

Sites Contested, Ideas Connected

Networked Media in Exhibitions of Contemporary Significance

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May 2015

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy of
The Australian National University



The research presented in this thesis, except where acknowledged in the text,
is the original work of the author.

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14th May 2015

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the effectiveness of networked media strategies in museum exhibitions about important contemporary issues. An extensive 2006 research project found that museums have a responsibility to present contemporary issues, providing visitors are given a meaningful opportunity to contribute to that discussion. This thesis builds upon that finding to evaluate the effectiveness of networked media – digital communication technology – in fostering discussion between visitors about issues such as climate change, refugees and terrorism. To test the capability of this strategy, visitors to an exhibition about Australian immigration policies were asked to use an iPad application to provide their own views on the exhibition's content and interact with other visitor contributions. The results demonstrate widespread support from visitors for the use of this type of technology. Museum staff also reacted favourably to findings that show visitors using networked media engage more deeply with exhibition content.

However, the research also reveals a set of problems relating to the use of networked media in exhibitions about contemporary issues. These problems are categorised into two analytical chapters in this thesis. The first considers the extent to which museum staff must curate or moderate the contributions of the visiting public. The second considers the ethical and logistical issues relating to the digital dissemination of museum content. The conclusions stemming from this analysis show that networked media strategies can be highly valuable communicative tools in difficult exhibitions, provided that they are carefully designed and implemented by museum staff.

Strategies shown to be effective include the integration of physical and online museum spaces, through mobile devices and standalone applications. The opportunity for meaningful visitor contribution is afforded by facilitating continuing debate outside the museum, and the active involvement of museum staff and other experts in discussions. Museums also benefit from the creation of digital partnerships, with other museums, institutions and the interested public to meaningfully engage with the contemporary issues that are critically important to visitors.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, many thanks to my supervisor Kylie Message, whose invaluable guidance and encouragement kept me on track throughout this research.

I want to thank all of the interviewees for their interest in this project and for generously giving their time – Rod Butler, Margaret Cawsey, Joanne Daly, Lynda Kelly, Catherine King, Moya McFadzean, Carolyn Meehan, Emily Kocaj, and Shevaun O’Neill.

Special thanks to Carolyn Meehan from Museum Victoria for so readily facilitating access to the exhibition space. Thanks also to the visitors of the Immigration Museum who agreed to participate in the research.

I want to acknowledge the significant support and advice I received from Lan Tran, Catherine Summerhayes, Sarah Scott, Paul Pickering, Alastair McLachlan, Laurajane Smith, Michelle Arrow, and all the students and staff at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts.

My managers at work – Amanda McCormack, Amy Jarvis and Olivier Krischer were incredibly patient and flexible while I completed this thesis, and continue to be valued mentors.

Thank you to Kathryn Sharpe for helping me with my research in Melbourne!

Most importantly, thanks as always to Mum & Dad. I couldn’t have finished this without your continued love and support, even from a city away!

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

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Introduction

Museums today are expected to actively involve their audiences with issues of contemporary significance. According to the 2006 research project¹ underpinning this thesis, museums have a responsibility to foster a diversity of views by encouraging visitors to contribute to debate. A design strategy that has the potential to fulfil this responsibility is the introduction of ‘networked media’ into a physical exhibition. The advantage of this digital networked media in the museum space is its capability to provide opportunities for visitors to meaningfully contribute their own views to a discussion. Providing visitors with the opportunity to participate in an exhibition on a digital platform, in addition to the physical dimensions, offers new possibilities for museums. Museums can open new dialogues with visitors and offer more content. They can contextualise their curatorial decisions within scholarly debate. They can increase their outreach to regional, interstate and overseas visitors and develop their public profile. And above all, through use of participatory networked media, museums are obliged to trust their visitors as content creators, thereby adding a new layer of value to the audience experience. This trust in the involvement of visitors is particularly important for museums exhibiting issues of contemporary significance. As an institution of considerable authority, the museum has considerable social responsibilities. The International Council of Museums defines the museum as a “public institution in the service of society and its development.”² In the context of this charter and an influential 2006 research project, there is an imperative for museums to engage with issues of significance to their communities, including the discussion of the subjects that will ultimately affect them.

The contribution of this thesis is an investigation of the effectiveness of digital communicative technology such as smart phones and tablets within a physical exhibition space to provide the means by which visitors can engage personally and contribute meaningfully to that significant discussion. I argue

¹ Cameron et al., Exhibitions as Contested Sites, *Open Museum Journal*, vol. 8, (2006)

² “ICOM Statutes”, Approved in Vienna August 24, 2007, Article 3, Section 1.

that through this technology, and in conjunction with the building of digital partnerships with other museums and the public, the museum is in a position to facilitate meaningful discussion about contemporary issues that are important to its audience and the wider public.

The impetus to provide visitors with a 'meaningful' voice derives from the findings of an extensive multi-national research project funded by the Australian Research Council – *Exhibitions as Contested Sites: the role of museums in contemporary society* (2006) – which examined the responsibility of museums in dealing with 'controversial' topics. One of the project's key conclusions was that if museums were to confront issues that were current and in the public interest, they must provide visitors with an opportunity to respond. Now, nearly a decade later, it is this finding that forms the foundation question of this thesis. My aim is to explore how museums might meet their obligations to deal with contemporary issues, and to provide visitors with a more active role in the discussion of this content. The focus of this thesis is to consider how those obligations could be achieved. My contention that these goals can be satisfied by 'networked media' is examined and justified in this thesis. Defined by the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, the term 'networked media' refers to any mode of content delivery that is interconnected (generally by the internet) and accessible from various locations and devices.³ It is the interconnected platform that provides opportunities for digital creation and delivery of content. 'Networked media' is the platform – a combination of hardware and software; 'networked content' is the contributions made by users of the platform. A key characteristic of networked media is the ability for content consumers to also be content contributors. The purpose of my thesis is to find answers to this overarching question: to what extent is networked media an effective strategy for museums to utilise in the discussion and debate of important contemporary issues?

³ "Networked Media", *NFSA website*, <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/networked-media/> (Note: this definition includes but is not limited to commercial 'social media' services such as Facebook, YouTube and Flickr).

The data analysed to answer this question emerges from my original quantitative and qualitative research conducted at an exhibition within Melbourne's Immigration Museum. The exhibition, *Getting In*, presents Australia's history of immigration policy as a reflection of evolving Australian society. The first chapter is devoted to the methodology and results of this research. The methodology builds out of the findings of the 2006 *Contested Sites* project, and examines the effectiveness of networked media in fulfilling recommendations from those findings. The results support my contention that networked media enhances visitor experience and strengthens visitor connections with the content. But the research also exposed two broad 'problems areas' that require further discussion, and as such are the focus of the following two thesis chapters. The second chapter considers the extent to which museum staff need to 'curate' visitor discussions. Do museums have a responsibility to maintain curatorial control over content created by visitors, and if so how do they go about implementing this using networked media? The third chapter discusses the implications of disseminating both museum content and visitor-generated content through digital networks. How does the digital dissemination of content impact upon a museum's authority and the exhibition's narrative, and what are the logistical hurdles involved in the use of networked media? The fourth and final chapter draws upon my empirical research results at the Immigration Museum and the discussion in Chapters Two and Three to present a set of conclusions. These conclusions outline the requirements necessary for networked media strategies to be effective, and address the problem areas identified in my analysis of the *Getting In* research.

Literature Review

This thesis draws primarily upon Western museum studies literature dating from the 'new museology' that emerged from the 1970s, to recent discussions about 'networked media'. The textual sources most pivotal to my thesis may be viewed in three broad categories. The first category of literature contends that museums have a responsibility to deal with issues of

contemporary significance. The overwhelming consensus by authors of these studies is that museums are institutions in the service of society that should continue to present and discuss ideas that are important to its visitors. The second category of museum literature that underpins my thesis relates to practices by which contemporary issues might be successfully exhibited. This is the subject of the 2006 Australian research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites*, the results of which will be seen as integral to my discussion. This thesis builds upon the project's methodology and findings to examine how recent technology can impact the exhibition of contemporary issues. The third important source of information pertaining to my thesis question is the museum literature that encompasses the use of networked media technology within museums. Despite an increase in the use of such technology in museums, there has been little written about its efficacy in exhibitions that deal with *contemporary issues*, particularly in terms of the creation of digitally-mediated visitor discussion.

The case for the museum to present contemporary issues

Underlying this thesis is the principle that museums have an obligation to engage with contemporary issues, an idea that has been the subject of a great deal of previous work. Since the advent of the 'New Museology'⁴ in the 1970s, museum academics and practitioners have criticised the museum's standing as an authoritative 'temple', and called for them to move away from being "exclusive and socially divisive institutions"⁵. Many museum scholars have advocated a nexus between museums and social and scientific progress. As far back as 1913, respected museum director John Cotton Dana asserted that "museums must be at the centres of their communities. Any publicly supported institution must do something for that public."⁶ Nearly 100 years later, law and natural history academic Willard Boyd reflected that "in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, museums were at the forefront of challenging our accepted

⁴ Peter Vergo (ed), *The New Museology*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 3.

⁵ Max Ross, "Interpreting the new museology", *Museum and Society*, 2, no. 2 (2004): 84.

⁶ John Cotton Dana, quoted in Lonnie G. Bunch III, "Embracing Controversy: Museum Exhibitions and the Politics of Change", *The Public Historian*, 14:3 (1992), p65.

ideas about the world”⁷, citing the recognition of Darwinian evolution as an example. This is supported by Alex Drago’s book chapter in ‘Challenging History in the Museum’. He argues that museums used their collections as a platform of authority, and the museums distanced themselves from accepted histories based on tradition and religion.⁸

However in a formative 1971 article considering the public role of museums, Duncan F. Cameron argued for a shift in museology, insisting that “there must be (the) creation of forums for confrontation, experimentation and debate.”⁹ The proposition that museums can maintain contemporary relevance without the necessity of being upheld as a ‘temple’ of objective knowledge was influential in the Western museum sector. In 1974 in Australia, the Whitlam Labor Government commissioned a report from the museum sector that looked at the potential for an institution that told ‘the story of Australia to Australians.’ One of the report’s recommendations was that “museums should display controversial issues” citing that “too many museums concentrate on certainty and dogma, thereby forsaking the function of stimulating legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion.”¹⁰

Museum academics and professionals have since emphasised the subjectivity of museum content and advocated the museum as a place for exchanging ideas rather than for authoritative storytelling. Influential museum practitioner and academic Elaine Heumann Gurian described the museum in *Curator* (1995) as a ‘safe place for unsafe ideas’¹¹, and historian and museum director Lonnie Bunch in his article ‘Embracing Controversy’ (1992), contended that museums are well-situated to guide visitors through “the complexity and

⁷ Willard L. Boyd, “Museums as Centres of Controversy”, *Daedalus*, 128, no. 3, (1999): 185.

⁸ Alex Drago, “The Emotional Museum” in *Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives*, eds. Jenny Kidd, Sam Cairns, Alex Drago, Amy Ryall, and Miranda Stearn (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014): 18.

⁹ Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum”, *Curator*, 14, no. 1 (1971): 19.

¹⁰ P.H. Piggott et al, *Museums in Australia 1975*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975, section 12.16.

¹¹ Elaine Heumann Gurian, “A Blurring of the Boundaries”, *Curator*, 38, no. 1 (1995): 31.

ambiguity of the past and help them wrestle with difficult issues.”¹² The concept of ‘safe’ however, can be considered problematic, as it may imply a lack of risk-taking by museums in presenting challenging ideas. This is the position taken by George Freedman in his article in *Curator* in 2000. He laments the increasingly audience-driven method of creating museum content, arguing that visitors no longer visit museums to have their views challenged, but instead to have them confirmed and endorsed.¹³ This notion is important to the propositions in this thesis. That is, that museums need to engage with issues of contemporary significance, and do so by involving their visitors in informed and challenging exhibitions. It is the need for divergent perspectives that has propelled this thesis to explore the potential of the relatively new technology, networked media, to meet this need.

The terminology used to refer to ‘unsafe ideas’ varies across the literature. These include ‘controversial’, ‘challenging’, ‘taboo’, ‘edgy’, ‘contentious’, ‘sensitive’ and ‘contested’, each with their own connotations. Cameron & Kelly settled upon the term ‘hot topics’¹⁴ in their book of 2010, *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*. However, Kidd argues in her introduction to *Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives* (2014) that this implies those subjects might cool or abate.¹⁵ Therefore, this thesis will adhere to the phrasing of the *Contested Sites* research project and refer to these exhibition subjects as ‘contemporary issues’ – not necessarily controversial, but issues that are significant to current society and that warrant meaningful visitor input and feedback. The topics chosen for analysis by Linda Ferguson in her contribution to the *Contested Sites* literature exemplify what is meant by the term ‘contemporary issues’: terrorism, asylum seekers, religion, racism, sex and

¹² Lonnie G. Bunch III, “Embracing Controversy: Museum Exhibitions and the Politics of Change”, *The Public Historian*, 14, no.3 (1992): p65.

¹³ Gordon Freedman, “The Changing Nature of Museums”, *Curator*, 43, no. 4 (2000): 296.

¹⁴ Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly, *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*, (Newcastle UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) 1.

¹⁵ Jenny Kidd, “Introduction” in *Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives*, eds. Jenny Kidd, Sam Cairns, Alex Drago, Amy Ryall, and Miranda Stearn (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014): 3.

drugs, and climate change.¹⁶ Most of these issues are not ‘new’ but they all continue to have considerable implications for contemporary society.

Notwithstanding variances in terminology, a consistent argument across this subject of literature is that in order to remain relevant, museums must be prepared to exhibit content relevant to contemporary issues. Caleb Williams argues in his *Open Museum Journal* article (2001), that museums cannot retreat from wider societal transformations, and that they have a responsibility to “reflect and dissect the concerns, interests and obsessions of contemporary audiences.”¹⁷ The recent books of Cameron & Kelly, and Kidd et al, comprehensively explore the museum’s relationship with, respectively, ‘Hot Topics’¹⁸ and ‘Challenging Histories’¹⁹, advocating for the open discussion of difficult subjects. This literature has been instructive in presenting the case that museums have an obligation to present contemporary issues to their visitors and it forms the basis of this thesis. However, there are implications to be considered. What rights do visitors have in these contested exhibitions? This question, explored in the *Contested Sites* research project, also constitutes an important theoretical underpinning of this thesis.

Exhibitions as Contested Sites

This thesis is framed by the findings of the extensive research project, *Exhibitions as Contested Sites: the roles of museums in contemporary society*.²⁰ Culminating in three articles published in 2006, it was itself influenced by two well-publicised museum controversies. The first controversy sparked from a

¹⁶ Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: controversial topics in museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006).

¹⁷ Caleb Williams, “Beyond Good and Evil? The Taboo in the Contemporary Museum: Strategies for negotiation and representation”, *Open Museum Journal*, 4 (2001).

¹⁸ Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly, *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*, (Newcastle UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

¹⁹ Jenny Kidd et al (eds), *Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives*, (Ashgate Publishing: Surrey), 2014.

²⁰ Fiona Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, “Edgy” Topics, Civil Responsibilities, and Modes of Engagement”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006).

Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: controversial topics in museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006).

Lynda Kelly, “Museums as Sources of Information and Learning: The Decision Making Process”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006).

1995 exhibition, marking fifty years since the end of World War II, at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. The *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, was displayed with a caption that considered the moral complexities of that event. In 'Transcending Fear - Engaging Emotions and Opinions' (2003) Cameron suggests that for Air Force veterans, this was a revisionist history that conflicted with America's "collective myth of glory and heroism"²¹. Following the very public debate that ensued, Boyd concluded that the American public didn't want their museums to be controversial.²² A similar scenario occurred closer to home. In 2001 the new National Museum of Australia became embroiled in the 'History Wars' and was criticised for its 'black armband' interpretation of frontier conflicts and massacres of Aboriginal people. Subsequently subject to a governmental review, the museum was described by its Director Dawn Casey as a 'battleground' up for grabs by contesting interests.²³

It was within this context that Fiona Cameron from the University of Western Sydney, Lynda Kelly from the Australian Museum and Linda Ferguson from the Australian War Memorial formulated a wide-reaching research project to determine the attitudes of museum staff and visitors towards the display of content relating to controversial issues. Funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by a number of museum and educational institutions across Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom, this project combined a review of academic literature with a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, including focus groups, exit surveys and phone surveys. By categorizing participants within three groups – museum staff, regular museum visitors and people who rarely visit museums – the researchers aimed to gauge the extent of the support for museums to display topics that were considered controversial, divisive or taboo.

²¹ Fiona Cameron, "Transcending Fear - Engaging Emotions and Opinions: A case for museums in the 21st century", *Open Museum Journal*, 6, (2003): 8.

²² Boyd, "Museums as Centres of Controversy", 186.

²³ Dawn Casey, "The National Museum of Australia: Exploring the Past, Illuminating the Present and Imagining the Future", in eds. Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner, *National Museums: Negotiating Histories Conference Proceedings*, The National Museum of Australia, Canberra (2001): 11.

The results, published in Cameron's, 'Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, "Edgy" Topics, Civil Responsibilities, and Modes of Engagement' were considered overwhelmingly positive. Over eighty percent of those surveyed supported museums to actively challenge generally accepted views, to present revisionist histories, to use non-traditional sources, and to engage in debate over moral issues such as race, gender and sexuality. However, this support did not extend to one particular area, the notion that museums could be places for resolving contemporary political issues, with only thirty percent of respondents agreeing with that proposition.²⁴ This intriguing disparity is explained by the researchers as a result of the widespread misconception that a museum is impartial and apolitical, despite the efforts of the 'New Museology' to transform this notion. The researchers' explanation is supported by evidence from focus group statements such as "museums should just present the facts – not opinions, they are not political places,"²⁵ or "museums have always been factual – we can rely on it,"²⁶ or "if history is fact, why cloud it with opinions,"²⁷ and finally "if you want to resolve issues you join a political party."²⁸

The researchers concluded that generally, visitors do not apply the same critical judgement to museums that they might to other sources of information. They argued that "museums continue to be inextricably political and moralising, acting as instruments of political and cultural power. Nonetheless, most audiences see museums as apolitical."²⁹ Thus it is this uncritical expectation and perception by museum visitors, whatever the intentions and practices of the museums, that is particularly problematic in the exhibition of contemporary issues, in which there should be a fair contest of ideas. *Contested Sites* head researcher Fiona Cameron concluded that "institutions have a responsibility to dispel this myth (of apolitical authority), by demonstrating their capacity and

²⁴ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 20.

²⁵ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 21.

²⁶ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 30.

²⁷ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 31.

²⁸ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 20.

²⁹ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 30.

willingness to truly engage divisive topics in an open and honest way.”³⁰ One of the research project’s key recommendations was that when museums deal with contested issues, they must provide visitors with an opportunity to contribute their own perspectives.³¹ This recommendation is important to this thesis – which explores whether networked media can function as a mechanism for facilitating meaningful visitor contributions in exhibitions about contested topics.

Networked Media

The use of networked media in the museum has been abundantly documented by museum scholars and professionals, particularly in the last five years. However, there is little written about its effectiveness in exhibitions that deal with issues of contemporary significance. Much has been written about the successes and failures of ‘digital interactive technology’ in the museum, most notably Fleck et al (2002)³², Hsi (2003)³³, Allen & Gutwill (2004)³⁴, and Kidd et al (2011)³⁵, but the parameters of this thesis extend only to ‘networked media’. Networked media is a specific form of digital interactive technology – it refers to platforms that enable content creation and distribution through any device that is connected to a network. The distinguishing feature of networked media technology, over broader digital technology, is that it relies on the public contribution of content. Visitors already bring networked media to the museum in the form of corporate social media services, currently dominated by Facebook and Twitter. Nancy Proctor argues that “this transformation is happening whether or not the museum chooses to be part of the

³⁰ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 34.

³¹ Kelly, “Museums as Sources of Information and Learning”, 13.

³² Margaret Fleck, Marcos Frid, Tim Kindberg, Rakhi Rajani, Eamonn O’Brien-Strain, Mirjana Spasojevic, “From Informing to Remembering: Ubiquitous Systems in Interactive Museums”, *IEEE Pervasive Computing*, 1, no. 2, (2002).

³³ Sherry Hsi, “A study of user experiences mediated by nomadic web content in a museum”, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 19 (2003).

³⁴ Sue Allen and Joshua Gutwill, “Designing With Multiple Interactives: Five Common Pitfalls”, *Curator*, 47, no. 2 (2004).

³⁵ Jenny Kidd, Irida Ntalla, and William Lyons, “Multi-touch interfaces in museum spaces: reporting preliminary findings on the nature of interaction”, in eds. Luigina Ciolfi, Katherine Scott and Sara Barbieri, *Proceedings of the International Conference “Re-thinking Technology in Museums 2011: Emerging Experiences*, University of Limerick, Ireland, 2011.

conversation”³⁶ in her *Curator* article, ‘Digital: Museum as Platform, Curator as Champion, in the Age of Social Media’. Many museum professionals, therefore, have looked to use networked media to increase their engagement with visitors. It is the relevance of this engagement to issues of contemporary significance in particular that is currently under-documented.

Public contribution, including the use of networked media, is the focus of Nina Simon’s book, ‘The Participatory Museum’, which is supported by her oft-updated blog *Museum 2.0*³⁷. Both sources have proved valuable in the formulation of this thesis. Her argument acknowledges that “the nature of mediation currently morphs at a hectic pace”³⁸, but also maintains that the principles of successful audience participation remain constant. She nominates these principles as trusting visitors’ abilities as creators, encouraging diversity of thought, and creating new value for the institution and its visitors.³⁹ These ideals are likewise supported by Kevin Walker in his book chapter ‘Structuring Visitor Participation’. In addition he argues that networked media enhances visitor learning by framing and focussing their activities and interactions, so that “learning occurs when museums cease to view visitors as passive containers and begin recognizing them as active contributors.”⁴⁰ The empirical research conducted in this thesis aims to examine the extent to which networked media can support the understanding of challenging issues by increasing visitors’ active engagement with museum content.

One of the most comprehensive works detailing the impact of digital media on the museum sector is the anthology ‘Museums in a Digital Age’, edited by Ross Parry. This book brings together the “diasporic body of literature”⁴¹ associated with digital technology in museums. Most relevant to this thesis is

³⁶ Nancy Proctor, “Digital: Museum as Platform, Curator as Champion, in the Age of Social Media”, *Curator*, 53, no. 1 (2010): 36.

³⁷ *Museum 2.0 Blog*, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com.au/>.

³⁸ Tiina Roppola, *Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience*, (New York: Routledge, 2012): 34.

³⁹ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (Santa Cruz CA: Museum 2.0, 2010): 3-6.

⁴⁰ Kevin Walker, “Structuring Visitor Participation” in eds. Loïc Tallon, and Kevin Walker, *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, (Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2008): 121.

⁴¹ Ross Parry, *Museums in a Digital Age*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

Jennifer Trant’s book chapter in which she argues that museums will have to modify their modes of engagement to retain authenticity in ‘museums without walls.’⁴² The authenticity of digital content is particularly important for exhibitions that engage with issues of contemporary significance, and is the subject of discussion in the third chapter of this thesis. Despite a growing body of literature about the use of networked media in museums, “the role of new media in debates about difficult and sensitive heritages is relatively unexplored”⁴³, notes Jenny Kidd in her 2014 book. Therefore, that is the purpose of this thesis – to examine the use of this technology in particular regards to its efficacy in fostering meaningful discussion on contested issues.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One: Methodology and Results

The first chapter presents the methodology and results of my research conducted within the *Getting In* exhibition, situated within Melbourne’s Immigration Museum. As the topic of immigration figures prominently in the past 226 years of Australian history and is an issue of enduring contemporary significance, *Getting In* is an ideal case study for this thesis. My research here, involving the introduction of a simple form of networked media coupled with interviews with key staff, provides invaluable information on the effectiveness of this strategy. The exhibition *Getting In* documents the historical evolution of Australian immigration policy, and suggests that there is a direct link between the nature of immigration policy and national identity. At the time of writing, there is no other prominent museum exhibition in Australia that so explicitly confronts a contemporary political issue. It is particularly unique given how fiercely contested this topic is. In present public discourse the issue of immigration, especially the processing of asylum seekers, tends to be linked with emotionally charged notions such as humanitarianism or xenophobia. This

⁴² Jennifer Trant, “When All You’ve Got is ‘The Real Thing’: museums and authenticity in the networked world” (1999), in ed. Ross Parry, *Museums in a Digital Age*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴³ Kidd et al, *Challenging History in the Museum*, 9.

exhibition represents exactly the type of 'Contested Site' considered by the 2006 research project. It is for this reason that it is the key case study for this thesis.

There are currently no networked media elements within the *Getting In* exhibition. This presented an ideal opportunity to acquire some original data for this thesis by introducing a simple and unobtrusive networked media component to the exhibition. Visitors were invited to use a tablet to take a photograph of any section of the exhibition that interested them, and to write a caption that indicated their personal response to the content. Participants could then browse the contributions of other people and could comment on these if they wished. These contributions, as well as the results of a visitor survey, constitute the original data to be analysed in this thesis. The methodology was influenced by that of the *Contested Sites* project as a point of comparison. The research indicates strong support from visitors for the museum to deal with contemporary issues, and to use networked media to facilitate discussion. 82% of the participants indicated that they appreciated the introduced networked media activity and felt that it enhanced their experience of the exhibition. A number of visitors reflected that the activity 'forced them to think' more carefully about museum content, and their diverse contributions reflect the extent to which the activity provided a meaningful form of participation. On the other hand, a small group of visitors felt the activity detracted from their museum experience, and only a few decided to leave comments on other visitors' contributions. The results of this research reveal two main 'problem areas' arising from the use of networked media that require further analysis, and this is the basis of the second and third chapters.

Chapter Two: Curating the Public

One of the main concerns arising from the *Getting In* research was a lack of structure in the presentation of the participants' contributions, which led to a lack of interaction between visitors. For this reason the second chapter considers the museum's role in curating, directing and moderating the discussions and contributions of its visitors. There emerge two main reasons to

'curate the public'. Firstly, – so that visitors' contributions fit within structured and engaging exhibitions, and secondly, to ensure that the museum can maintain editorial control over its content. Oppressive moderation of public discussion has the potential to undermine the democratic capabilities of networked media, but it is apparent that a balance is required. With a web of stakeholders and interest groups to appease, as well as direct funding ties to both government and commercial industry, museums can be understandably hesitant about dealing with contemporary political issues that could put these relationships at risk. As a result, *Contested Sites* researcher Linda Ferguson argues that museums often only focus on political issues when enough time has passed for them to be 'historical' and there are fewer emotions involved. Is it not, however, the presence of these very emotions that categorise an issue as significant? As one museum staffer posited, "if museums wait for issues to become 'historical,' do they run the risk of becoming irrelevant?"⁴⁴ A key consideration for this chapter therefore is how networked media can be used to facilitate 'meaningful' discussion about confronting ideas without the museum appearing partisan or losing control of its content.

This chapter opens with an examination of how museums can facilitate *meaningful* visitor contributions, as opposed to superficial participation. This necessitates trusting visitors to engage in discussions about contemporary issues. The International Museum of Women is a constructive case study for this purpose. It is an 'online' museum with direct aspirations for social activism and it is constructed almost entirely from user contribution. As an extreme example of the utilisation of networked media to facilitate interactions with visitors, this museum can illuminate the possibilities for introducing networked media into the *physical* exhibition space, in order to present on contemporary issues. However, the International Museum of Women is in a unique position, openly advocating for women's rights. On the other hand, Government-funded museums such as the Immigration Museum are required to present more objectively on contemporary issues. The second part of this chapter considers the responsibilities that the majority of museums must uphold whilst still

⁴⁴ Ferguson, "Pushing Buttons", 24.

allowing visitors to contribute content. As construed from interviews with museum professionals, the most pertinent threats posed by networked participation to these accountabilities involve inaccuracy, a loss of structure, unbalanced debate, and derogatory comments. These potential problems, which have particular implications for exhibitions about contemporary issues, are analysed with reference to examples from the Immigration Museum and the International Museum of Women. The final section of this chapter analyses another 'curator' of contemporary issues for further constructive ideas that might also be applied by the museum sector. These are the networked discussion platforms that have been used widely by online news media, with a variety of curatorial models. The discussion platforms used by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The New York Times*, and *Kinja 2.0*, in their very nature as news sources, curate thousands of comments about contemporary issues each day. There is much to learn from digital commenting systems like these, as there is from the online International Museum of Women, whilst also still maintaining and indeed advancing, the expert curatorial skills of museum professionals.

Chapter Three: Digital Dissemination

The focus of the third chapter is the challenge posed by the digital dissemination of museum content. The research conducted at the *Getting In* exhibition illuminated the potential problems associated with publishing both museum content and visitor contributions on digital platforms. Visitors and museum staff indicated that a networked mode of contribution must also be accessible outside the museum in order to create meaningful discussion. Networked media provides this opportunity, through mobile applications, social media services, or remote web access, and there is a growing expectation from visitors that museums provide online access to their material. However, the digital dissemination of exhibition content about contemporary issues presents some challenges. There is the potential for the museum to lose curatorial control over its content. Also, unstructured digital content can threaten the carefully constructed narrative of a contemporary exhibition. Finally, there are considerable logistical challenges associated with digital dissemination, including a need for funding and copyright restrictions.

The discussion in this chapter is supported by analysis of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. As a federal institution based in Canberra, networked media is a fundamental necessity for the archive to appropriately fulfil its charter of exhibiting audio-visual heritage. Especially considering the highly transmittable format of most of the Archive's collection, the National Film and Sound Archive is a prime example of a cultural institution facing the profound challenge of keeping up with an increasingly digital world. The National Film and Sound Archive invests a vast amount of resources into the restoration and preservation of the items in its care, and yet owns the intellectual rights of only a small minority of that collection. Previously the public was only able to access collection material onsite in Canberra or at state access centres. But recently it has also implemented a number of strategies to engage with audiences through networked media, with varying success.

Therefore the National Film and Sound Archive is an ideal case study to explore the challenges faced by the digital dissemination of museum content, which are categorised into three sections in this chapter. The first section considers the museum's curatorial authority over collections that are disseminated online. With reference to a cautionary example from the National Film and Sound Archive, a discussion of the problems associated with publishing content on third-party social media websites demonstrates the advantages of maintaining platform control. By retaining curatorial control of their digital platforms, museums can continue to encourage and guide debate on contemporary issues in a way that is meaningful for their visitors. The second section examines the effect of digital dissemination on an exhibition's narrative coherence. An object's meaning often derives from its context within a physical exhibition, but how does this change when published online? In the *Getting In* research, the unstructured collection of visitor contributions hindered the effectiveness of the networked activity. Given the important role museums play in contextualising issues of contemporary significance, this section discusses the retention of narrative coherence within networked media strategies. Finally, the logistical realities facing many collecting institutions are

examined in the third section of this chapter. Three significant challenges – the digitisation task, copyright restrictions, and lack of resources – reveal some of the immediate problems associated with the digital dissemination of museum content.

Chapter Four: Networked Media Conclusions

The final chapter of the thesis reflects upon the results of my research at the Immigration Museum as well as the analytical discussion in the second and third chapters to present a set of conclusions regarding the use of networked media platforms in exhibitions of contemporary issues. This chapter evaluates the problem areas arising from my original research in order to address this thesis' central question: to what extent are networked media strategies effective in dealing with contemporary issues. The rationale for these conclusions stem from the contributions and survey results of the participants in the *Getting In* research combined with interviews with museum professionals and detailed analyses of the International Museum of Women, the National Film and Sound Archive, and online media services. Each conclusion is also supported by examples from the museum sector and applied within the context of the *Getting In* exhibition, thus testing the real-world effectiveness of networked media strategies within a contested exhibition space.

The conclusions in this chapter are categorised into three sections. The first set of conclusions relate to the addition of digital networked media to physical exhibition spaces. There are important considerations for the integration of this technology into exhibitions relating to contemporary issues, as highlighted by the experiences of the museums analysed in this thesis. These include the utilisation of smartphone and tablet technology, and the need for cautious, selective employment of social media by museums. This section also examines the advantages of standalone applications in ensuring a museum's platform control, and the use of dynamic networked media to keep contemporary exhibitions up-to-date with evolving issues. The second set of conclusions focuses on the networked strategies that provide visitors with a meaningful voice. An important conclusion emerging from my thesis' research

is the requirement for networked discussions of contentious issues to continue outside the physical museum space. Drawing from the analysis of online museums and media sources, there are also other ways museums can provide visitors with a meaningful voice using networked media. These include the active featuring of content by curators, the provision of anonymity, and the involvement of museum staff and other experts in the discussion. The third set of conclusions reveals the requirement for museums to build digital partnerships with other museums, institutions, community groups and the general public. Innovative and collaborative solutions such as the Digital Public Space can provide new avenues for meaningful visitor contribution and opportunities for embedding original data into an exhibition, whilst also easing the logistical pressures involved with digitisation and networked media. Finally, this section also evaluates other forms of visitor involvement with museums, including crowd sourcing and social activism.

All of the conclusions inform the evaluation of networked media as a strategy for dealing with contemporary issues. As the findings of my original research, these conclusions justify the argument presented in this thesis: that networked media can be highly effective in creating meaningful visitor discussion about issues of contemporary significance, providing the museum's strategy is carefully designed and implemented.

Chapter One:

Getting In – Methodology and Data Analysis

Getting In, at Melbourne's Immigration Museum, is a suitable case study for gauging the effectiveness of networked media in an exhibition that confronts a topical and contested issue. The injection of a networked media activity into an existing museum space allows for an insight into the viability of this technology for dealing with contemporary subjects. The aims of my research build directly from the 2007 Australian Research Council project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites*, led by the University of Western Sydney's Fiona Cameron.¹ That project examined museum responsibilities in dealing with controversial issues by interviewing staff and visitors across 26 institutions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. My research in the *Getting In* exhibition had two broad objectives. First, to test the current day validity of a major claim of the *Contested Sites* research project: that visitors must be given an opportunity to personally respond to controversial issues. When surveyed in 2007 for that project, 86% of museum visitors agreed that museums were "places that should allow their visitors to make comment about the topics being presented."² My research gauged whether that support still exists seven years later, and particularly whether visitors continued to support this notion in exhibitions that deal with complex, political issues. Given the significant changes in the media landscape during this period, the research aimed to gauge whether the findings of the *Contested Sites* project have maintained their relevance. The second objective of this case study was to evaluate the viability of networked media as an effective communication tool. Would museum visitors accept the use of this technology to make 'meaningful' contributions? What did museum visitors see as the benefits of this form of inter-visitor communication? The research also examined the problems that visitors may have with using networked media in the museum. In order to find

¹ Fiona Cameron had expressed interest in this research, but external circumstances meant we were unfortunately unable to schedule an interview for this thesis.

² Lynda Kelly, "Museums as Sources of Information and Learning: The Decision Making Process", *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006): 13.

answers to these questions, I introduced a simple networked media activity into a current museum exhibition. To maximise the usefulness of my findings, such an exhibition needed, most crucially, to be one that confronted an important policy issue with significant contemporary implications, but that did not currently have any form of visitor contribution. Moreover, the results of my research would have greater weight if the exhibition was housed within an established museum with a range of stakeholders and responsibilities. Given this criteria, this chapter begins by rationalising the use of the *Getting In* exhibition as an appropriate case study, and then presents the research methodology. An analysis of the results is then categorised within the main research outcomes. The following chapters build on these findings and interpret them within a wider theoretical framework.

Case Study Rationale: *Getting In*, Immigration Museum

The Immigration Museum resides within Old Customs House, in the hub of the city and directly opposite the north bank of the Yarra, where the schooner Enterprise landed in 1835 to found the settlement of Melbourne (Fig 1.1). For thousands of new arrivals between 1876 and 1965 this building was



Figure 1.1
Immigration
Museum,
Melbourne

the first port of call, and is thus a fitting location for a museum that preserves the stories of immigrants to Victoria from all over the globe. Managed by the state organisation, Museum Victoria, this public institution aims to provide “a thought-provoking and moving experience (by re-creating) the real-life stories of coming to Australia with a rich mix of images, personal and community voices, memories and memorabilia.”³ The permanent exhibitions begin with a poignant installation that projects some of the reasons why people leave their homelands, powerful footage of people escaping disaster-ravaged zones, European Jews after World War Two, and Vietnamese refugees arriving by boat following the war in Indochina. The installation is interspersed with oral histories including stories of a Ukrainian family being reunited; Singaporean students arriving for university; and an Italian family endeavouring to build a new life in an unknown land. As a first impression, this exhibition underlines the hardship faced by many refugees and migrants, and also serves to represent Australia as a welcoming and hospitable safe haven. Subsequent exhibition spaces provide a timeline of significant immigration events: the detailed stories of select immigrants; historical information about the Old Customs House; interactive ‘origin booths’ with statistical information about immigrants from specific countries; and perhaps most strikingly, an abstract design of a ship’s hull within the giant ‘Long Room,’ providing visitors with a hands-on understanding of the conditions faced by migrants making the sea journey from Europe to Australia.

Getting In is the final gallery of the permanent exhibitions (Fig 1.2). It builds upon the individual stories and the experiential atmosphere of the previous displays by providing a more in-depth insight into immigration policy. This exhibition is a suitable case study in that it engages explicitly with the policy details of a contemporary issue and its direct implications for the community.

³ “About Us”, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/about-us/>.

The opening statement is immediately provocative: “More than nine million people have migrated to Australia since 1778. Countless others have tried and failed.” The central notion that permeates the exhibition is that immigration policy has been inextricably linked with national identity. One of

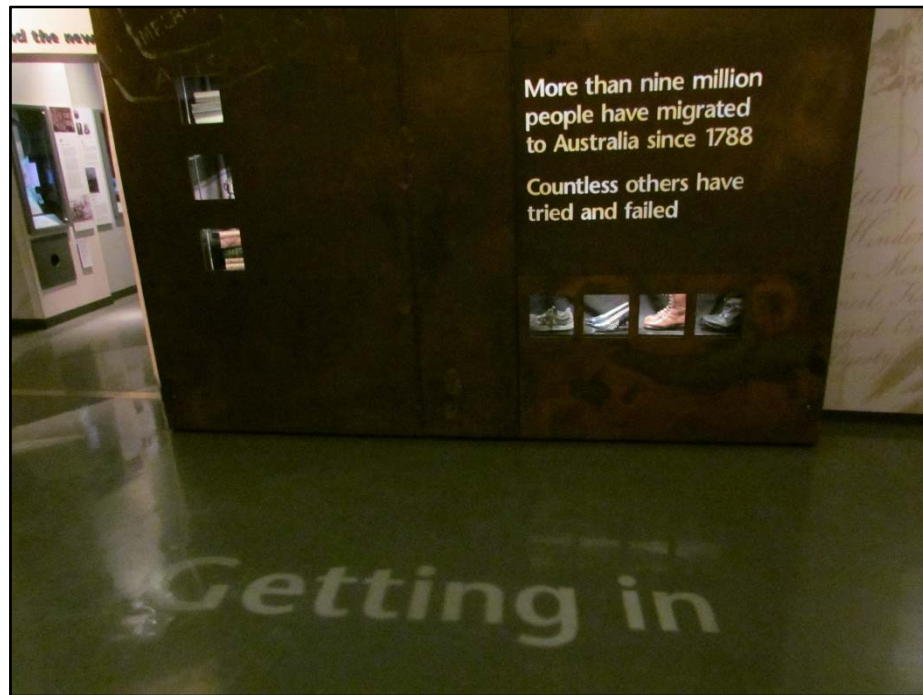


Figure 1.2
Entrance to
Getting In
exhibition

the introductory panels explains that “the selection of immigrants over time has always been influenced by the sort of nation that governments and special interest groups have wanted to create.” This idea is further reflected in the separation of immigration policy into four distinct time periods. “1840-1900: Old England and the new,” documents both the influx of gold rush immigrants and their views on democracy and egalitarianism, and the introduction of assisted migration to assist the transition away from convict labour. The impact of the ‘White Australia Policy’ dominates the next section: “1901-1945: One nation, one people, one destiny,” which includes a display that encourages visitors to try their hand at the infamous dictation test. “1946-1972: Room for millions more” suggests a contradiction in increased migration being a requisite for economic growth, whilst heavily favouring British and European applicants. Finally, “1973-2009: Australia for tomorrow” documents the shift towards a multicultural policy that seeks skilled workers and also provides migration based upon humanitarian grounds. This section also presents some of the

controversies that have arisen out of the immigration debate, including the formation of Pauline Hanson's far-right and anti-immigration political party One Nation; the use of offshore detention centres to deter asylum seekers arriving by boat; and the Tampa incident – in which a Norwegian freighter carrying 438 rescued asylum seekers was refused entry to Australian waters.

The basis for the *Getting In* exhibition are the thirteen legislative Acts that have formed Australia's immigration policy, so the curators have been imaginative in their efforts to transform this heavy policy issue into a memorable visitor experience. As Ian McShane argued in a review of the exhibition, "How can (you) convey the importance of documentation without papering the walls with departmental files?"⁴ The curators achieve this through the use of personal stories and experiences, which provide an emotional backdrop that emphasises the human impact of policymaking. Situated in the middle of the exhibition space is an interview booth that allows visitors to personally evaluate the worthiness of prospective immigrants, confronting visitors with the emotional impact of these policies. The exhibition's blend of informative text, evocative images, remarkable personal stories, and a confronting interactive centrepiece provides a unique experience for understanding the immigration policies that have defined the demographics of Australian society, and that continue to cause heated debate. It is therefore an ideal case study for an investigation into the use of museum space as a public forum for policy debate and development.

Research Methodology

The central premise of my research in the *Getting In* exhibition was to introduce a simple networked media activity, in order to gauge the reactions of visitors. The capability of networked media as a tool for contemporary

⁴ Ian McShane, "Exhibition reviews including 'Getting In', a permanent exhibition at the Immigration Museum, Melbourne, Australia", *Australian Historical Studies*, 37, no. 128 (2006): 123.

discussion relies on the visitors' perception that the technology improves their experience of the exhibition. The original research data would consist of three components: the contributions made by visitors within the activity; the results from the post-activity survey; and the reactions to the data from three key staff at Museum Victoria. This use of triangulation aims to validate data by "using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation."⁵ This multi-faceted research methodology was selected to gather qualitative data about visitor and staff attitudes towards the use of networked media in this exhibition. The activity in the *Getting In* exhibition represents what Robert Stake terms an instrumental case, in that "it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else."⁶ An assessment of the level of support for networked media in this case study is hoped to elucidate the potential for implementing this form of technology in the wider museum sector.

The research activity was designed to allow visitors to contribute their own thoughts on the exhibition. This activity expanded on other forms of visitor participation research by making those content contributions networked so that visitors could instantly scroll through other contributions and comment on them. These photo contributions, captions and comments together constituted one stream of the research data. In an attempt to observe 'natural' reactions to the technology, the researchers were not directly involved in the creation of these contributions. The activity was therefore a form of reactive observation, defined by Angrosino as "based on the assumption that the people being studied are aware of being observed and are amenable to interacting with the researcher only in response to elements in the research design."⁷ Apart from initial instructions, visitors were left to explore the gallery and write their captions and comments without direction or questioning from the researchers. However, the research presence was clear in the exhibition. This may have had

⁵ Robert E. Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies", in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (3rd edition)*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2005): 445.

⁶ Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies", 445.

⁷ Michael Angrosino "Recontextualising Observation: Ethnography, Pedagogy, and the Prospects for a Progressive Political Agenda" in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (3rd edition)*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2005): 732.

an impact on the validity of the results, with participants aware that their contributions were to be analysed for research purposes. On the method of observation Bernard Phillips stresses the importance of “distinguishing between the goals that actually serve to direct the individual’s behaviour and the individual’s self-image or self-expectations.”⁸ A post-activity survey was conducted to somewhat alleviate this issue and provide visitors with an opportunity to reflect on their experience. Although there were necessary limits to the scope of the research activity, its parameters would enable a solid indication of museum visitors’ attitudes towards the use of networked media in contested exhibitions.

The research was conducted over two days – a Sunday and a Monday were chosen on advice from the museum that these days would provide the broadest range of demographics. I approached visitors at the entrance to the *Getting In* exhibition to invite them to ‘participate in an iPad activity for some university research.’ There were three iPads available to use on rotation. When an iPad was available, all visitors were approached to participate. Therefore there was no intentional selection bias. However, it is important to note that only the views of those who agreed to participate were analysed. To those that did agree, I gave an instruction flyer (Fig 1.3) and talked through the three steps of the activity as outlined below:

1. Using the Flickr app on the iPad provided, take a photo of anything in the exhibition that you feel you would like to respond to. This could be a photo of a panel of text; an image; an object; a design feature; or even yourself interacting with the exhibition – anything that interests you.
2. You will then need to write a response in the photo’s ‘description’ box. You may want to express your feelings towards one of the images. You might wish to disagree with something written on a text panel. You may have a personal anecdote that relates to an object in the exhibition. These are just examples – please feel free to respond in any way you wish towards your photograph. When you are done, press ‘Upload’.

⁸ Bernard S. Phillips, *Social Research: Strategy and Tactics*, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1971): 161.

- Your photo and description will be instantly uploaded to the photostream, along with other visitors' contributions. Take a moment to browse some of the other photos and submit a comment to at least one of the other visitors' photos.

1. PHOTOSTREAM

Photostream Activity

Getting In
Immigration Museum
8 Photos

SETS GROUPS FAVORITES PHOTOS OF FOLLOWING

Press the camera button to get started

2. CAPTURE

POINT THE IPAD AT ANYTHING THAT INTERESTS YOU

Please queue here', The Age 2001
Artist - John Spooner. Source - The Age
Copyright - John Spooner

Press this to take the photo

3. REVIEW

Camera Next

IF YOU'RE HAPPY, PRESS NEXT

IF NOT, GO BACK TO TAKE ANOTHER

Please queue here', The Age 2001
Artist - John Spooner. Source - The Age
Copyright - John Spooner

4. CAPTION

Details Upload

Title

Description

WRITE YOUR CAPTION HERE

Only you

Add a Venue Advanced

Q W E R T Y U I O P
A S D F G H J K L
Z X C V B N M
123 space return

When you're done, press the blue upload button

5. ACTIVITY

Photostream Activity

Getting In
Immigration Museum
9 Photos

SETS GROUPS FAVORITES PHOTOS OF FOLLOWING

YOUR PHOTO HAS NOW BEEN UPLOADED!

Press 'Activity' to see what other visitors are commenting on

6. COMMENT

flickr

Getting In
1 hour ago

Interview room
I found it so difficult to make decisions based on the policies rather than emotion!

Add a comment

Select an image, scroll to the bottom and then add a new comment

Figure 1.3
Instruction card provided to research participants.

Having finished the activity and returned the iPad, visitors were asked to fill out a survey about their experience with the activity (Fig 1.4). The use of a survey was chosen to mirror the methodology of the *Contested Sites* project, and to attempt to quantify the change in attitude towards the presentation of contemporary issues in museums in the seven years since. A standardised, written survey sheet was best placed to determine this variance between the two research projects.⁹ The first two questions of the survey align directly with questions asked of visitors in the *Contested Sites* project. The remaining questions extended to the specific use of networked media to facilitate museum discussions. Visitors were asked to respond to a series of statements using the Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree:

1. Museums should exhibit 'contemporary' issues like refugees, same-sex marriage and climate change.
2. Museums should allow visitors to contribute their own opinions to an exhibition.
3. In general, I am comfortable using mobile devices and online applications.
4. I would like to be able to interact with a museum exhibition using my mobile device.
5. The photograph and caption exercise detracted from my experience in the exhibition.
6. I am usually comfortable sharing my personal opinions with a public audience (including online).
7. I would still be willing to share my personal opinions if they were attributed to my real name.
8. If given the opportunity, I would be willing to share my photograph (from today's activity) on one of my personal social media accounts.

The reverse of the survey sheet provided visitors with writing space to respond to open-ended questions, which are "more effective in revealing (the participant's) own definition of the subject."¹⁰ These questions were constructed to encourage visitors to write a detailed response to their

⁹ Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement", in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (3rd edition)*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2005): 702.

¹⁰ Phillips, *Social Research*, 138.

exhibition experience without 'leading' the visitor towards a particular judgement:

1. Did you appreciate the opportunity to respond to this exhibition using the Flickr activity? Why/Why not?
2. How could this activity have been improved?
3. Have you used technology like this in a museum or gallery before? If so, where and what was your impression of it?
4. Do you have any other comments about this activity?

Australian National University

Research Survey

Thanks for your involvement in this research project. Please take a moment to fill in this short survey, and provide any feedback you might have about this activity.

Please Circle:

Gender: M / F Age: Under 18 18-24 25-44 45-64 65+

Postcode (if from Australia): _____

Nationality (if from outside Australia): _____

Please Indicate your response to these statements:

Museums should exhibit 'contemporary' issues like refugees, same-sex marriage and climate change.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Museums should allow visitors to contribute their own opinions to an exhibition.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

In general, I am comfortable using mobile devices and online applications.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

I would like to be able to interact with a museum exhibition using my mobile device.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

The photograph and caption exercise detracted from my experience in the exhibition.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am usually comfortable sharing my personal opinions with a public audience (including online).
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

I would still be willing to share my personal opinions if they were attributed to my real name.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

If given the opportunity, I would be willing to share my photograph (from today's activity) on one of my personal social media accounts.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please Turn Over

Did you appreciate the opportunity to respond to this exhibition using the Flickr activity? Why / Why not?

How could this activity have been improved?

Have you used technology like this in a museum or gallery before? If so, where and what was your impression of it?

Do you have any other comments about this activity?

Thanks very much for your help today!

Figure 1.4
Survey sheet given to research participants following the Flickr activity.

Following the research, I discussed the results – both from the visitor contributions and the survey responses – with three key members of the Museum Victoria staff. Carolyn Meehan is the Manager of Audience Insights, tasked with gauging visitor reactions to museum content. Moya McFadzean is the Senior Curator, Migration and Cultural Diversity, and was the head curator for the development of the *Getting In* exhibition. Finally, Emily Kocaj is the

Exhibitions Manager at the Immigration Museum, responsible for continually updating exhibitions to maintain their relevancy for audiences. This interview was conducted one day after the research activity, which was sufficient time to collate preliminary results only. Conducted as a discussion with all three interviewees present, I first asked for background information on the development of the *Getting In* exhibition. I then questioned how they responded to the findings of the Contested Sites projects, before introducing selected findings from my research into the discussion. The insights of these staff members were critical in understanding the practicalities required to implement this technology over the long term.

A discussion of the results from this multifaceted research – a contributory activity, surveys, and interviews – is reported below. Following demographic and general results from the survey, the data is analysed thematically, categorised by the main issues revealed by the research. The remaining chapters of this thesis present a deeper interpretation of these results, positioned within the wider theoretical framework.

General Results

The survey results revealed highly positive attitudes towards museums exhibiting issues of contemporary significance and towards visitors' contributions to those exhibitions. There was also generally broad support for the use of a form of networked media to achieve this participation. Over the course of the two-day research, 50 people agreed to participate in the activity, although 2 declined to complete the post-activity survey. The quantitative section of the survey sheet was analysed as ordinal data – “in which an ordering or ranking of responses is possible, but no measure of distance is possible.”¹¹ As no numerical scales were shown on the survey, Allen & Seaman argue it would be misleading to convert the results to a combined numerical value. Instead, the

¹¹ I. Elaine Allen and Christopher A. Seaman, “Likert Scales and Data Analyses”, *Quality Progress*, July 2007.

results from the Likert scale survey are presented here as percentages of each response.

The research garnered a fair scope of age groups, with 45-64 years most highly represented with 40% (19), followed by 25-44 years with 27% (13) under 25 years with 23% (11) and over 65 years with 10% (5). Both genders were fairly represented, with slightly more women – 52% (25).

As expected at the Immigration Museum, there was a rich cultural diversity among respondents. Along with listing their Australian postcode, many visitors (25%) identified with a nationality other than Australian. In addition to that number, 31% (15) indicated that they were visiting Australia temporarily from another country. Of the visitors who listed an Australian postcode, the vast majority were from Victoria (76%), with all other states and territories (bar the Northern Territory) represented in the remaining 24%. The postcodes revealed that visitors hailed mostly from metropolitan districts, with only 15% (5) from regional areas.

In a strong endorsement of the *Contested Sites* findings, 79% (38) of the respondents to this research agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that ‘museums should approach issues of contemporary significance’. Only 2 people (4%) disagreed with this statement. Additionally, 71% (34) agreed that ‘museums should allow visitors to contribute their own opinions to an exhibition’. The approval for this second statement was less intense - the number of visitors strongly agreeing dropped to 17% (8), compared to the 35% (17) who strongly agreed with the former statement. Nonetheless, these results are still a strong indication that museum visitors are comfortable with viewing and contributing to exhibitions about topics that may be contemporary and contested.

The survey results also showed there was support for using networked media platforms such as the Flickr activity to contribute to an exhibition. When asked if they appreciated the opportunity to respond specifically to *this*

exhibition, visitors were overwhelmingly affirmative. Of the people who provided a response, 82% (32 from 39) indicated a positive outcome from the activity. A significant trend among the answers was the notion that the activity required visitors to think more carefully about their own reaction to the content – this was mentioned explicitly by 10 people. Only 8 people believed that the activity ‘detracted from their experience in the exhibition’, although a sizeable group (25%) remained neutral to this statement rather than disagreeing (58%). The vast majority of visitors were not concerned by the need to use mobile devices as networked technology, with 83% (40) indicating they were ‘comfortable using mobile devices and online applications’. In addition, most people (56%) said that they would ‘like to be able to interact with a museum exhibition using their mobile device’. The remaining visitors mainly indicated they were neutral to this statement (35%) rather than disagreeing.

The survey also questioned visitors on their attitude towards sharing their opinions with a broader public. A slight majority of visitors (56%) responded that they were ‘comfortable sharing personal opinions with a public audience (including online)’. 6 respondents (13%) disagreed, and the remaining 15 (31%) were neutral towards that statement. The results also revealed that half of the visitors were not reliant on anonymity to present their opinions, with 25 people (52%) agreeing that they ‘would still be willing to share their personal opinions if they were attributed to their real name’. There were 9 people (19%) who disagreed. Views were mixed in regards to the integration of this activity with a personal social media account: 20 people (42%) agreed or strongly agreed that they ‘would be willing to share their photograph (from today’s activity) on one of their personal social media accounts’; 19 people (40%) remained neutral; and 9 people (19%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. There was no obvious correlation between a disagreement with this statement and age group. Of the respondents over 45, slightly more disagreed with this statement (21% compared to 14% of those under 45) but the sample size is too small to draw any concrete conclusions from these close numbers. Therefore, there is certainly an interest in using forms of networked media such

as the Flickr activity to contribute opinions, but this research suggests a slight reluctance towards integrating those opinions with personal social media.

These findings, in conjunction with both the actual contributions made by visitors in the activity and interviews with three key staff members, will now be discussed in greater detail. The discussion of these results will be structured thematically based on some key trends that emerged from this original research.

Research Data Analysis

1. Exploring Issues of Contemporary Significance

The research clearly shows an enthusiasm from visitors to explore issues of contemporary significance in museums. In fact, the proportion of visitors who agreed with the exhibition of contemporary issues (80%) is significantly higher than the figure observed by the *Contested Sites* research seven years ago, in which only 60% of museum visitors agreed with a similar statement. There could be a range of reasons for this increase. Perhaps museum visitors are now simply less conservative in their attitudes towards the types of topics that museums should display. But it is also important to consider the context of this research. Unlike the *Contested Sites* project, my survey was conducted within an exhibition that directly confronts a currently contentious political issue. It is likely that this had an impact on the results, with visitors feeling less threatened by the concept having just seen it in practice. When the *Contested Sites* researchers raised the possibility of an exhibition about asylum seekers, many of their focus group participants expressed concerns:

“(This topic) elicited strong views. Many of those who disagreed said that it was too political . . . some believed that the museum could be ‘hijacked’ . . . others said that museum staff themselves would present a

biased view . . . another view was that the issue of asylum seekers was not yet settled . . . also, there were fears that it would incite aggression.”¹²

Therefore, for this research it was critical to gauge the attitudes of visitors who had just experienced a *real* exhibition that dealt with a contemporary policy issue. For Australia at least, *Getting In* represents a rare example of exactly that type of exhibition.

Getting In was the last of the Immigration Museum’s permanent exhibitions to be developed, as a response to visitor feedback that displayed an interest in immigration policy and the application processes of prospective migrants.¹³ As the exhibition’s head curator Moya McFadzean explained, “people wanted that harder side of it - they wanted us to get into the meatier issues, the tougher issues, and the contemporary issues.”¹⁴ Immigration policy, particularly with regard to asylum seekers, has been at the centre of heated debate for more than a decade. It is a complex issue with significant moral implications, and is often misunderstood. The exhibition immediately attempts to clarify the distinction between asylum seekers and illegal immigrants in an introductory panel:

“It is not illegal to seek asylum in Australia – it is a basic human right . . . illegal immigrants are people who have not met any legal requirements for visiting or migrating to Australia. This includes thousands of people who overstay their visas, many from Britain and the United States. Overstayers outnumber asylum seekers by ten to one.”

The final section of the exhibition, signified by a barbed wire clad sign, details relatively recent policies and controversies (up to 2003) and is intentionally confronting. The panels present a range of arguments that have affected perspectives on immigration policy, including the population debate, multiculturalism, national security and humanitarian obligations. These points

¹² Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: Controversial topics in museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8, 2006: 15.

¹³ Barbara Horn, “Barriers and Drivers: building audience at the Immigration Museum, Melbourne, Australia”, *Museum International*, 58, no.3 (2006): 80.

¹⁴ Moya McFadzean, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

are illustrated by a number of items including a socialist party poster advocating the abolition of detention centres; a Radio 3AW print advertisement suggesting that “immigration should be banned”; the citizenship documents and head scarf of a recently-migrated Muslim woman; and a copy of the One Nation Party’s policy document. The selection of these items contribute to the underlying sentiment of the exhibition: that immigration policy (and the various responses to that policy) has always been, and remains, a reflection of national identity.

Getting In therefore represents a highly contentious issue, and the curatorial construction of the exhibition is critical to its success as a trusted source of information. McFadzean strived for a ‘factually based approach’ in developing the exhibition:

“No museum can be objective, but we wanted to stand back and present the history of Australian immigration policy through these time periods – this is how it evolved, this is the impact it had, this is what the nation looked like – you judge for yourself whether this was problematic.”¹⁵

Developed in the wake of the highly controversial *Tampa* incident of August 2001, this curatorial approach was criticised at the time by “a couple of high profile people in the museum industry”¹⁶ for being too passive in its interpretation of contemporary events. Richard Devetak argues that the *Tampa* incident had a significant long-term impact on border protection policies and public attitudes towards asylum seekers – “deep anxieties were expressed about how immigration is affecting social cohesion and national identity.”¹⁷ Devetak suggests that this incident, as well as the September 11 terrorist attacks three weeks later, contributed to the re-election of the Howard Government in the 2001 Federal Election, and the subsequent implementation of the Pacific Solution – the use of offshore detention centres to process asylum seekers. This wider political context is not referred to in the *Getting In*

¹⁵ Moya McFadzean.

¹⁶ Moya McFadzean.

¹⁷ Richard Devetak, “In fear of refugees: the politics of Border Protection in Australia”, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 8, no. 1 (2004): 104.

exhibition. One of the panels describes the events surrounding the Norwegian freighter *Tampa*, yet the exhibition curators did not believe it was the museum's role to discuss the political implications of the incident. McFadzean: "I still stand by the approach we took with that exhibition – it was the right approach for an historical narrative with a contemporary outcome."¹⁸ However, as McFadzean concedes, no museum can be completely objective and there are aspects of the exhibition that could be contested, which will be discussed later. The question for now is: did the *Getting In* research indicate visitor support for the manner in which the Immigration Museum addresses this contemporary policy issue?

As we have seen, there was strong support for museums in general to approach contemporary issues, but many visitors also expressed their appreciation more specifically of the *Getting In* exhibition. Visitors recognised the importance of understanding the historical significance of immigration policy. One person remarked "Immigration critique is essential to our identity as Aussies."¹⁹ Another said "I was pleased to bring my 16 and 13 year old daughters and hope it will perhaps adjust their perspective on our culture."²⁰ The social and political significance of this exhibition also struck one overseas visitor: "In Canada an exhibit of this type is much needed as a contribution to the current political climate."²¹ One person did criticise the museum in general for its perceived "poor standard and thin collection"²², but this sentiment was not evident in any other response. Most visitors were content with the manner in which the issue was approached.

One person wrote as a caption to a panel about the refugee debate (Fig 1.5):

"This exhibition is helpfully balanced in its treatment of the issues involved. You present all the facets of the story. No easy answers, only the worrying feeling that climate change and globalised activity are going to keep these issues relevant and sharp in the future."²³

¹⁸ Moya McFadzean.

¹⁹ Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

²⁰ Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

²¹ Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

²² Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

²³ Photo contribution (no. 52).

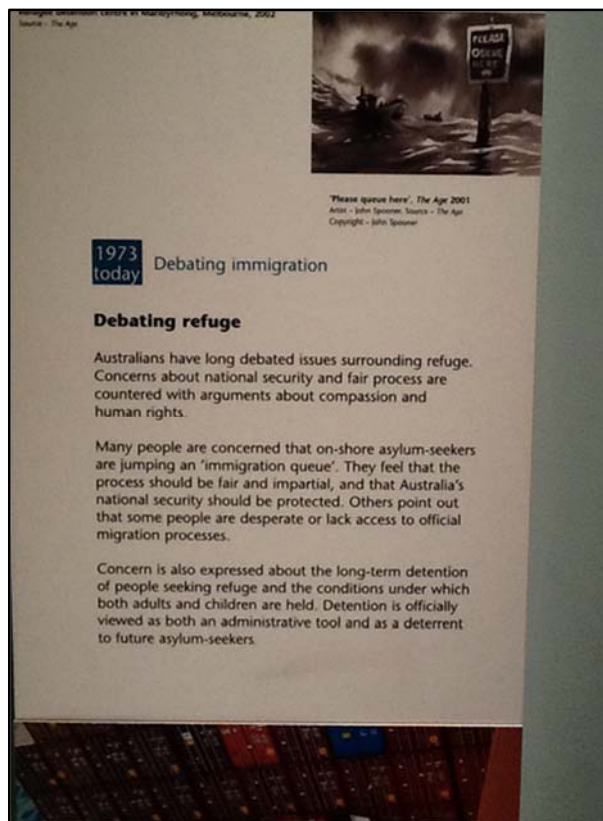


Figure 1.5
'Debating Refuge' wall panel.
Photo taken by a research
participant.

Therefore, the research clearly shows that visitors to this exhibition are supportive of the museum approaching an issue of such consequence and contemporary significance.

2. The Requirement for Visitor Contributions

Must visitors be given the opportunity to contribute their own opinions to exhibitions that confront contentious ideas? The *Getting In* research clearly showed an appreciation from visitors to provide a form of feedback to the exhibition. There was strong evidence that visitors welcomed the opportunity to contribute opinions on this contemporary issue. 71% of respondents reacted positively to this statement in the survey although of these most indicated that they 'Agreed' (26) rather than 'Strongly Agreed' (8), revealing some hesitancy. Additionally, there were 6 contributors against this idea. One said "I don't see that my personal reactions should influence exhibits."²⁴ This was a minority point of view, but one with which museum staff sympathised. McFadzean: "It's

²⁴ Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

refreshing that they are willing to stand back and let the museum do its job – a unique perspective to say that they wouldn't want our exhibitions to be swayed according to what one individual says."²⁵ Audience Insights Manager Carolyn Meehan agrees: "I think that reinforces the role that they see the museum playing – as being dispassionate and objective in whatever the conversation might actually be about."²⁶ However this sentiment raises the problematic notion of the authoritative museum – the third chapter of this thesis will present a more detailed discussion of the implications of museum authority when dealing with contemporary issues.

The focus of the exhibition is the historical evolution of immigration policy, not an attempt to resolve issues. However, there is an implicit suggestion of a link between policy and national identity, as well as the inclusion of issues that are subject to contemporary debate. This would, according to the *Contested Sites* research, oblige the museum to engage a range of perspectives. For example, a panel about the population debate asks rhetorical questions about "How many people should Australia have in the future?"; a Temporary Protection Visa is displayed along with the description that they enforced "reduced access to social services"; and a closing panel describes the Tampa crisis as a "diplomatic stalemate", without any reference to the children overboard incident. These are all highly contested issues which foster a range of perspectives, emotions and attitudes. Shouldn't the museum therefore allow visitors more opportunity for scrutiny and discussion? Not necessarily, replied McFadzean:

"I think it depends on the exhibition. There are different ways for visitors to interact with exhibitions or feel as though they have participated. (Participation) doesn't just mean that you get to write a response and put it on a wall."²⁷

And Meehan suggests there are other ways for museums to gather feedback:

²⁵ Moya McFadzean.

²⁶ Carolyn Meehan, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

²⁷ Moya McFadzean.

“People could have provided a comment in the "Voice of the Customer" book that sits in the foyer. Or had a conversation with a customer service officer - we may not have captured those conversations but the opportunity is there if (the visitors) really feel driven to do that.”²⁸

It could be argued that the success of the *Getting In* exhibition is evidence against the finding of the *Contested Sites* project – that contentious exhibitions *require* visitor feedback. This exhibition represents the most direct engagement of contemporary policy of any museum exhibition in Australia, and has been well-received for the last ten years without any substantial form of visitor contribution. Is there really a *requirement* for museums to allow visitors to contribute their own opinions to these types of exhibitions?

Museum curators rightly have control over the manner in which they present information, and they remain best placed to judge the potential value of facilitating visitor contribution in any particular exhibition. But while there is no *requirement* for museums to allow contributions, the evidence from my research certainly shows that visitors appreciated the opportunity to engage with a museum, and importantly, that their engagement changed the way visitors thought about the content. Of the 39 visitors who responded to the question: “Did you appreciate the opportunity to respond to this exhibition using the Flickr activity?” 82% (32 people) reacted positively. Not only was there overwhelming support for the ability to contribute their own ideas about the topic of immigration, but many visitors indicated that the activity forced them to think more carefully about the content in front of them. This trend will be discussed in greater detail later, but the important point here is that there are clear advantages in employing this type of visitor interaction. The success of the *Getting In* exhibition may show that meaningful visitor contributions are not *vital* for exhibitions on contemporary issues, but my research indicates that it is still a highly valuable tool for engaging visitors with material that may be contested.

²⁸ Carolyn Meehan.

3. Types of Contributions

Visitor contributions consisted of personal stories, overseas perspectives, political opinions and appreciation of immersive experiences such as the 'Interview Room'. The annotated photo contributions – 81, from the 50 visitors – reflect the variety of visitor viewpoints, and the parts of the exhibition which resonated with visitors. A few visitors expressed a personal connection to stories of immigration. For instance, one visitor took a photo of a text panel about European assisted migration (Fig 1.6) and wrote "I liked this because it related to my family who came from England as '10 pound poms' in 1958."²⁹ Another reflected on their personal situation with reference to the opening statement (Fig 1.7): "Being an immigrant myself, my heart goes out to those who were refused."³⁰ Some others reflected on the policies of their own

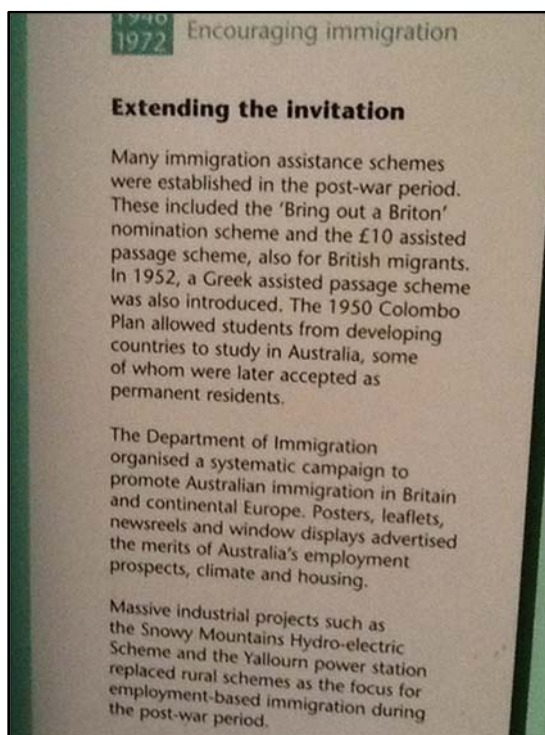


Figure 1.6
'Extending the invitation' wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.

Figure 1.7
Exhibition introduction text.
Photo taken by a research participant.



countries – a Canadian tourist responded to a panel that connected immigration policy with national identity (Fig 1.8): "Living in Quebec, the question of identity has been and continues to be at the centre of political discussion,

²⁹ Photo contribution (no. 56). (These footnotes refer to the photographs and captions created by visitors during the research activity.)

³⁰ Photo contribution (no. 42).

dividing the population.”³¹ Another said, in response to a poster depicting a detention centre, “After spending time in Jordan, it has made me somewhat ashamed to be Australian. In Jordan they do not turn Syrians away!!”³² Such contributions demonstrate how different perspectives can extend the relevance and scope of the exhibition content.

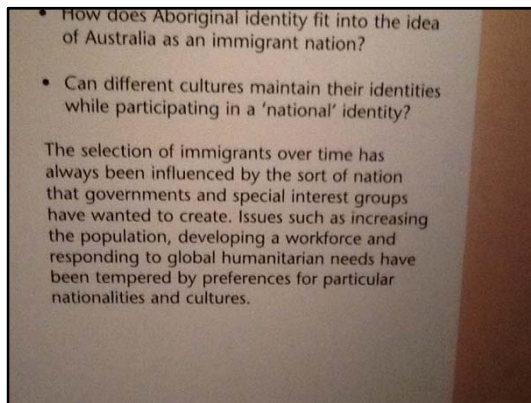


Figure 1.8
'Immigration and national identity'
wall panel. Photo taken by a research
participant.

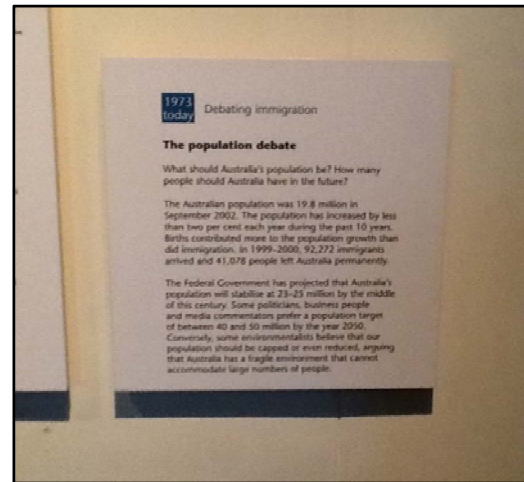


Figure 1.9
'The population debate' wall panel.
Photo taken by a research participant

Another form of contribution was the 'socio-political response'. Many visitors connected objects or text panels to current political issues. One expressed interest in a panel about population (Fig 1.9):

“What should Australia's population be in the future? This is maybe the most important question the country has to discuss. For the nation's unity it is important that all affected people/groups/companies/governments etc talk to each other so that the final policy will be an Australian one!”³³

Another made their own views clear (Fig 1.10): “I support closing down detention centres!”³⁴ Three respondents commented on the panel about the Tampa incident (Fig 1.11). One thought the panel lacked political context:

³¹ Photo contribution (no. 43).

³² Photo contribution (no. 76).

³³ Photo contribution (no. 13).

³⁴ Photo contribution (no. 64).

“Should be reference to the disgraceful use of this incident for political expediency”³⁵ while another claimed

“Tampa started it all. The story encapsulates the whole refugee issue brilliantly. Seems to be a mix of xenophobia struggling with being welcoming and humane to fellow human beings with fair cause for trying to be here.”³⁶



Figure 1.10
‘Is this how we want the world to see us?’, Socialist Party poster, c.2002.
Photo taken by a research participant.

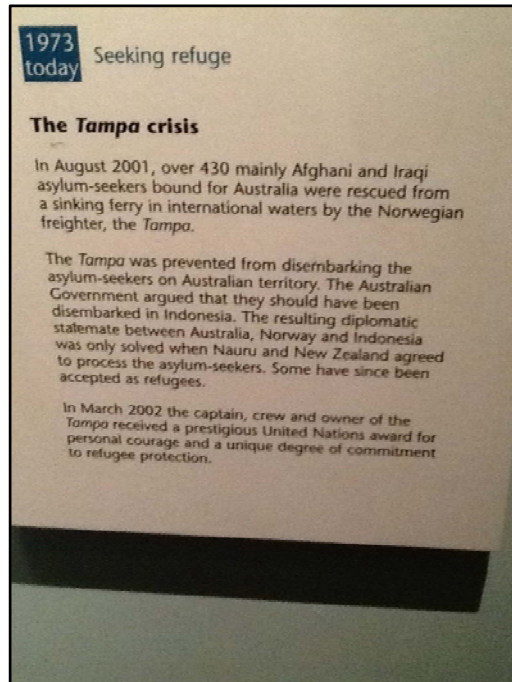


Figure 1.11
‘The Tampa crisis’ wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.

Some visitors lamented the racism inherent in past immigration policies. In response to the dictation test (Fig 1.12): “I wasn’t aware of how sneaky the government was in blocking non-Anglo immigration.”³⁷ Another expressed surprise at the post-war favouritism of British settlers.³⁸ But in a significant trend, many visitors expressed that this racism still exists in contemporary policies. In response to the panel depicting rejection based on ‘looking different’ (Fig 1.13) it was noted, “It’s maddening that this ever happened and that it still

³⁵ Photo contribution (no. 23).

³⁶ Photo contribution (no. 5).

³⁷ Photo contribution (no. 11).

³⁸ Photo contribution (no. 26).

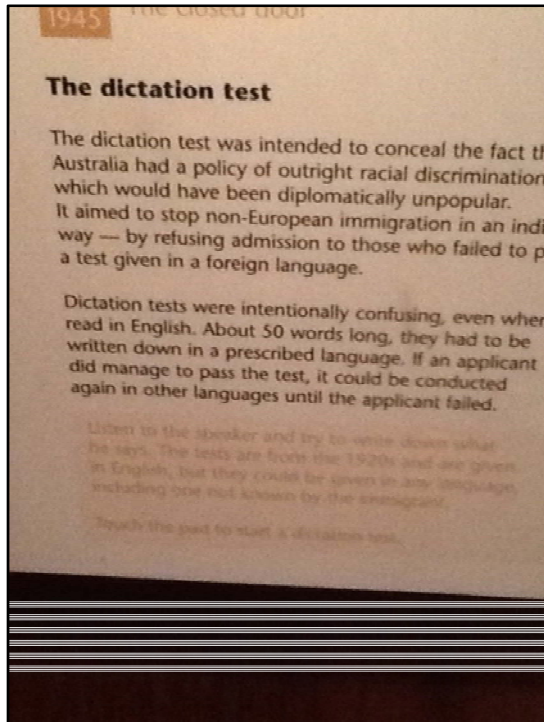


Figure 1.12
‘The dictation test’ wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.



Figure 1.13
‘Continuing rejection’ wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.



Figure 1.14
‘They escape persecution, famine and torture, then we brand them for life’, Austcare and Refugee Council of Australia poster, 1991. Photo taken by a research participant.

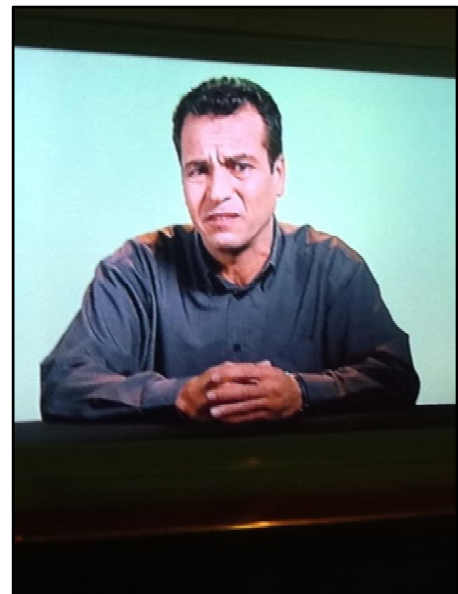


Figure 1.15
Character in the interactive video installation ‘Interview Room’

exists today. Why?”³⁹ One person commented on another’s contribution (Fig 1.14): “Yeah. It’s a very current issue, what with the Abbott/Morrison crusade against vulnerable people.”⁴⁰ The curators may have provided an ‘objective’ overview of the policies, but it is clear from these contributions that visitors recognise the contemporary political implications of the content.

The contributions of fifteen people focused on the interactive ‘Interview Room’, thus establishing the popularity of the exhibition’s central installation. It is one of the most emotionally confronting installations in the museum (Fig 1.15). Visitors must choose between potential applicants, played by actors, from three time periods – the 1920s, 1950s, or present day – and are charged with the responsibility of assessing their suitability for immigration to Australia. Juxtaposed with actors pleading their case for acceptance is another screen providing a dossier with detailed information about the applicant, the period’s respective policy, and the criteria for judging an applicant. An example from the 1920s section is a Chinese woman with a husband and children born in Australia. In light of the criteria of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, visitors are compelled to reject her application for citizenship on the grounds of her race, and order her to leave her family and return to China. The woman cries as she pleads in limited English for an exception to the rule. A contrasting scenario, in the present day section, is an Iraqi man seeking asylum from a Saudi Arabian refugee camp, after collaborating in an unsuccessful uprising against Saddam Hussein’s government in 1991. Having assessed his claim as legitimate, he is granted an Australian visa as part of the Humanitarian Migration Scheme. The visitors who responded to this installation found it an entertaining and engrossing way of understanding the evolution of immigration policies throughout Australia’s history. One said “This was great. It shows both sides of the process. It was hard to decide who should or shouldn’t be allowed to enter Australia.”⁴¹ Another response: “This really brings home the issues for everyone.”⁴² And “Given the subjectivity of human decisions, I am glad not to

³⁹ Photo contribution (no. 37).

⁴⁰ Comment on photo contribution (no. 54).

⁴¹ Comment on photo contribution (no. 15).

⁴² Photo contribution (no. 29).

have the responsibility to make this decision over other people's lives."⁴³ The visitors raised a diverse range of issues through their contributions. An analysis of the contributions immediately reveals the sections of the exhibition visitors were drawn to, and the issues that resonated most strongly.

4. Text panels versus Objects

The importance of museum interpretation is revealed in the high proportion of contributions that featured text panels rather than objects. It is interesting that only 35% of the visitor contributions (28) focussed on objects. Of the remainder, the interactive featured highly (19%), but overwhelmingly, visitors chose to respond to text that had been written by the museum staff.

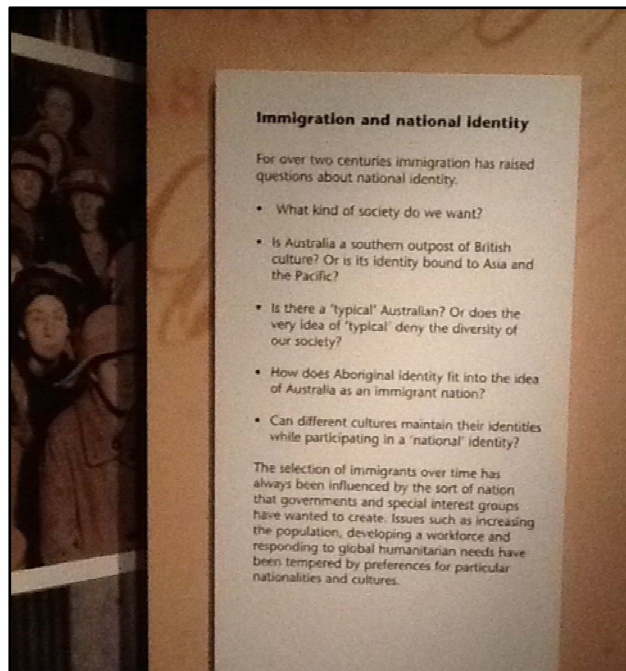


Figure 1.16
'Immigration and national identity' wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.

There were 38 photographs (47%) of the exhibition's text panels indicating the value that visitors place on the museum's interpretation of objects and their placement into a narrative. This can be demonstrated by a few examples. One text panel poses some questions that imply a relationship between immigration policy and national identity (Fig 1.16). A visitor responded: "Such important questions! It is necessary to talk about them to build up a fair society with

⁴³ Photo contribution (no. 45).

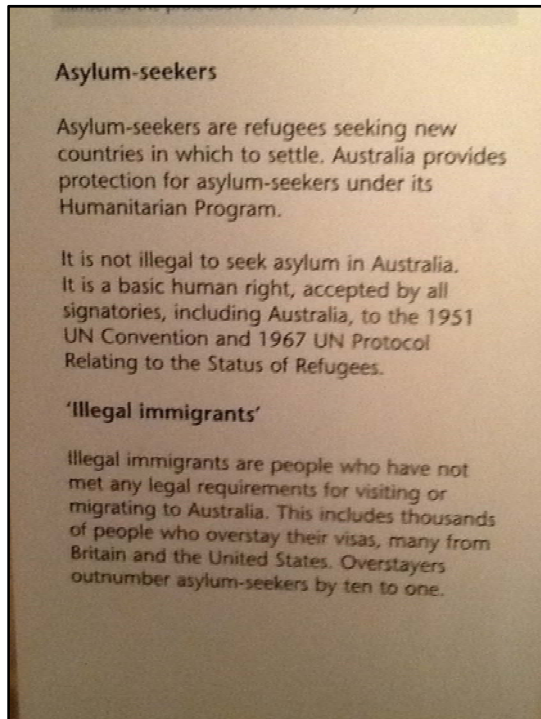


Figure 1.17
'A place of refuge' wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.

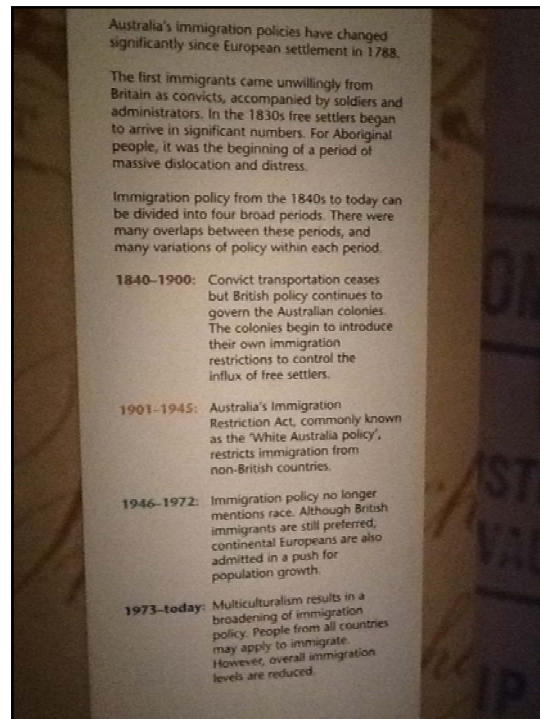


Figure 1.18
'Australia's Immigration policies' wall panel. Photo taken by a research participant.

respect and tolerance.”⁴⁴ Two people responded to the museum’s definition of ‘Illegal immigrants’ (Fig 1.17): “Wish more people were aware of this. Refugees have been through so much by the time they arrive here.”⁴⁵ It seems panels of text were particularly valued in this exhibition as they could be used to provide historical context on this contemporary issue. Responding to the time period overview (Fig 1.18), a visitor wrote “Helpful big picture – One panel to tell the whole history of policy. Helps me.”⁴⁶ The Museum Victoria staff were pleasantly surprised to hear the value visitors placed on the text panels - curator Moya McFadzean responded “that’s really interesting – people are reading them!”⁴⁷ Emily Kocaj considered this a reflection of the exhibition’s subject matter:

“It seems more intellectually engaged to relate to text rather than images - especially in an exhibition that's so heavily intellectual, in terms

⁴⁴ Photo contribution (no. 6).

⁴⁵ Photo contribution (no. 41).

⁴⁶ Photo contribution (no. 49).

⁴⁷ Moya McFadzean.

of the policy implications. It would be interesting to see how that would work in a different kind of exhibition.”⁴⁸

It is also possible that the outcome of the activity as ‘university research’ may have influenced the objects people focussed on. One visitor noted that “I found myself evaluating ‘surveyability’ of what I am looking at.”⁴⁹

Audience Insights Manager Carol Meehan noted that many of these visitors gravitated towards the most thought-provoking text, especially the opening panel: “More than nine million people have migrated to Australia since 1788. Countless others have tried and failed.” (Fig 1.7) As she said, “A lot of the (chosen text panels) were powerful statements. A statement or a series of words – not necessarily an entire panel. It does show the power of word.”⁵⁰ Visitors were asked to take a photo of anything in the exhibition that interested them, and almost half chose to photograph words written by the museum. What does this say about the visitors’ regard for the museum’s role in exhibiting contemporary issues? Visitors clearly feel a need for the museum to explain the significance of objects, and they value the narrative structure that a physical exhibition affords. This has implications for the use of networked media to retain the museum’s voice on a digital platform. The techniques through which museums can achieve this will be the subject of discussion later in the thesis.

5. “It ‘forced’ me to think”

A significant trend among visitors was the assertion that the activity forced them to carefully consider the implications of the content. To the question “Did you appreciate this activity?” 10 out of the 48 respondents specified said that this activity compelled them to engage directly with the exhibition rather than just ‘gliding’ through the space. For instance: “. . . it made

⁴⁸ Emily Kocaj, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

⁴⁹ Anonymous survey response, Question 11.

⁵⁰ Carolyn Meehan.

me more interested in things I saw”⁵¹; “. . . encourages you to think more about what you’re reading”⁵²; “it gave me a reason to pay closer attention to what I was actually seeing and consuming”⁵³. The research shows this sentiment to be consistent among many visitors. This notion is of course reflective of the activity as described to the visitors – they were asked to provide their ‘personal’ response to the material. One visitor praised the activity because “it brings people to the point where they have to make their own opinion about migration.”⁵⁴ Essentially, encouraging visitors to evaluate content and provide a response resulted in those visitors engaging more closely with the exhibition and improving their comprehension of the content. In addition to networked media’s communicative benefits, this result underlines the potential *learning* outcomes of these meaningful participatory technologies.

Carolyn Meehan compared this result to recent Museum Victoria research that revealed differences between *visiting* a museum and *using* a museum:

“When you use a museum you are more purposeful. This kind of activity (would attract people) that use a museum for a purpose that is already defined. Whereas if you are visiting, you are more in a ‘glide mode’.”⁵⁵

This was evident in my research. Two people did not appreciate the cognitive demands of the activity: “very stressful trying to find something significant (from my perspective) to photograph”⁵⁶; “worth doing, (but the activity) slightly detracted, as I was ‘working’.”⁵⁷ However, I would argue that the majority of the participants fell somewhere between the definitions of *users* and *gliders* – they hadn’t come to the museum with the specific purpose of expressing an opinion, but when presented with that opportunity they were certainly willing to

⁵¹ Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

⁵² Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

⁵³ Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

⁵⁴ Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

⁵⁵ Carolyn Meehan.

⁵⁶ Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

⁵⁷ Anonymous survey response, Question 12.

engage, and with conviction. The respondents strongly appreciated this activity's function as a learning tool. Visitors must be free to interact with exhibitions within their own levels of comfort. Any technology that promotes closer engagement with content, however, is surely of high value to museums.

6. Immediacy of Reactions

This networked media activity captured visitor thoughts as an instant reaction to the exhibition content. This capability could greatly assist museum staff in understanding audience insight and behaviour. It also allows visitors an opportunity to provide more specific comments than current methods of audience feedback. The potential value of these immediate reactions is evident in the *Getting In* research. One visitor contributed a photo of a handprint, an example of those which were recorded of immigrants in the early twentieth century (Fig 1.19). The visitor asked "Wondering why they took whole hand prints as I have only heard of fingerprints?"⁵⁸ Another visitor asked about



Figure 1.19
Handprint of Clara Young, 1917. Photo taken by a research participant.



Figure 1.20
Notepad in exhibition for visitors to attempt the dictation test. Photo taken by a research participant.

⁵⁸ Photo contribution (no. 31).

details of the dictation test (Fig 1.20) in which prospective immigrants had to write 50 words in a prescribed language – a policy used to prevent non-European immigration: “How much time were people given?”⁵⁹ These two examples reveal the usefulness of integrating handheld technology into museums – visitors can ask questions while they interact with the exhibition. Museum staff could respond with a comment, thus creating a learning environment that is reactive to visitor enquiries and comments. Carolyn Meehan appreciates the enormous potential for this sort of technology:

“That’s an area that we don’t capture to the depth that we would find interesting – as they go through the exhibition, what is it they are thinking? What’s going on for them at any particular moment? We can try to get them when they come back out of the exhibition, but often those moments can be gone and the richness of the response can be lost. I see this in the behaviour of visitors - they are looking around to find somebody, because what they have just read struck a chord with them and this is their opportunity to say something. We want to capture the strength of that moment, but they’ve gotten over it by the time they get to the exit. So I do think (this technology) is an opportunity.”⁶⁰

Further development of an activity such as this one could enhance the data harvested by museum staff. For example, using GPS markers to pinpoint the exact location where visitors make a comment or automatically collating the oft-repeated words would greatly enhance the staff’s awareness of audience behaviour and insights. Immediacy is networked media’s strength. It can provide visitors with an intuitive system to capture instant reactions. This is a notion beneficial not just to that visitor, but also to the museum’s perception of their audience.

7. Detracting from the Exhibition Experience

A minority of visitors indicated that this activity impacted negatively on their interaction with the exhibition. Responding to the statement ‘The

⁵⁹ Photo contribution (no. 53).

⁶⁰ Carolyn Meehan.

photograph and caption exercise detracted from my experience in the exhibition', 5 people agreed and 3 people strongly agreed – together accounting for 17% of respondents. So while the majority of people felt it enhanced their experience, it is evident from these results that the activity was intrusive for some visitors. Perhaps the people who refused to participate in the research activity could also be added to this percentage. I have previously discussed two of the complaints – that museums should not display personal opinions, and that the activity was too demanding. The only other complaint by another visitor was that the activity lessened their enjoyment of the exhibition, as she “found it distracted from the experience by adding an activity which interrupted the flow of conscious attention.”⁶¹ Curator Moya McFadzean sympathised with this perspective: “I can see that, because it changes your interaction and makes you feel a bit self-conscious.”⁶² However, this was an isolated viewpoint. As noted previously, most people thought the activity enhanced their experience.

Moreover, the use of the technology did not seem to detract from the experience. Visitors were generally very capable of using the technology without assistance. The activity ran on the Flickr photo-sharing application on an iPad. For the steps of the activity (take a photo, write a caption, make a comment) an instruction sheet was necessary. If museum staff were to further develop this activity, they may need to devise their own application to guide visitors through this process. (This would have been impractical in the scope of a two day research activity). In response to the statement ‘In general, I am comfortable using mobile devices and online applications’, visitors overwhelmingly agreed (83%), with only one person disagreeing. This was reflected anecdotally as well – very few visitors required technical assistance from me or my assistant. When asked how this activity could be improved, some people did criticise the technology, suggesting: “Lighter iPad?”⁶³ and “If (the iPad) was a bit smaller. Having said that, I’m just not very used to using tablets.”⁶⁴ As one other person noted, the activity would be better if “it could be

⁶¹ Anonymous survey response, Question 9.

⁶² Moya McFadzean.

⁶³ Anonymous survey response, Question 10.

⁶⁴ Anonymous survey response, Question 10.

done using a personal device.”⁶⁵ This would clearly be the ideal option, and would be possible if the museum developed its own application that visitors could download for free. The use of personal devices could also facilitate extended interaction between visitor and museum beyond the physical visit – a concept that will be discussed in detail later. Nevertheless an encouraging finding from this research was visitors’ proficiency in using the technology provided. For the vast majority of people, this networked media activity was manageable and did not detract from their museum experience.

8. Younger Visitors

The representation of age groups in the research is reflective of the Immigration Museum’s audience, yet anecdotal observations point to a surprising trend. Of the visitors who chose *not* to participate in the activity, there was a higher than expected proportion of people under 30. As they declined to take part in the research this cannot be proven accurately with statistics, but as the researcher requesting potential participants I found this to be a noticeable occurrence. This was an unexpected result – and a concerning finding for museums aiming to use emerging technologies to attract younger visitors. McFadzean suggested that younger people “might just be time poor”⁶⁶, and Meehan pointed out that many young visitors at the Immigration Museum are tourists who may have felt “a hesitation to involve in a conversation that could get beyond them.”⁶⁷ This reasoning is speculative however, and further research in this area might help to specifically elucidate young peoples’ attitudes towards using technology in museums.

9. Meaningful, Diverse Contributions

A promising advantage of networked media is that it could facilitate ‘meaningful discussions’ Meaningful discussion is a subjective term, but for the purposes of this thesis, it represents a contribution that has been allowed the

⁶⁵ Anonymous survey response, Question 10.

⁶⁶ Moya McFadzean.

⁶⁷ Carolyn Meehan.

potential to influence others – that is, it is visible to other visitors and museum staff, who can in turn respond to create interesting discourse. As McFadzean alluded to earlier, visitor feedback can sometimes seem tokenistic, and it is important that any form of contribution be considered worthy of a visitor's intellectual investment. Another potential benefit of networked media is its ability to diversify the debate by allowing for different points of view. A successful form of visitor contribution would encourage difference of opinion and foster the contributions of a range of demographics. To what extent was there evidence of a meaningful and diverse discussion within the *Getting In* research activity?

It is clear that participants considered the activity meaningful, yet there was very little diversity in opinion, which perhaps explains the lack of discussion amongst visitors. It has already been established that visitors appreciated this activity as an opportunity to provide feedback, and that this is particularly beneficial for the museum. However it is questionable whether the activity enhanced the visitor's perception of the immigration issue by exposing them to new ideas and differing opinions. It is notable that the visitors' overwhelmingly positive responses towards immigration do not reflect that of broader Australian society. The museum visitors' unanimously positive sentiment is incongruous with the results of a 2013 survey report from Monash University, which found that 42% of Australians consider the immigration intake to be 'too high'.⁶⁸ For instance, one panel in the *Getting In* exhibition outlines the distinction between 'asylum-seekers' and 'illegal immigrants' (Fig 1.17). These are terms used frequently in contemporary political discussions about immigration, and their definitions are often blurred. A sizeable proportion of Australians would contest the definitions on this museum panel, but this was not the case for any of the 50 research participants. Thus, even within an exhibition that presents a highly contested political issue, none of the visitors chose to question any of the museum's claims.

⁶⁸ Andrew Markus, "Mapping Social Cohesion", *Scanlon Foundation Surveys* (2013): 3.

This is not a revelation – it is reflective of an immigration museum’s core audience – yet it highlights a potential problem in *Contested Sites’* proposal that museums could be a place for open and balanced discussion. How can museums facilitate a meaningful discussion if there is little variation in people’s responses? What does this suggest about a museum’s ability to attract the full spectrum of social demographics? The Australian Museum’s Dr Lynda Kelly surveyed the backgrounds of more than 2,500 visitors over 2005-7 and found that “visitors to the Australian Museum are typically: Sydney-based, primarily from the inner and north areas . . . tertiary qualified . . . white collar, with a busy family life.”⁶⁹ Kelly argues that this is typical for most museums, “the demographic characteristics of museum visitors has remained fairly stable, both over time and across studies in many different countries.”⁷⁰ This matter is a key discussion in this thesis, enquiring how museums can use networked media to facilitate and diversify debate about contemporary issues.

10.No comments

A significant observation from this research was the absence of discussion amongst visitors. Very few people chose to comment on any of the other photo contributions. Participants were expressly asked to make a comment on at least one other person’s photograph as a part of the research activity, but, only 9 out of the 50 visitors left a comment and all of those agreed with the original contributor. Why was there no motivation for discussion? And does this result challenge the effectiveness of networked media?

There may be a few contributing factors to the lack of comments. Firstly, as commenting was the third task of this somewhat prescriptive research activity, participants may have had enough of their involvement by this stage. As mentioned by some visitors, the activity was intellectually demanding and required extra time and concentration. In addition, some visitors may have forgotten about the commenting part of the activity. Another factor may have

⁶⁹ Lynda Kelly “Australian Museum Visitors”, *Australian Museum Blog*, September 18, 2009, <http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/museullaneous/australian-museum-visitors>.

⁷⁰ Kelly, “Australian Museum Visitors”.

been reluctant to be critical of other people's work. One visitor reflected "I, personally, would not usually add a comment to someone else's work/photo on social media."⁷¹ Carolyn Meehan also considered this to be a potential cause: "Maybe they thought that by providing a comment they were making a judgement."⁷² All of these reasons are plausible. It is apparent therefore that if networked systems are to overcome these barriers and illicit responses, they must convince visitors that their comments have value. Whereas my two-day research activity was limited to the confines of the museum itself, a more long-term commenting system would allow visitors to continue their discussions online.

This is reflective of the concept of 'meaningful' involvement: that any contribution must be worth the visitors' investment. The Museum Victoria staff also picked up on this point. Given that the activity was only accessible inside the exhibition space, Meehan felt that there was little benefit in sparking a discussion:

"If I just leave my comment and then go away, I never know if anyone commented on that again. So what's the point of starting the conversation if there is no opportunity for that continued contact?"⁷³

Emily Kocaj suggests this could be rectified if the application allowed off-site interaction:

"It would be great if that conversation could continue after they leave the museum . . . so you can see people's opinions and thoughts changing about an issue or being challenged potentially, and I think that's very interesting dialogue which a lot of in-gallery stuff misses."⁷⁴

The research shows that most visitors were unwilling to invest in a system of commenting that provided them with no lasting benefit. Again, this points to the

⁷¹ Anonymous survey response, Question 10.

⁷² Carolyn Meehan.

⁷³ Carolyn Meehan.

⁷⁴ Emily Kocaj.

advantage of networked systems that utilise personal devices and can be extended beyond the museum's physical realm. The practicalities of developing such a system will be considered in the final chapter.

11. Anonymity and Social Media

Visitors were content to provide anonymous, non-public contributions, but would this change if their opinions were linked to their real name or their social media profiles? If this technology was extended to allow visitors to continue conversations offsite, then they would need to be identified by a unique username. That doesn't necessarily have to be their real name, but social media integration could be advantageous. Connecting to the museum discussion with an existing Twitter or Facebook account would afford visitors simpler and quicker login and provide them the option of digitally sharing their contributions with friends. That option would therefore be of significant marketing benefit to the museum, as visitors reach out to like-minded followers. But would visitors be prepared to do this?

There was some hesitation amongst visitors towards publishing opinions under their real identities. Just over half of respondents (52%) agreed that 'I would still be willing to share my personal opinions if they were attributed to my real name.' 9 people (19%) disagreed with this statement. Visitors were also split over the use of social media. 20 people (42%) agreed that 'If given the opportunity, I would be willing to share my photograph (from today's activity) on one of my personal social media accounts' – 9 people disagreed and a further 19 people remained neutral to this statement. These figures were largely consistent across the age groups, with only slightly higher agreement (50%) in the 18-44 ranges. An alternative option could allow visitors to log-in directly with the museum application using either their real name or a pseudonym, and then provide the option to share their contributions on social media. This also avoids alienating visitors who do not own a social media account. A slight majority of people were not willing to share their photo on social media, but not all visitors need to participate to make an activity

worthwhile for the exhibition. Four people (8%) *strongly* agreed that they would be willing to share their photo on social media. If that figure eventuated in reality, it would still be a significant boost for a museum's outreach strategy – 8% of visitors would be connecting their exhibition experience with their digitally connected friends or followers. Therefore these results indicate that social media could be useful in extending the reach of the exhibition, although a museum would be wise to allow the option of anonymity in order to engage the majority of visitors in discussion.

Conclusion

The information gathered from this research reveals positive visitor attitudes towards the use of networked media technology, but raises two broad questions about practical implementation that need to be addressed in this thesis. The first, how can museums both encourage and maintain control of visitor discussions? The lack of comments provided by participants of this activity demonstrates the imperative to create systems of participation that are worth the visitors' investment. The idea of a space for unrestricted public comment is exciting, but what are the practical implications for museums? Can a meaningful and diverse debate about contemporary issues form organically amongst visitors, or do museums need to 'curate' this discussion? The next chapter 'Curating the Public', considers the difference between moderation and curation, and explores the models of networked participation that can be effective in the museum space.

The second question to emerge out of the results from this research regards the movement of museum content onto digital networks. It is clear that to create a meaningful, diverse and ongoing conversation, museums must allow continued digital access to their content. But this concept presents some real problems for museums, both logistical and ethical. The third chapter 'Digital Dissemination' explores some of the practical problems surrounding digitisation of content – copyright restrictions, a lack of resources, and the

immense amount of content. This chapter also considers how museums can maintain their control of content once it is disseminated on digital networks, and the effect that this digital involvement has on the academic authority of the museum.

The results of this research activity provide a basis for the introduction of networked media as a tool to encourage discussion amongst visitors and perhaps museum staff. The research participants overwhelmingly appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and considered it an important right to be able to contribute opinions. Additionally, museum staff saw the significant potential for deeper and continued interaction with their visitors. It is also apparent that this activity would need to be greatly improved if it were to be implemented on a long term basis. Visitors and museum staff expressed a desire for standalone applications, the use of personal devices, and online integration to allow continued access. Not only would these improvements enhance the intuitiveness and functionality of the technology, they would also create interesting new possibilities for exhibiting and interpreting museum content. These possibilities are explored in the final chapter 'Networked Media Strategies' with further reference to case study of the Immigration Museum's *Getting In*. By consolidating the findings of this research and the discussions of the next two chapters, a theoretical version of *Getting In* will be proposed, that would utilise these extensions of the research activity. These results indicate there is great potential for networked media in museums, and with further development this technology could have a profound impact on the way visitors engage with contemporary issues in museums.

Chapter Two: Curating the Public

The networked media activity at the *Getting In* exhibition provided visitors with an uninhibited right of comment, yet the research revealed a requirement for greater museum involvement in the publishing of user-generated content. A lack of curatorial structure undermined the value of individual contributions, and served to limit interaction between visitors. This chapter will consider the extent to which museums should *curate* the contributions of the public, in order to uphold standards of accuracy, balance, structure and civility. This proposition is ethically dubious – to alter, restrict or favour public input could be regarded as a severe breach of trust between the museum institution and its visitors. Yet museums also have a responsibility to create compelling visitor experiences that showcase significant content – a task that requires the expertise of museum curators and exhibition designers. Critical to the design of a successful networked media strategy is the balance of these two factors: the right for visitors to have a ‘meaningful voice’; and the right for museums to control their content. This is especially crucial for museums fostering discussion on issues of contemporary significance, which may be more vulnerable to user content that is inaccurate, unbalanced, unstructured or derogatory. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the models of participation through which museums can strike this balance.

Building on findings gleaned from the *Getting In* research, this chapter focusses on case studies that engage with visitors (or users) in the online sphere. As will be seen from these examples, there are already museums and other institutions that have developed strategies to curate and moderate user-generated content. With its sole internet presence, The International Museum of Women relies on contributions from its audience to present innovative exhibitions about issues facing women across the globe. This chapter presents a close analysis of the museum’s *Economica* exhibition, supported by discussions with Executive Producer Catherine King, to examine its effectiveness in

providing users with a meaningful voice on important contemporary issues. The museum's strategies in curating, moderating and structuring this content could inform the introduction of similar strategies into physical exhibition spaces. Additionally, this chapter looks outside the museum field to consider online models of user moderation on news media websites. By their very nature, many of these websites are the primary space for online discussion about contemporary issues. Analyses of the curatorial models used by the online forms of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The New York Times* and *Kinja* provide a snapshot of the forms of networked media that could be effective when translated to the physical museum space.

The first section of the chapter considers the definition of a 'meaningful voice' – essentially the potential for a user's contribution to influence others. The online International Museum of Women is analysed to determine how museum staff curate user-generated content to provide a range of views on important issues currently facing women across the globe. The second section questions to what extent the exhibition of contemporary issues intersects with social activism. As a self-identified activist museum, The International Museum of Women uses participatory communication to promote social campaigns and advocate charities – how does this use of networked media translate to government funded museums such as the Immigration Museum? Third, I will examine in detail the museum responsibilities that could be threatened by networked media, with particular reference to the situation of *Getting In*, at the Immigration Museum. Four main issues associated with user-generated content examined here are inaccuracy, loss of structure, unbalanced debate and derogatory comments. These four factors represent the impetus for museum staff to curate and moderate visitor contributions. In an effort to find the networked media strategies effective in achieving this moderation, the last section will consist of a review of online institutions that have already confronted the problems associated with curating user contributions. There is much for museums to glean from the experiences of news sources, blogs and social media in developing networked models of participation. In essence, the

central question for this chapter will be: to what extent should networked museums 'curate the public'?

Facilitating 'meaningful' contributions

A networked exhibition creates a new, digital layer that allows visitors to make a contribution that is 'meaningful'. The word meaningful in this context does not allude to the quality, or value, or accuracy of the contributions. Instead it refers specifically to the potential influence and impact of a visitor's views. That is, networked media fosters an interconnected and evolving discussion, rather than feedback oriented models of participation that are common in many museums. The *Contested Sites* project came to the conclusion that if museums are to represent contemporary or controversial issues, they must provide a mechanism by which the visitor may contribute, thus "creating more socially integrative experiences, making a stronger commitment to promoting free debate and allowing genuine diversity in opinion in exhibition contexts."¹ This form of interactivity demands more than just the impression of participation. Museums must sincerely endeavour to provide visitors with an opportunity to engage in debate and challenge authoritative viewpoints. The networked media activity introduced to the *Getting In* exhibition was designed to facilitate meaningful contributions. It was partially successful, in that visitors clearly appreciated the opportunity to provide detailed feedback. Yet there was very little interaction *between* the research participants – visitors seemed more interested in providing their own opinion over engaging with other visitors' ideas. This brings into question the potential influence and impact – the meaningfulness – of the visitor contributions in this networked media activity. This section outlines the importance of curation in encouraging visitor engagement with diverse ideas.

¹ Fiona Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, 'Edgy' Topics, Civic Responsibilities and Modes of Engagement", *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006): 32.

It is true that for some museum exhibitions, a superficial impression of audience participation is justified. Nina Simon defines the most common form of participatory design as ‘contributory projects’². This comprises of any design technique that invites visitors to share their own thoughts within the exhibition. It is generally a brief and simple activity that attracts a large proportion of visitors and affords the museum staff with a high level of control over the content. An example of this is a contributory project at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in Canberra, which invites visitors to write a response to the question “Who do you think will be remembered in 100 years?” on cardboard and then place it on display. Their responses are guided by examples provided (AC/DC, Heath Ledger, The Wiggles) and later curated by exhibition staff who remove inappropriate offerings such as non-Australian and contentious personalities.³ In this way, the archive shapes visitor contributions to fit the charter of promoting Australian screen and sound identities. This may work well for the museum’s purpose, but it is important to recognise that this is not an accurate reflection of the visitors’ responses (visitors typically favour either international artists such as One Direction or current politicians). For many institutions like the NFSA, this simple contributory project is adequate for their charter and succeeds as the most appropriate means of engaging visitors.

Yet for exhibitions that confront more divisive issues, this feedback oriented model of participation does not fulfil the obligation prescribed by the *Contested Sites* researchers. The objective of providing visitors with a means of contribution is to enable them to openly challenge the arguments presented by the museum exhibition. For this to work, museums must be prepared to relinquish some of their curatorial control over visitor contributions. A meaningful model of visitor participation must encourage diverse views, including those of people who have not traditionally been museum visitors. Additionally, a meaningful contribution must have the potential to influence others. Simon criticises some museums as “participatory kiosks that are

² Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 203.

³ Personal communication with NFSA staff member, June 2014

functional black holes”⁴ – these visitor contributions are only tokenistic because they disappear into a slot or are thrown away at the end of the day. If museums are to foster a valuable and dynamic discussion within their exhibitions, they need to create a platform that is worth the visitor’s intellectual investment. Such a platform could be a debate, facilitated by networked media technology, as it can create an evolving conversation that as explained later rewards interesting perspectives and reaches new audiences. Does this work in practice? In the following paragraphs I will examine one example of a museum that has utilised networked media to an extreme degree in order to give a more meaningful voice to its visitors.

This museum, The International Museum of Women (IMOW) exists entirely online, fuelled by social activism and user-generated content. This not-for-profit independent museum aspires to promote gender equality of rights, responsibilities and opportunities by “amplifying the voices of women worldwide through history, the arts, and cultural exhibits and programs that educate, create dialogue, build community, and inspire action.”⁵ A small team of staff work out of an office in San Francisco to produce online exhibitions that confront contemporary issues facing women, such as *Economica: Women and the Global Economy* (Figure 2.1). Developed in response to the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, *Economica* explores world economic issues from the viewpoint of women. There are two distinct perspectives that permeate the exhibition content: that “women are the majority of the world’s poor and exploited (and) on the other hand, women form an increasing percentage of the world’s entrepreneurs, business leaders, shoppers and philanthropists.”⁶ Each of the exhibition’s nine themes launches with a short slideshow, presenting captivating stories that set the tone for each section: from the desperation of Egyptian women lining up in a queue for bread; to Qatari women challenging

⁴ Nina Simon “Responsiveness is the Most Important Part of Participation” *Museum 2.0 Blog*, February 24th, 2010, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com.au/2010/02/responsiveness-is-most-important-part.html>.

⁵ “Goals and Principles”, International Museum of Women website, http://www.imow.org/about/ourstory/goals_and_principles.

⁶ Exhibition Description, International Museum of Women website: <http://www.imow.org/exhibitions/index>.

traditional gender roles in the business community; to the emotional impacts of the Chinese government's 'policing of women's fertility' via the one-child policy. These provocative slideshows are held together by hauntingly beautiful photographs, an evocative soundtrack, and the often heartbreaking stories that they illustrate. Following the slideshow, visitors are able to explore the topic in more detail through essays, poems, photographic collections, multimedia displays, podcasts, interview transcripts, personal stories and artworks, throughout which the user is encouraged to share their comments.



Figure 2.1
Front page of the *Economica* exhibition, International Museum of Women

This digital landscape affords new opportunities but brings into question its definition as a museum. There is an abundance of content – it would be impossible to experience all of it and that is clearly not the curators' intention. Instead, the online experience is more organic than that of a traditional museum: visitors are encouraged to delve into what interests them, to follow links to other material and resources, and to revisit the museum multiple times. The exhibition is unashamedly slanted towards the imperative for humanitarian

aid in developing nations and structural change within the global business world – after all, the museum’s mission statement is not simply to present ideas and stories, but also to inspire action for vital global issues for women. With no publically accessible physical presence and aspirations of social activism, it is reasonable to question whether this is in fact a museum. Cary Karp concedes that some museum professionals question the legitimacy of ‘born-digital initiatives’ such as the IMOW, arguing that “the definitive essence of a museum is its possession of physical collections.”⁷ However, whilst acquiring, conserving and interpreting physical collections will remain central to the charters of most museums, the revised International Council of Museums definition of the museum purposely does not exclude museums without physical collections. In fact, as so much new material is inherently digital, Karp insists it is entirely appropriate for those collection items to also be digitally exhibited, providing that “the material is presented in keeping with professional curatorial standards.”⁸ Maintaining established museum standards is critical for the IMOW’s credibility and to differentiate it from other websites. According to the *Contested Sites* research there is a widespread distrust of information on the internet, with 66% of the surveyed respondents believing that the internet was not trustworthy.⁹ Elaine Heumann Gurian predicted an expanding definition of museums and urged museum-thinkers to be open minded: “These many new museums are to be welcomed; there is the opportunity for the changed museum to make a more relevant contribution to our society.”¹⁰ Certainly, the *Economica* exhibition is using innovative networked media techniques to provide its visitors with a meaningful contribution to the debate.

Economica is built on user-generated content. Museum visitors can leave a comment on almost every item; share content on social networking websites, participate in the forum, or even submit their own work to be considered for publishing within the exhibition. The integration of visitor content into the

⁷ Cary Karp, “Digital Heritage in Digital Museums”, *Museum International*, 56, no. 1-2 (2004): 46.

⁸ Karp, “Digital Heritage in Digital Museums”, 48.

⁹ Lynda Kelly, “Museums as Sources of Information and Learning: The Decision Making Process”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006): 7.

¹⁰ Elaine Heumann Gurian, “A Blurring of the Boundaries”, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 38, no. 1 (1995): 31.

museum is “a cornerstone of every project we’ve ever taken on”¹¹ according to Catherine King, the Executive Producer of the Global Fund for Women (which recently merged with the IMOW). The ensuing discussion is well-mannered, but thought-provoking. For instance, in response to a question about what the world would be like if women had equal control over the economy, visitors posted “there would be more workplace options for women who cared about both their personal success and spending time with their families”; “men are great risk takers . . . if women controlled the economy we would not be in this mess”; and “what matters is not who’s in charge, but that our policies, practices, and institutions work to benefit everyone.”¹² In addition to commenting on existing material, visitors are encouraged to submit their own content. More than one quarter of the written pieces were created by museum visitors in response to the exhibition. Visitors have submitted their own artworks, poetry, music and essays that reflect their own understanding of the issues facing women in the global economy.

Visitor contributions to the IMOW are still curated by museum staff. Catherine King contends “we have a very strong belief that hearing real and authentic voices from women around the world is the most important way to understand the lived experience and the stories.”¹³ However, all these submissions pass through a juried, editorial process before they are published: “we don’t present all work that is received . . . we can curate the content that we think addresses our range of perspectives and viewpoints.”¹⁴ An example of a chosen visitor contribution is the report by photojournalist Elena Fava Emerson on the working situation of women in Kashmir and Jammu, regions of northern India. Emerson presents a series of photographs and descriptions of industries such as brick-making, a physically exhausting job that many women take due to precarious financial security – “it is a hopeless existence, with little certainty

¹¹ Catherine King, Skype Interview, 28 August 2014.

¹² Comments on a post by Masum Momoya, “An economy that works for everyone”, *Economica Exhibition*, IMOW.

¹³ Catherine King.

¹⁴ Catherine King.

other than seemingly endless labour.”¹⁵ The inclusion of pieces such as this creates an immersive and thought-provoking exhibition, enriched by the experiences and perspectives of the museum’s audience.



Figure 2.2
Tammy Mike Laufer, *Economic Liberation*, *Economica* exhibition.

As well as relevance, strength of presentation, and creativity, the IMOW curators also seek a uniqueness of voice. King explained that “if there was a story or perspective or an issue we haven’t heard before, we’re always particularly interested in presenting that.”¹⁶ One of the more unusual visitor contributions in *Economica* is Israeli Tammy Mike Laufer’s submission of a series of ‘digitally-manipulated’ artworks that were inspired by the inequality of women in the workforce. Her piece entitled *Economic Liberation* (Figure 2.2) demonstrates, ironically, that while a woman is immortalised as a symbol of equality and freedom in the Statue of Liberty, this is not reflected in the reality

¹⁵ Elena Fava Emerson, “Community Voice: Work To Live”, *Economica* Exhibition, IMOW, <http://www.imow.org/economica/stories/viewStory?storyid=4679>.

¹⁶ Catherine King.

of most women's economic existence. This work has inspired positive comments relating to "the vibrancy and power".¹⁷

King argues that the presentation of viewpoints that challenge the perspectives of the museum audience is critical to the exhibition of a contemporary issue such as this. As an example, she cites the inclusion of a piece by the founder of non-profit Women for Women International, Zainab Salbi, which questioned the impact of microenterprise. King explains "we had a whole gallery devoted to exploring how microenterprise has been successful in helping to harness women's economic power, particularly in rural areas . . . but she really challenged that idea, arguing that we need to go beyond that and talk about macro solutions as well."¹⁸ The curatorial strategy at the IMOW is to not only select user contributions that adhere to the museum's mission, but to also feature viewpoints that challenge visitors and spark discussions. This is an important point to consider in the analysis of the *Getting In* research results. The contributions from the introduced networked media activity varied in style and content – but there was little diversity in opinion. This may have accounted for the lack of comments on visitor contributions. The experience of the IMOW shows that curators can develop this meaningful engagement by featuring alternative points of view, such as that of the *Getting In* visitor who raised a question about the nation's sustainable population. Therefore, active curation of public comments serves to highlight legitimate areas of debate and challenge visitors' preconceptions.

Despite the significant steps taken by the curators of *Economica* to ensure that meaningful visitor contributions become integral to the success of the exhibition, there are challenges facing this innovative museum. Although theoretically the museum has a potentially broad audience, it is noticeable that the majority of contributors are women who already have a role in rights activism or who are academics in the humanities. If an online conversation is to

¹⁷ Clare Winterton, commenting on Tammy Mike Laufer, "Community Voice: Economic Connections", *Economica* exhibition, IMOW,

<http://www.imow.org/economica/stories/viewStory?storyid=4868>.

¹⁸ Catherine King.

be dynamic it should encourage views from a more diverse demographic, including those that don't align with the museum's perspective. User contributions are 'curated' – chosen by staff for their perceived insightfulness, originality and legitimacy. This maintains the high standard of user-generated content, thereby protecting the exhibition's credibility, yet it also works to suppress contributions that may challenge the authoritative view of the museum. Furthermore, a very small minority of visitors actually utilise their right to comment. There are 600 000 annual individual visitors, and yet most pieces only have one or two comments, and many have none. Visitors must endure a relatively involved registration page in order to create a profile and contribute to the discussion. The expectation for users to upload their profile picture and location, and to fill in information 'About Me,' 'How do you exhibit change?' and 'What issues are you passionate about?' the museum discourages online anonymity. This certainly reduces the chance of derogatory comments or 'trolling'¹⁹ but it may also severely limit the potential for an evolving conversation that challenges visitors' perspectives. *Economica* is an innovative project that uses networked media to blur the barriers between curators and visitors, yet it reveals how challenging it is to design a model of participation that balances visitor autonomy with curatorial standards.

Activism in the exhibition

The exhibition of contemporary issues and the curation of public content is a subjective practice, and has the potential to become a form of social activism, whether that be the intent of the museum or not. For the *Getting In* exhibition, the curators aimed to develop an exhibition that presented an objective view of immigration policy. But is it inevitable that museums play the role of activist when dealing with issues of contemporary significance? Dawn Casey argued that it is impossible to escape that perception:

¹⁹ Trolling is the act of deliberately inciting controversy by posting subversive opinions.

“Museums which mount exhibitions about refugees, the environment or human sexuality will protest in vain that they have been scrupulously fair to all points of view, (but) to some conservative critics, merely choosing to discuss such things is to indicate a political position.”²⁰

The staff at the Immigration Museum are acutely aware of their responsibilities as a public institution, yet these boundaries can be blurred when contemporary politics clash with the museum’s scientific and academic research. Carolyn Meehan said:

“The question is always around: what is it that we discuss, and how far can you go, and can we express a view? If we don't have an exhibition space that is dedicated to that topic, then we don't get to say anything necessarily.”²¹

A recent event arose to test this provision. With the museum dedicated to the topic of immigration, Moya McFadzean believes there is some opportunity to be involved in contemporary policy discussion: “we are having that discussion right now about 18C – the Racial Discrimination Act²² – and at what point should the museum make a statement?”²³ There was some apprehension towards releasing a public statement, which staff felt would be outside the realms of the museum’s objective responsibilities. Instead, the museum planned to install within the *Identity* exhibition a speech given by Senator George Brandis in defence of the proposed changes, in which he controversially declared that “people have the right to be a bigot.”²⁴ Emily Kocaj explained the advantage of this strategy: “It is providing that context for comment to be made and for the community to make comment on it. But (as a museum) we are still

²⁰ Dawn Casey, “Culture Wars: museums, politics & controversy”, *Open Museum Journal*, 6 (2003).

²¹ Carolyn Meehan, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

²² Note: at the time of this interview, the Federal Government was considering making changes to Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act that would no longer make it unlawful to ‘offend, insult or humiliate’ a person because of their race, colour or ethnicity.

²³ Moya McFadzean, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

²⁴ George Brandis, Parliamentary debate, 24 March 2014, Hansard p1797.

not providing actual comment.”²⁵ However, it may be seen as a fine line as Moya McFadzean added: “There's an implied comment (from the museum).”²⁶

The IMOW's *Economica* is far more explicit in its promotion of change, advocating charities and activist groups. On many of the content pages the curators have provided links to relevant external organisations. For instance, in the 'Basic Rights' section under the banner 'Take Action,' there is a link to a blog about the 'Beijing + 15', a 15 year review of policy that holds governments to account for gender inequities. Also, after learning about both the positive and negative impacts of microfinance schemes, visitors are encouraged to donate to one of five microenterprise charities that focus on women. The IMOW is upfront about its position as an activist institution and the inclusion of these links are consistent with its mission of 'exhibiting change.' The participating visitor is critical to the success of the *Economica* exhibition, in both the creation of content and the objective of social change. However, the notion of museum and visitor as social activists contradicts the sentiments of the *Contested Sites* respondents – less than 30% of whom saw museums as places that should take an active political role to bring about change.

The argument cited by the *Contested Sites* focus groups was that advocating avenues of activism may render a museum impartial and thus damage its credibility. The researchers found that “few staff saw museums as having a role to promote social activism”²⁷, and similarly only 20% of visitors felt museums should have “a more active role in building a better society.”²⁸ The Museum Victoria staff agreed that it is not the museum's job to openly advocate a political position, but that broad messages such as tolerance and acceptance could be inferred from the content. Networked media places the power of activism in the hands of visitors, as they can use it to express opinions that a government-funded museum could not. One research participant did exactly that (Fig 1.15): “It's a very current issue, what with the Abbott/Morrison

²⁵ Emily Kocaj, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

²⁶ Moya McFadzean.

²⁷ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 13.

²⁸ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 12.

crusade against vulnerable people.”²⁹ *Contested Sites* researcher Fiona Cameron argued that museums should be equipping visitors with this activist power: “Contentious topics such as immigration policy epitomise change, uncertainty and the challenges faced by people in a rapidly changing world, (and) museums can (provide) support by offering reflective experiences, contextual information and activist know-how.”³⁰ Cameron and the Museum Victoria staff therefore agree that museums can empower visitors to contribute to social change on contemporary issues, but that most museums, particularly those funded by government, hold short of directly advocating a position. The final chapter will consider how museums can facilitate this empowerment by creating digital partnerships with relevant community groups or charity organisations.

Maintaining curatorial responsibilities

An egalitarian approach to visitor perspectives in exhibitions has the potential to risk the authority of a museum. Museums have built a reputation as institutions that can be trusted to supply accurate information in a logical sequence. The *Contested Sites* research confirms that museums are highly regarded by visitors as credible sources of information: “museums are like a library . . . a very reliable, informative first hand source of information.”³¹ That assessment may be misguided given that museums, like any source of information, are fallible representations of reality, yet there is an understandable desire for museum professionals to maintain this level of credibility. One staff member said “we should be inciting debate, not championing single points of view. If we become too politicised we lose our power and for many perhaps our funding.”³² This section will examine how museums must curate visitor contributions to maintain their responsibilities as a trusted public institution whilst using networked media to mediate on issues of contemporary significance.

²⁹ Comment on photo contribution (no. 54).

³⁰ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 14

³¹ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 15.

³² Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 22.

Any museum's primary objective should be the creation of valuable visitor experiences. Yet this simplifies the range of obligations expected of a modern museum. Most museums are public institutions, and as such need to be accessible and transparent to all of their constituents. Museum staff are charged with expertly collecting and conserving items of great public importance. They are critically involved in researching the provenance and significance of their collection, and its place in the field of study. Curatorial staff must present these precious items to the public, and help interpret them with an emphasis on accuracy and scholarly process. They then must create narratives that appeal to a multitude of demographics: kids with their parents; locals; university students; researchers; school groups and tourists. And for most museums, all these outcomes must be achieved under a tight budget. There is a complex web of responsibilities to fulfil and stakeholders to appease in putting on an exhibition. Funding bodies and visitors demand a high standard and museum professionals are experts in their field with the knowledge and experience to deliver this. Therefore, couldn't the introduction of networked media undermine this quality of experience expected of museums? By allowing visitors to create museum content, we could be left with a mass of white noise – pages of uninteresting, unqualified, and inaccurate opinion that adds no value to our understanding of the subject matter. The previous section explored the importance of providing visitors with a meaningful opportunity for contribution – a chance to speak without prejudice or conditions. But in reality, this is highly problematic. Museums are a structured medium, bound by proven methods of communication and a commitment to scholarly processes. Museums must create networked media models and policies that help protect the broader objectives of museums. The following pages will discuss four of the most pertinent threats raised by the introduction of participatory networked media: inaccuracy; loss of structure; unbalanced debate; and derogatory content.

Inaccuracy

Inaccurate assertions are potentially very damaging not only to the credibility of the museum, but also to the museum's objective to promote an

educated and informed representation of subject matter. As Matthew MacArthur notes “the idea of deliberately diluting our intellectual content with substantive input from users – allowing their material to appear in connection with our trusted ‘brand’ – makes us extremely uncomfortable.”³³ It is questionable whether staff should direct or curate these discussions, particularly if the contributions include information that is misleading or promotes inaccuracies. In the exhibition *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* at Melbourne’s Immigration Museum, visitors are invited to undertake the citizenship test given to prospective Australians, and are then encouraged to suggest alternative questions that should be included. The visitors vote for the questions they believe to be most warranted on the citizenship test. Of a list of thirty suggestions, the highest user-rated question was ‘What year were Australian Aboriginal people allowed to vote?’ presumably with the answer intended to be 1967. This piece of user contribution effectively propagates the inaccurate myth that the 1967 referendum concerned Indigenous suffrage. The contribution was originally submitted in 2010, and three years later still remains on the museum’s website.

This example articulates the level of influence that networked media can provide to visitors, irrespective of the quality of that contribution. Given that it has been ‘up-voted’ to highest on the list suggests that this erroneous piece of content inside the museum exhibition has been accepted by visitors as truth. As one of the *Contested Sites* visitors said: “museums have always been factual – we can rely on it.”³⁴ At this point, do museum staff have an obligation to step in and rectify the situation? “It’s a difficult one,” acknowledges curator Moya McFadzean, “we do just let it sit there, because I guess it is the sentiment that is interesting.”³⁵ In this instance, the model of participation would only have allowed staff to remove the question from the program. This solves the immediate problem, but it doesn’t lead to any educational improvement. A more

³³ Matthew MacArthur, “Can Museums Allow Online Users to Become Participants?” in *The Digital Museum: A Think Guide*, ed. Herminia Din and Phyllis Hecht, (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2007), 60.

³⁴ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 30.

³⁵ Moya McFadzean.

sophisticated model of visitor contribution could allow staff to use this as a learning opportunity, posting their own comment that explained the real outcomes of the 1967 referendum and the historical complexities surrounding Aboriginal people's right to vote.

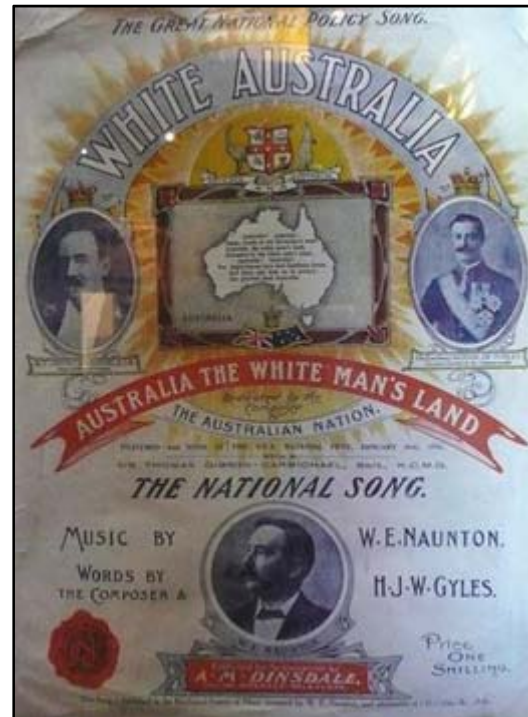


Figure 2.3
Cover of 'White Australia' Sheet Music,
W.E. Naunton & H.J.W. Gyles, 1910.
Published on Collections Online, Museum
Victoria website.

A separate example from the Immigration Museum emphasises this point in practice. Many of the collection items on display have been digitised and uploaded to Collections Online – a section of the Museum Victoria website that allows people to comment on any object in the collection. The subject of a number of comments is the sheet music to the 1910 song *White Australia*, by W.E. Naunton and H.J.W. Gyles (Figure 2.3). The uploaded image shows the sheet music's cover, depicting a white map of Australia, and the caption: 'Australia the White Man's Land'. The museum's curatorial notes explain that this object reflects the sentiment of immigration policy at the time. However one commenter misinterpreted the museum's motivations in collecting the object:

"That is Soooooo racist you guys should be ashamed of your
selves! God what a selfish idiots . . . I bet no other countries wrote this

kind of crap! WTF I think you guys should be embarrassed by uploading this”³⁶

The curatorial staff saw this as an opportunity to explain why the museum collects objects that might reflect negatively on the past. McFadzean recalls:

“I was supported to write a museum response that framed the rationale. It wasn't about her or anything – it just framed the rationale as to why we would collect an object like that, and then we let the debate continue. We don't intervene very often – we certainly left her comment there. I just felt that we needed to, because I didn't want it to engender an opinion that we were collecting racist material because we are racists.”³⁷

Not only did the museum response address that accusation, but it also evoked a number of other visitor comments, including some that agreed with the museum and others that challenged the museum's interpretation. By becoming involved in the comment section, the museum had sparked a meaningful discussion amongst visitors. Therefore the essential point here is this: although museums should be striving to promote diverse views, it is critical for staff to actively curate standards of accuracy and accountability.

Loss of Structure

The second curatorial threat posed by networked media is the loss of structure. Museum curators are experts in representing ideas that will be new and intriguing to the visitor, yet poorly designed networked media techniques can create a mass of uninterpretable data. Like any authored source of information, the museum exhibition is a carefully structured medium, engineered to promote information that is both accurate and interesting. Leslie Bedford builds on the thesis of G.E. Hein's *Learning in the Museum* (1998) to argue that narratives and storytelling are critical for museum exhibitions as

³⁶ Jenny Gilard, comment on “Sheet Music – ‘White Australia’, W.E. Naunton & H.J.W. Giles, 1910”, Museum Victoria website, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/items/1326028/sheet-music-white-australia-w-e-naunton-h-j-w-gyles-1910>.

³⁷ Moya McFadzean.

they “generate personal connections between visitors and content . . . and find the place, the intersection between the familiar and the unknown, where genuine learning occurs.”³⁸ The creation of narrative is inherently a subjective task as it requires strict selection and structuring of content, yet it is a key cognitive mode of comprehension.³⁹ Consequently, a networked media strategy left un-curated is a threat to this trusted form of learning. If every visitor’s contribution is afforded equal standing, the exhibition will resemble an unstructured wall of text that provides little insight into the subject, minimises the incentive to be involved, and buries perspectives that could be considered more interesting or original. Therefore, there is a critical role to be played by museum staff in curating the contributions of the public. Curators can improve the functionality of networked media strategies through a range of policies: featuring creative posts on a public display, removing contributions that don’t add new information, or grouping similar ideas under headings.

These approaches could undermine the point of an open networked media strategy: to gauge the response of a larger visitor base, and provide visitors with an unprejudiced opportunity to challenge museum authority. Selecting, removing and favouring public contributions will alienate visitors with perspectives that are marginal within museum staff and traditional visitors. Museum workers need to be mindful that there is a public perception of political imbalance within museums. Linda Ferguson noted that there was an impression among the *Contested Sites* focus groups that museum curators were generally left-wing.⁴⁰ This reflects the observation of respected historian and museum director Lonnie G. Bunch III that museums are perceived to be “dominated by loony left-wingers.”⁴¹ However, Dawn Casey argues that this is partly a reaction to the process of in-depth inquiry.⁴² Nonetheless, museums

³⁸ Leslie Bedford, “Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums”, *Curator*, 44, no. 1 (2001): 27.

³⁹ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 11.

⁴⁰ Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: Controversial topics in museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8, 2006: 15.

⁴¹ Lonnie G. Bunch III, “In Museums at the National Level: Fighting the Good Fight”, in *Public History: An Introduction*, eds. Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp, (Malabar: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1988), 349.

⁴² Casey, “Culture Wars”, 13.

must be aware of their political power, and the act of curating visitor contributions may simply further marginalise the points of view that are already rare in the museum field. As observed in the *Economica* exhibition, the curated selection of singularly aligned perspectives discourages differing opinions, and therefore the potential reach of the exhibition is limited to a specific audience, whose views are left unchallenged. It is also worth noting that the views of both visitors and staff can rarely be categorised into right and left wing perspectives. In reality curators are charged with balancing a wide spectrum of opinion. An incentivised system such as visitor voting may certainly be more democratic, and would produce a more accurate representation of the museum audience, however would still serve to drown out dissenting opinion. I would argue for a model of participation that allows museum staff to harness their understanding of narrative construction to create stimulating debate within the exhibition. The means of achieving this will be discussed later in this chapter, following analysis of online news media that have already confronted this problem.

Unbalanced Debate

Thirdly, there is also a fear that the balance of debate on a participatory networked media platform could be easily corrupted for political gain. Visitors surveyed in the *Contested Sites* project were concerned that exhibitions could be “hijacked”, particularly when dealing with contentious political issues: “an exhibition about asylum seekers . . . people might use it to push their own political angle . . . you’ve got to be very careful.”⁴³ The ability to offer an unpopular opinion should be perfectly acceptable, but creating an unrestricted public forum does present an opportunity for the manipulation of data. Online news sources have experienced this in the manipulation of online polling. *Crikey* reported that a number of poll results on Australian websites had been drastically skewed by organised groups for political advantage.⁴⁴ But would this occur in a museum environment? If the exhibition is successful enough to be in

⁴³ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 22.

⁴⁴ Tom Cowie, “Online Reader Polls on Life Support at Holt Street 2.0”, *Crikey*, 18 February 2011, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/02/18/online-reader-polls-on-life-support-at-holt-street-2-0/>.

a position of influence, then museum staff must be prepared for this possibility – the implementation of specific policies to maintain a balanced and representative debate will be considered in the next section of this chapter. But one preventative measure lies in determining the type of subject matter that should be open for public debate. As argued previously, museums should remain firm advocates of historical and scientific principles. Therefore there is no need for museums to provide visitors with an opportunity to respond to issues that already hold scholarly consensus within their institution. For instance, the benefits and safety of fluoridated water or vaccines are issues that have been overwhelmingly scientifically proven, and yet are aggressively rejected by some fringe groups. It would be irresponsible for museums to feed these cultures of denial by providing them with a platform to dismiss scientific evidence. The careful selection of subject matter is critical in creating balanced debate using networked media.

Derogatory Comments

Finally, many museums will already be accustomed with dealing with contributions that are derogatory or completely off-topic. Posts that include abusive language, direct insults, needless provocation or advertising spam present less of an ethical dilemma than the previous threats to museum responsibilities, and can be swiftly deleted. In fact there may be a legal obligation to remove content that is offensive or inciting hatred. The lack of anonymity in museums will alleviate much of this type of content – staff at Museum Victoria did not consider derogatory comments to be a problem for their current public programs. The introduction of networked media strategies would need to include policies to remove these contributions swiftly.

Museums must build systems and policies that serve to manage these four main problems associated with open networked discussions – inaccuracies, loss of structure, unbalanced debate, and derogatory comments. They could be solved through heavy moderation and curation by museum staff, however this arguably defeats the purpose of a free and open discussion. The following section will examine the models of participation used by online institutions

outside of the museum sphere. I will argue that the design of the participatory model is key to alleviating these problems and to maintaining the standards from which museums have built their credibility.

Learning from Online News Media

Museums can gain much from the experiences of other institutions that have embraced Web 2.0 techniques to promote content and connect with users. The term Web 2.0 refers to website design that utilises user-generated content, such as blogs, forums, video sharing and social networking. This has had a resounding impact on the consumption of online media. This “convergence”, as Henry Jenkins describes it, means that “the circulation of media content (now) depends heavily on consumers’ active participation.”⁴⁵ The saturation of Web 2.0 has created an expectation of participation among users and has therefore put pressure on public-facing organisations to similarly embrace user-generated content. This strategy has the potential to engage larger audiences and foster brand awareness, but it comes with risks. Malcolm Knox is particularly wary of the impact social media is having on private corporations and businesses: “the moment in which social media was seen as a truthful, democratic, level playing field for the making of reputations was brief.”⁴⁶ Pointing to research that one-third of user-generated web reviews are faked in order to promote or denigrate a product, Knox questions whether the rise of web 2.0 is “an explosion of democracy or open slather for reputation saboteurs.”⁴⁷ In order to protect their credibility, many organisations that have already established an online presence have had to develop new strategies that help to maintain control of user-generated content. The following section will explore the experiences of some of these organisations. Firstly, an analysis of *The Sydney Morning Herald* model will illustrate the burden of manual

⁴⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴⁶ Malcolm Knox, “Bad Reputation: blackmail, corruption plague online reviews”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/digital-life-news/bad-reputation-blackmail-corruption-plague-online-reviews-20130430-2i944.html>.

⁴⁷ Knox, “Bad Reputation”.

moderation and the issues that can arise from a flawed system of participation. *The New York Times* will be presented as an example of a simple commenting system that provides staff with the provision to curate responses. Third, Gawker Media's innovative comment system *Kinja* provides users with their own curatorial responsibilities, and has been greatly successful in fostering insightful discussion amongst its significant reader base. Finally, the increasing use of third party social media offers a more intuitive interaction with content and comments, but raises questions about online privacy and the loss of anonymity.

Newspaper corporations are an instructive case study. In their physical form, newspapers have been publishing reader perspectives for almost three hundred years as 'Letters to the Editor'⁴⁸, yet new technology has democratised the experience of news feedback. Wahl-Jorgensen argues that letters to the editor have remained popular amongst readers because "they were seen as representing the truth and authenticity of the public".⁴⁹ Yet McCluskey & Hmielowski question whether this is indeed the case, with letter writers being "often older, better educated and more conservative than the general population."⁵⁰ Furthermore, a 2004 research survey into letter writer demographics found that the newspapers' requirement to identify writers by name deterred a significant number of readers from letter submission, particularly women, city-dwellers, young people and people with unusually high or low incomes. The researchers concluded that "people seen as being more vulnerable than others are more likely to opt out of the letters forum out of fear of being identified and perhaps becoming susceptible to intimidation."⁵¹ According to McCluskey & Hmielowski, the advent of online reader posts on newspaper websites has the potential to approach Habermas' "ideals of the

⁴⁸ Jim Allee Hart, *Views on the news : the developing editorial syndrome, 1500-1800*, (London: Feffer & Simons, 1970), 90 (Hart describes letters that were published in an American newspaper in 1722).

⁴⁹ Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public: Newsroom Culture, Letters to the Editor, and Democracy*, (Cresskill NJ, Hampton Press, 2007), 38.

⁵⁰ Michael McCluskey and Jay Hmielowski, "Opinion expression during social conflict: Comparing online reader comments and letters to the editor", *Journalism*, 13, no. 3, (2011): 306.

⁵¹ Bill Reader, Guido H. Stempel III, and Douglass K. Daniel, "Age, Wealth, Education Predict Letters to Editor", *Newspaper Research Journal*, 25, no. 4 (2004): 64.

public sphere of discussion and debate.”⁵² From their comparison of printed newspaper letters and posted online comments regarding a series of racially-charged incidents in Louisiana in 2007, the researchers found that opinions from the online posts provided a more equal balance of views than the letters to the editor. They propose four reasons for this: firstly, anonymity expanded the range of views, particularly among ‘vulnerable’ demographics; second, there were no ‘media gatekeepers’ excluding comments, apart from those that were seen as derogatory; thirdly, the technological nature of participation made it easier for time-poor readers to contribute; and finally, the demographics of technology users favoured younger, more progressive people.⁵³ These findings reinforce the advantages for museums to also utilise network media in fostering a broader debate. Further investigation into the moderation of user comments by newspaper websites will clarify the models through which this can be effectively implemented.

As determined earlier, the moderation of comments serves to keep discussions constructive and protect an institution’s reputation, but it does raise questions over the ethics of editing or curating public sentiment. If done ineffectively, moderation can undermine the inherent advantages of utilising networked media. The majority of western newspaper websites have adopted user contribution, and it would be wise for museums to consider the experiences of these organisations in dealing with comment moderation. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) recently released a set of guidelines for the acceptance of user comments. Before being published, contributions are checked for: material that may incite violence or hatred; gratuitous abuse of the author, subjects or fellow commentators; relevance to the discussion; and commercial promotion.⁵⁴ But even with a clear set of guidelines, comment moderation is a role steeped in personal judgement. Rob Ashton, a comment moderator for Fairfax Media must make quick and consistent decisions about

⁵² McCluskey and Hmielowski, “Opinion expression during social conflict”, 316.

⁵³ McCluskey and Hmielowski, “Opinion expression during social conflict”, 314-5.

⁵⁴ “Comments on Fairfax articles and blogs”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/comments-on-fairfax-articles-and-blogs-20120307-g1sg.html>.

the type of content published on their websites: “It’s easy to reject the worst comments: the spear-tackles. But many comments are borderline. I have to judge, as best as I can, where to draw that line.”⁵⁵ He believes it is critical to support a diverse range of views on the website, as “regardless of whether people are erudite or otherwise, everybody has the right to submit a comment and have a chance to engage. To do anything else would be discrimination.”⁵⁶ The SMH employs a chronological model of comment listing: the first responder has their comment at the top of the page, regardless of quality or popularity. This has led to a misuse of the website’s ‘Reply’ option, which readers can use to embed their comment underneath another. Experienced users have learnt to reply to the top comment, regardless of relevance, in order to have their observation more readily accessible to a larger audience. Comment moderators can’t resolve this issue, but Ashton does admit to rejecting a higher percentage of replies than standalone posts due to personal attacks on fellow readers. He cites an example of a rejected reply: “I don’t know how to class you 1. as an idiot . . . or 2 that you are just another Coalition supporter.”⁵⁷ Fairfax moderators strive for a debate that focusses on the issues by only accepting comments that “play the ball, not the man.”⁵⁸ The SMH’s model of networked participation and their policies of moderation may be effective in removing derogatory comments, but it is evident that this system is still highly vulnerable to inaccuracies, unbalanced debate and a lack of cohesion.

Online comments may have a negative reputation as a space of vitriol and unstructured rants, but the success of online participation relies heavily on the design of the commenting mechanisms. In September 2013, the magazine *Popular Science* announced that it was shutting down the commenting system on its website, as ‘trolls and spambots’ were hindering the prospect of intellectual debate. Online content director Suzanne LaBarre offered a scathing attack on the negative impact of comments:

⁵⁵ Rob Ashton, “Why I reject your comments”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 2013 (no longer accessible online).

⁵⁶ Ashton, “Why I reject your comments”.

⁵⁷ Ashton, “Why I reject your comments”.

⁵⁸ “Comments on Fairfax articles and blogs”, *SMH*.

“A politically motivated, decades-long war on expertise has eroded the popular consensus on a wide variety of scientifically validated topics . . . Scientific certainty is just another thing for two people to ‘debate’ on television. And because comments sections tend to be a grotesque reflection of the media culture surrounding them, the cynical work of undermining bedrock scientific doctrine is now being done beneath our own stories, within a website devoted to championing science.”⁵⁹

This grim evaluation is supported by the results of a 2013 study on ‘the Nasty effect’ which found that extreme and polarising comments were more likely to solidify reader perceptions than civil and balanced comments.⁶⁰ Many news sources, including *The Australian* and *Sky News Australia*, have thus opted not to allow comments on their online platforms. But other organisations have found that carefully designed models of participation can help to create an engaging connection with the reader and promote user loyalty to their site. Critical to the design of these models is the level of curatorial control afforded to content creators, and the potential risks associated with hosting public contributions on a news website. The following three examples – *The New York Times*, Gawker Media’s *Kinja*, and 3rd party social media integration – illustrate the capabilities of well-designed systems of online debate, models which could translate to the museum space.

Some news outlets have developed their own innovative models of commenting that create a structured debate among readers and content creators. *The New York Times*’ (NYT) system balances reader recommendations and staff curation in order to feature the most interesting posts. As well as viewing all comments in order of ‘newest’ or ‘oldest’, readers can select a separate ‘Reader Picks’ tab, which displays comments that have been

⁵⁹ Suzanne LaBarre, “Why We’re Shutting Off Our Comments”, *Popular Science Column*, 24 September 2013, <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>.

⁶⁰ Ashley A. Anderson, Dominique Brossard, Dietram A. Scheufele, Michael A. Xenos and Peter Ladwig, “The ‘Nasty Effect’: Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, (2013) doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12009.

recommended by fellow NYT account holders⁶¹. Additionally, the 'NYT Picks' tab displays comments that the newspaper staff have decided to feature. The following example illustrates how this model of participation promotes comments deemed worthy by both staff and readers. Following a mass shooting of 12 people in the Washington Navy Yard, Op-ed columnist Joe Nocera wrote an opinion piece about the lack of political will to limit mentally-ill people from accessing guns.⁶² 528 comments were left by readers – a huge volume of content to negotiate if simply reading in chronological order. The posts that had been most 'recommended' by NYT account holders are overwhelmingly in favour of stricter gun control regulations, a reflection of the NYT's largely left-wing readership.⁶³ Highly recommended posts included: "even after mass shootings, the pro-NRA politicians quickly dry their crocodile tears and put their hands back out to collect their campaign money" (228 recommendations⁶⁴); "I turned in my NRA card when it would not back the ban on assault weapons more than 2 decades ago" (180); and "Who needs terrorists when the 2nd Amendment terrorizes all of us? America is a sick, violent and disturbed country." (152). You need to scroll further than the 40 top-rated contributions before finding a comment that opposes the premise of the article. Although these responses are reflective of the views of the NYT's demographic, it is certainly not representing a balanced debate. The 'NYT Picks' section alleviates this issue somewhat, by featuring comments that do offer an alternative perspective. Whilst the 26 posts featured by the newspaper staff remain heavily in favour of gun control, there are some opposing views: "It is not the guns it's the criminals using them. Fix the mental health issue, don't infringe on my rights" (21); and "To use such tragedies as excuses for railroading arbitrary gun laws through Congress isn't working, thankfully" (11).

⁶¹ A free account that allows readers to comment on articles, as well as 'recommend' or 'flag' other readers' contributions.

⁶² Joe Nocera, "Shrugging Off the Shootings", *The New York Times*, September 23, 2013. (The online edition with comments is available here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/24/opinion/nocera-shrugging-off-the-shooting.html>).

⁶³ "In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable: Trends in News Consumption: 1991-2012", *The Pew Research Center*, September 27 2012, 39. (The report found that 44% of NYT readers declared themselves Democrat supporters, compared to 13% Republican supporters).

⁶⁴ These comment sections are fluid, so the number of recommendations on each post may have changed since this was written.

The NYT journalists also promoted posts that offered a broader context: “(Background) checks would only pick up on people who have been adjudicated to be mentally ill by the court system (and therefore) I do not believe they would be particularly effective” (8); “While Hollywood glorifies (guns) and their culture, what hope is there for the impressionable young?” (86); and “Why aren't we doing more to treat the mentally challenged?” (56). As evident from the number of reader recommendations these posts are not garnering the same support from their fellow readers, but the NYT commenting model promotes them in order to create a more structured and balanced online debate. The success of this system reinforces the advantages of curatorial involvement – something that museums must consider in the construction of their own networked systems.

Also relevant to networked technology in museums is an online media source aspiring to create comment discussions that are just as valuable as the original content. The online blogging network Gawker Media, launched a commenting system called *Kinja 1.0* in 2013 – a model of participation that in Gawker’s own words, gives readers “the power to curate the conversation using the same tools of engagement as our editors”. Essentially, any reader of the blog can make a comment; then similar to the NYT model, these comments are ‘recommended’ by fellow users, thus pushing them further up the page. But unique to *Kinja* is that each comment becomes the start of a new conversation curated by the author of that first comment. New participants can add their replies, but they are subject to approval from the original poster. What transpires is a series of individual conversations that in turn become content in their own right – automatically posted on the original poster’s personal *Kinja* blog. That blog, hosted by Gawker Media, can also be used to compose new content, that can then be republished by staff onto one of the main Gawker sites. ‘Following’ blog authors and other commenters brings their content and comments to your personal blog feed, snowballing the social experience. Furthermore, the comments are highly integrative – enabling users to embed and annotate images, gifs, videos, links and quotes, just like the blog authors. This participatory model is at the forefront of egalitarian, but structured, online

debate – Gawker editor Matt Hardigree described their ambition “to demolish the walls that separate the conventional wisdom from the truth, the reader from the writer, and the powerful from the curious . . . As of this moment you now have all the tools we have.”⁶⁵ The intention of this model is to create inclusive discussion areas “civil enough to encourage authors, experts and celebrities to come in for open Web chats”⁶⁶ That is critically important to Gawker because it boosts advertising revenue.⁶⁷ Advertising is of less importance for publicly funded museums, but this does indicate *Kinja*’s success in engaging visitors and retaining loyal readers. Finally, *Kinja* encourages anonymity through its ‘Burner’ login option, which allows users to create an account that is not linked to any other identifying source such as an email or third party social media account. Gawker chief Nick Denton believes that anonymity can be beneficial to online debate, providing a voice to people in a vulnerable position: “The most interesting things on the web tend to come from people who are disguising their identities.”⁶⁸ *Kinja* represents a model of networked participation that blurs the boundaries between content and comments. This intricately designed system of contribution provides users with a meaningful voice, whilst upholding standards of structured, balanced and civil debate. There is much for museums to glean from the capabilities of the *Kinja* platform, however the development of such a complex participatory system may be an expense well out of the realm of most museums.

The integration of third party social media as a mode of contribution is favourable for many online news sources, because it is cheap, discourages anonymity and removes most moderation obligations from the hosting website. Embedding existing social media sources such as Facebook, YouTube and

⁶⁵ Matt Hardigree, “Welcome to What’s Next”, *Jalopnik blog*, February 11 2013, <http://jalopnik.com/welcome-to-what-s-next-73787938>.

⁶⁶ Nick Denton (Chief of Gawker Media) in a private memo to staff. Published by David Carr, “Nick Denton, Relentless Seeker of Online Traffic, Turns Sentimental About Writing”, *The New York Times*, January 6, 2012, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/06/nick-denton-relentless-seeker-of-online-traffic-turns-sentimental-about-writing/>.

⁶⁷ Felix Salmon, “How Gawker Wants to Monetize Comments”, *Reuters Opinion blog*, 22 May, 2012, <http://blogs.reuters.com/felix-salmon/2012/05/22/how-gawker-wants-to-monetize-comments/>.

⁶⁸ Nick Denton, quoted in Noah Davis, “Can Gawker’s New Commenting System Improve Quality Without Creating Chaos?” *Fast Company*, 167 (2012).

SoundCloud allows a content provider to instantly link to a participatory network with minimal responsibilities required by the hosting website. For example, ABC News regularly embeds videos hosted by YouTube within its online content. This is particularly useful for cross-platform news sources – the ABC can upload a video produced for ABC News 24 to YouTube and then embed that video into a story on its online news website. Users can still participate in discussion, but the responsibility for those comments shifts to YouTube, without any expense to the ABC. Removing this responsibility is a necessity for some high traffic websites. The US cable channel ESPN reported that 6.4 million comments were made on its websites in August 2013, through the Facebook Comments plug-in⁶⁹. This commenting model requires commenters to post using their personal Facebook account, thus removing any liability for ESPN to moderate that enormous volume of content. The other advantages of this system include broader transmission, achieved by automatically posting the comment on the user's Facebook wall; and the necessity for commenters to use their own identities, which supposedly should reduce the level of vitriol. The obvious disadvantage is privacy – commenters using this system expose their Facebook profile to strangers, and provide Facebook with internet use analytics that are sold to advertisers. It also excludes anyone without a Facebook account from participating in the discussion. For this reason, many media sources such as CNN and *The Telegraph UK* have opted to use a different third party tool, 'Disqus' – an unlinked commenting system that allows the hosting site to retain moderation duties. But the integration of third party social media is not just about shifting responsibilities – it also creates participation that is more intuitive than static comments at the bottom of the page. SoundCloud is an audio hosting social media site, often used by radio stations to embed radio clips into online content. The innovative concept of this tool is that it supports 'atomic commenting', allowing users to post a comment at a specific point in the audio recording. Similarly, the plug-in 'Quip' allows readers to highlight and comment on a specific sentence from an article before sharing it on Facebook or Twitter. Therefore, not only are integrated third party social media cheaper

⁶⁹ Kevin Ota, "ESPN Digital Media Remains No. 1 in Platforms across August", *ESPN Press Release*, 30 September 2013, <http://espnmediazone.com/us/press-releases/2013/09/espn-digital-media-remains-no-1-across-platforms-in-august/>.

and easier for the hosting site, but they also provide new and innovative ways of engaging with content. Furthermore, our experience of online content is evolving so rapidly that it is arguably not worth media sources spending vast resources on developing models of participation that could quickly become obsolete. It is clear that there are advantages to the utilisation of social media for visitor communication, however it is worth noting here that there are logistical problems particular to the museum sector associated with the incorporation of these 3rd-party content-hosting sites, which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Integrating networked media into museums does pose a risk to the key museum responsibilities of accuracy and scholarship. It would certainly be easier to maintain the clear divisions between content creators and content consumers. Yet given the progression of web based media in entitling consumers the right to rate, select and create their own online content, museums will soon be forced to progress their own modes of participation. There is much to learn from the practices of other organisations that have embraced the egalitarianism of networked media – particularly the experiences of news media, which similarly must appease a web of stakeholders whilst dealing with complex and politically charged issues. Networked debate is not always going to be accurate, balanced, interesting and civil, but there are certainly commenting models and policies that can help push insightful, interesting and unique perspectives to the fore. The three examples cited in this thesis represent a spectrum of commenting models with varying degrees of institutional control and potential risk. *The New York Times* system affords staff a high degree of control over the content by choosing to feature exemplary posts, but the newspaper is also responsible for all the contributory content, and must be vigilant in moderation. In contrast, the use of third party social media allows very little curatorial control over the comments, yet given this content is hosted externally, the risk is minimal. Gawker's *Kinja* floats somewhere in the middle of these two: there is curatorial control, but the responsibility for this is shifted to the users. *Kinja* is still only in its infancy – if it

succeeds in turning user comments into a valuable commodity (for both users and advertisers), it may become the standard for online participation.

Conclusion

How would these models work in the museum sphere? The fourth chapter will return to the analysis of these examples to examine how these experiences translate to the use of networked media in museums, and present some of the models and policies of moderation that could be successful. The public perception of trustworthiness differs between that of news media and museums, as found by the *Contested Sites* research project. Kelly argues that museums are considered to be reliable sources of information due to the perceived authenticity of their collection-based communication.⁷⁰ The introduction of public contribution to museum exhibitions, in a similar manner to the models analysed in this chapter, may threaten that notion of museum authority and encourage visitors to think critically about the museum as a subjective source.

Museums have the expertise and creativity to engage in networked debate in interesting and innovative ways. However, this open and very visible mode of communication with the public also poses a threat to the respected museum standards of scholarship, structure and balance. As evident from the analysis in this chapter, there is much to learn from the experiences of institutions that are already in the midst of online participation. Not that museum staff are completely unaccustomed to this – curators continue to employ their skills in carefully structuring content, even if it means ‘curating the public.’ Entirely egalitarian debate is a utopian ideal, but curators do need to be transparent in their moderation of content. As one curator from the *Contested Sites* focus group put it: “Every exhibition is a manipulation. We have

⁷⁰ Kelly, “Museums as Sources of Information and Learning”, 5.

tremendous responsibility to manipulate wisely.”⁷¹ The modes of content delivery in museums may be changing, but the expert skills of curatorial construction must be maintained.

⁷¹ Fiona Cameron, “Transcending Fear – engaging emotions and opinion – a case for museums in the 21st century”, *Open Museum Journal*, 6 (2003): 25.

Chapter Three: Digital Dissemination

An effective networked media strategy for the participatory museum experience relies on digital dissemination of museum content. This was revealed by my research in the *Getting In* exhibition. Both visitors and staff asserted that in order to foster meaningful debate on contemporary issues, discussions must continue beyond the physical constraints of the museum. Networked media provides this opportunity, through means such as stand-alone applications on personal devices, or the uploading of content on third-party social media. This is *digital dissemination* - the publishing of content outside of the museum's physical walls, in a digital format. Digital dissemination is strongly advocated by Michael Loebenstein, in his role as CEO of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA): "I don't think any government in the developed world, or in the digital economy, can actually ignore the mounting pressure of expectation that access to cultural heritage, access to knowledge, is essential for democratic participation."¹ His reference to a 'mounting pressure of expectation' derives from the explosion of digitally accessible content online. Visitors might consider an online presence to be a prerequisite for any contemporary institution, and this research demonstrated that it is critical for the discussion of contemporary issues. But for the museum sphere, digital dissemination also presents some significant challenges. The three foremost of these will be considered in this chapter, as represented by some key case studies and relevant literature in the field. These are: the effect of digital publishing on a museum's authority; the retention of narrative coherence; and the logistical hurdles involved with enacting a digital strategy. As challenges to digital dissemination, they also represent challenges to the museum's capability to exhibit the full range of evidence required for even-handed discussions on current affairs.

¹ Michael Loebenstein, speaking at *Digitise or Perish* forum, Australian Parliament House, 12th August 2013.

These challenges will be explored here using the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) as a case study, as well as references to other collecting organisations. Located in Canberra, the NFSA is charged with collecting, protecting and interpreting Australia's audio-visual heritage. It is a prime example of an institution facing the 'mounting pressure of expectation' to provide digital access to their material. Its collection consists of video and audio – content formats that can be digitally disseminated with ease – and yet for the most part, access is currently limited to on-site viewing. This is a diverse collection of almost two million objects, much of which is stored in inaccessible formats, which can be culturally sensitive, and which has copyright held by external stakeholders. The theoretical and practical questions posed by this chapter are constant problems for staff at the NFSA, as they attempt to fulfil their charter to provide public access to the archive. Through interviews with key staff members and a discussion of specific examples, the experiences of the NFSA provide an insight into the museum-specific challenges of digital dissemination.

This chapter examines the three challenges of digital dissemination separately. Firstly, can museums maintain their curatorial authority on content that is digitally published? With reference to a troubling example from the NFSA, this section discusses the problems associated with publishing content on third-party social media websites and considers the advantages of maintaining platform control. The second section questions the visitor's experience of digital collection material, particularly material that pertains to issues of contemporary significance. To what extent is there a requirement for museums to retain narrative structure within online platforms in order to effectively and expertly interpret collection items? The final section of this chapter considers the logistical realities facing many collecting institutions. A discussion of three significant challenges – the digitisation task, copyright restrictions, and lack of resources – reveals the immediate problems associated with the digital dissemination of museum content.

Digital Authority and Platform Control

How can museums maintain their curatorial authority when their collections are disseminated online? How critical is their authority for maintaining objectivity and balance when it comes to exhibiting potentially controversial material? The previous chapter addressed the ‘levelling’ impact of the digital arena, where the user’s voice and the museum’s voice are provided equal credence. Digitally publishing the *collection* exacerbates this trend, as prized museum items are re-interpreted, re-transmitted, and re-arranged. The notion that museums should have an authoritative voice in the interpretation of collections is problematic. In fact, Russo et al see the breakdown of this curatorial authority as a positive shift in museum practice: “Museums and visitors collaborate in the ‘making of meaning’ . . . museums are now sites in which knowledge, memory and history are examined, rather than places where cultural authority is asserted.”² But will this have an impact on the perception of a museum as a trustworthy source of information? In an online environment “museums find themselves unable to rely upon the semiotics of a century of museological symbols that have enabled them, in public buildings and spaces, to create the aura of authenticity.”³ Nina Simon argues that this discussion of museum authority needs to be reframed: “there is a difference between control and expertise.”⁴ Museums might need to relinquish *control* of their collections, but the *expertise* of museum staff is still of significant value. Simon suggests that in a digital world, it is the platform rather than the collection that constitutes authority. That is, if a museum has control of the publishing platform, it can afford to allow visitors to reinterpret content. But for the most part, museums are using third-party platforms to publish their online content – websites such as Facebook, Flickr and SoundCloud. The following example from the National Film and Sound Archive demonstrates how this arrangement can be

² Angelino Russo, Jerry Watkins, Lynda Kelly, and Sebastian Chan “Participatory Communication with Social Media”, *Curator*, 51, no. 1 (2008): 22.

³ Jennifer Trant, “When all You’ve Got is ‘The Real Thing’: Museums and Authenticity in the Networked World”, *Archives and Museum Informatics*, 12 (1998): 108.

⁴ Nina Simon, “The Future of Authority: Platform Power” *Museum 2.0 blog*, October 8 2008.

problematic: without control of the publishing platform, it can be difficult for museums to maintain curatorial authority.

The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) uses YouTube to publish significant collection items, but maintaining curatorial control of this content has, in one instance, proved difficult. In its physical form, the NFSA is a “monument to culture”⁵ – the architecture of the headquarters emphasises the significance of the national collection. With its striking sandstone façade, tall exterior columns and elegant art deco foyer, the NFSA’s Canberra building affirms its cultural power. If an audio-visual object is considered to be of national significance, it will be held within these walls. Therefore for the visitor, perhaps, a dichotomy of what is considered important and what isn’t important is created by the archive’s physical presence. However, the NFSA’s venture into digital publishing on social media has had mixed results. The nature of the archive’s collection creates considerable opportunities for digital distribution. Video and audio are relatively transmissible in comparison to other types of museum objects, through social media such as YouTube and SoundCloud. However, this factor has also made it difficult for the institution to maintain curatorial control over the content.

One of the NFSA’s most notable possessions is the Corrick Collection – these 140 films provide a fascinating insight into Australian filmmaking in the early 20th Century. The Corrick family were travelling entertainers, and as part of their act, they began to show film footage of exotic locations, such as *Excursion en Italie* (1905) and Pathé’s *Du Caire aux Pyramides* (1905). They also bought their own film making equipment and their actuality footage of Australian street scenes are some of the earliest in existence. This remarkable collection lay dormant within a basement in Tasmania, until they were donated to the NFSA in 2006 by John Corrick. Among the reels of nitrate film was another significant discovery. The NFSA curators had found 11 minutes of

⁵ Michaela Giebelhausen, “Museum Architecture : A Brief History”, in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald, (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 230.

Charles Urban's 1904 travelogue *Living London*,⁶ previously thought to be lost. This beautifully photographed footage of street scenes around London's Trafalgar Square provides a rare early glimpse of the growing metropolis.⁷

The film was regarded as a momentous unearthing by the NFSA, which invested vast resources into its restoration and provided free modes of access to the public. However, only months after the NFSA began licensing the original 11 minutes of footage to external clients, more than one minute of footage was uploaded to YouTube from an American account with the title: *Lost film footage of 1904*. It might have been the more exciting title or perhaps the extra footage included, but by the time of writing this clip had garnered 270 000 views. This number eclipses the 3000 hits to the official clip uploaded by the NFSA social media team. This level of attention could be considered a great success if it weren't for the decontextualised footage, the amount of misinformation spouted in the comment section, and the lack of credit returned to the NFSA. Not only did the American uploader neglect to include any details about the film or its provenance, but viewers commented confidently with inaccuracies of their own. One commenter suggested the footage was from the 1920s; another announced that it was the work of filmmakers Mitchell and Kenyon, discovered in a London basement; one more praised the British Film Institute for the quality of the restoration work. The separation of the collection item from its contextual framework is highly problematic – Trant argues that “detailed knowledge about the actual construction of a work is one of the keys to establishing its authenticity.”⁸ Aside from the loss of credit and licensing fees to the NFSA and the Corrick Family, this erroneous information undermined the integrity of the film's significance. In an attempt to regain some curatorial influence, the NFSA used their official YouTube account to comment on the clip:

⁶ There is some uncertainty over the identification of this film. It may also be from Urban's documentary *The Streets of London* (1906).

⁷ Ian Christie, “The Girl With the Speck of Dust in her Eye: *Living London* Returns”, *Senses of Cinema*, 49 (2009).

⁸ Trant, “When all You've Got is ‘The Real Thing’”, 117.

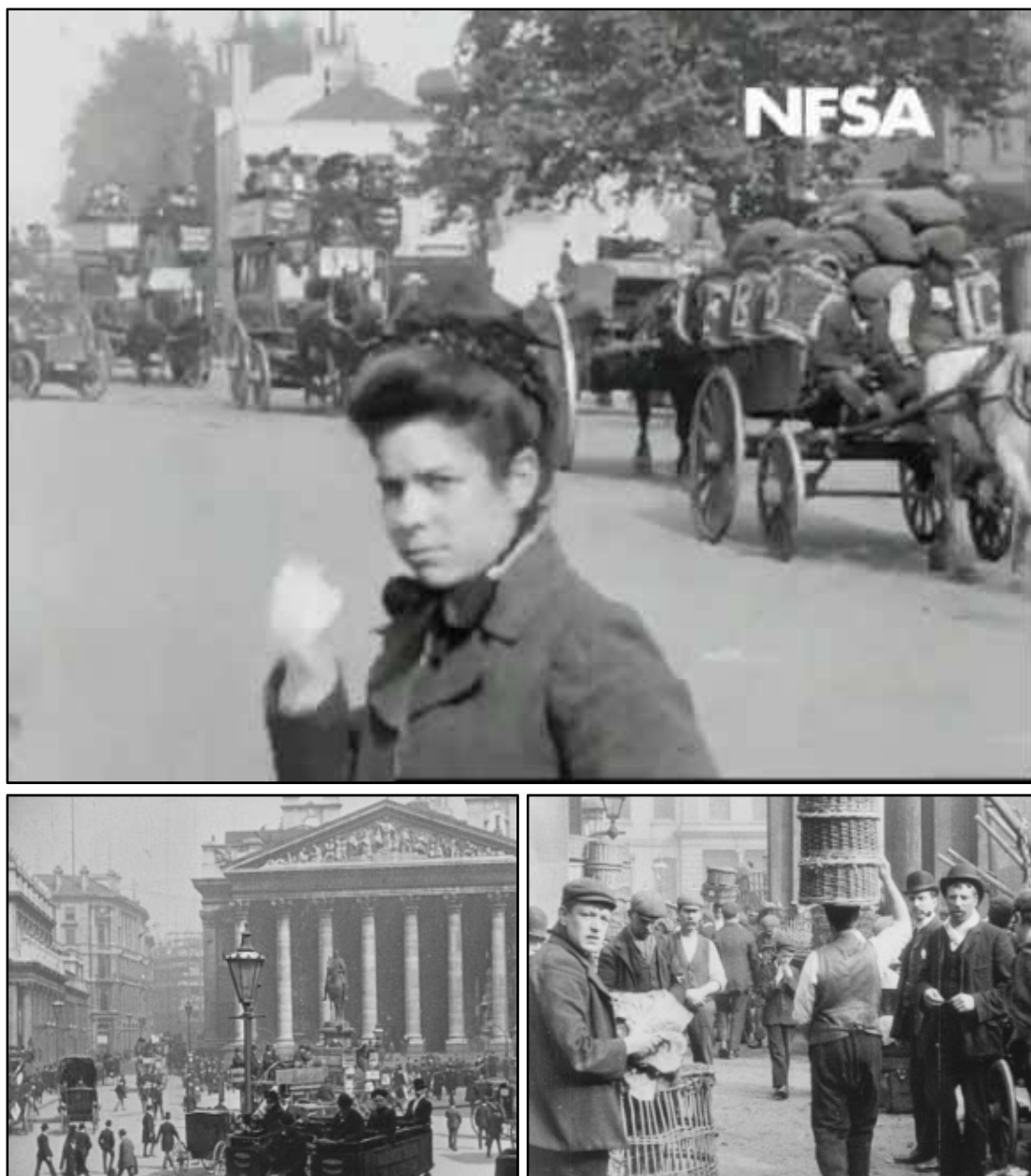


Figure 3.1
Screenshots from Charles Urban, *Living London*, 1904,
National Film and Sound Archive.

“This is an excerpt of Charles Urban’s travelogue ‘Living London’.
The 11-minute edited version of the film held by the National Film and
Sound Archive of Australia is the only known surviving footage of the 40-
minute original . . . More info about the restoration of *Living London* by the
NFSA at nfsa.gov.au/collection/film/corrick-collecton/”

The social media team used this as an opportunity to engage with this
considerably large audience and filter them back to more NFSA material.

However, as is the nature of YouTube, where recency of information takes precedence, this comment soon faded down the page and became less visible. Curatorial influence is particularly important when confronting issues of contemporary significance. Some of the YouTube commenters posted derogatory comments regarding contemporary British immigration policy: “Real London! Not now blacks n Muslims n seekers! Indian it's a mix of the world trash!” and “Those were the good old days, all white!!”⁹ With no control of the publishing platform, the NFSA has no curatorial influence over the comments posted on its own film. This is a genuine problem for the NFSA’s online credibility. Russo et al argue that “the cultural authority of the museum is due in large part to the perception that it can provide authentic cultural knowledge.”¹⁰ Without the high walls of the Canberra Headquarters, the NFSA had little influence – even over its own valued collection material. Despite their expertise in the subject matter, without control of the platform the NFSA lost curatorial authority of the collection item. This example has ramifications for all museums who need to maintain their credibility in organisation of information, and of even greater consequence when presenting material related to contemporary debate.

The benefits of retaining control of the publishing platform are also highlighted by my research at the Immigration Museum. My research activity used the third-party photo application Flickr which, for the purpose of this two-day activity was more useful than developing an app from scratch. But the long term problems with this strategy were evident in the responses from visitors and interviews with Museum Victoria staff. Firstly, as outlined previously, the use of the app was not intuitive for the purposes of this activity – visitors had to be supplied an instruction sheet to direct them through the steps. A purposely developed app would permit the museum ultimate platform control, and thus more effectively guide visitor contributions. Secondly, allowing visitors to use individual Flickr accounts would strip the museum of its regulation of content. For the purposes of the research activity, all visitors used the same account to

⁹ Comments on the YouTube video “Lost film footage of 1904”.

¹⁰ Russo et al, “Participatory Communication”, 23.

create contributions and leave comments. This decision was made for two reasons: to develop an uncomplicated sign-in process; and to ensure the participants' anonymity as per the research's ethics clearance. However, this would be impractical in a long-term implementation of this activity – there would need to be a differentiation between visitors in order to allow for a comprehensible discussion.¹¹ Additionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, museums may want to maintain civil debate by restricting visitors from anonymity. Therefore, an effective form of this activity would require visitors to sign into individual accounts to make their contributions. What would be the problem with using Flickr for this purpose? The Immigration Museum has no control over the functions of the Flickr app, and would therefore have no influence over where that museum content is published and how it is interpreted. As the experience of the NFSA shows, this is a high risk strategy for digital dissemination. A more sensible, albeit costly, solution would be to develop a custom application and maintain control over that app's function and parameters.

Platform control affords museum staff more power to present their expert knowledge, while allowing, and even encouraging visitors to reinterpret their collections online. As the NFSA example reveals, publishing content on third-party social media websites automatically relinquishes the power of the museum. However there are also distinct advantages for the museum's use of social media as a public outreach tool. A 2008 study of a selection of American institutions found that "YouTube was a good way for them to reach out, market and educate in a very non-traditional way."¹² The majority of the institutions surveyed stated that the use of YouTube increased visitor traffic both physically and to the website. Utilising existing third-party content hosts such as YouTube, SoundCloud or Facebook for distribution has many advantages: it is free; it

¹¹ Given that all the visitors were using the same account, they had the power to delete and edit any of the photos or comments. We were therefore relying on the good faith of the participants not to delete other people's contributions. This would clearly be unsustainable without staff supervision.

¹² Chris Alexander, Allegra Burnette, Daniel Dark, David Hart, Jennifer Rossi and Nicole Minor, "Beyond Launch: Museum Videos on YouTube", in *Museums and the Web 2008: Proceedings*, eds. Jennifer Trant and David Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2008), 7.

requires no private digital infrastructure; and it comes with an audience base that is already familiar with that web service. Moreover, it provides museums with a useful opportunity to personally connect with visitors: Dr Lynda Kelly argues that “social media provides the perfect vehicle (for the museum to be) about *doing with* somebody as well as *being for* somebody.”¹³ Thus museums may be best placed to use social media as a marketing and communicative tool, rather than a place to publish collection material. By developing their own platforms, museums can manage the parameters of an audience’s interpretation, and museum staff can appropriately assert their expertise. Nina Simon argues that if “you create a platform that is consistent in its values and the interaction provided, you will be able to control the experience as you open up content authority.”¹⁴ It is critical for a museum to have its collection exhibited accurately, with the works’ moral rights appropriately attributed. The transmissible nature of digital material in the networked age makes this considerably more difficult, but it remains a core responsibility for museums to retain authority over their collections. Importantly, a curatorially managed platform allows museums to encourage and guide debate on contemporary issues within parameters that are useful and meaningful for their target audiences.

Retaining Narrative Coherence

Digital dissemination changes the way visitors experience collection material. What effect does the loss of narrative coherence in the digital medium have on the interpretation of meaning? In a physical exhibition, the meaning of a collection item is constructed through its context in an exhibition: its placement among other objects; its label; the nearby panel texts; and the museum design. As Hogsden and Poulter argue, “Museums constrain the kinds of connections people can have with collections. Through interpretation,

¹³ Lynda Kelly, “Museum Authority” *Australian Museum blog*, November 12, 2009, (emphasis in original), <http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/museullaneous/museum-authority>.

¹⁴ Simon, “The Future of Authority”.

decontextualisation and recontextualisation, objects and their meanings are continually transformed.”¹⁵ They go on to argue that this creation of meaning continues when visitors encounter objects in a ‘digital contact zone’. Yet the visitor’s online experience of a collection is markedly different. Published on a social media account or discovered through a search engine, the haphazard discovery of a museum object can disconnect it from its parent museum, and all the contextual meaning that comes with it. Fiona Cameron sees this as a distinct advantage: “the interpretive potential of digital objects becomes legitimised, open to a variety of interpretations using a range of senses beyond the visual as well as individual affectual knowledge.”¹⁶ While Cameron’s view may be true, this form of digital publishing could also undermine the museum’s ability to play a contextualising role, through placing objects within a narrative, and thus foregrounding particular meanings. Trant argues that the museum is in a strong position to play this role: “Disorientation is often the prime sentiment of a web surfer. Museums have an opportunity to provide a touchstone.”¹⁷

This ‘contextualising role’, this ‘touchstone’, is particularly important for museums regarding issues of contemporary significance. As outlined in the *Contested Sites* research, the exhibition of ‘contemporary’ issues can be problematic because the objects may lack historical integrity and require expert interpretation.¹⁸ Many of the objects suitable for these exhibitions have meanings that are considered unresolved, such as oral testimonies and media coverage. That is, without a significant passing of time, visitors feel unable to accurately evaluate the true meaning of these contemporary objects, many of which may convey opinions and assertions that are yet to be tested. Additionally, exhibitions that confront contemporary ideas may include evidence that is inaccessible to the museum visitor. Objects such as government policy documents, academic and scientific papers or even the museum’s own

¹⁵ Carl Hogsden, and Emma K. Poulter, “The Real Other? Museum objects in digital contact networks”, *Journal of Material Culture*, 17 (2012), 268.

¹⁶ Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010), 54.

¹⁷ Trant, “When all You’ve Got is “The Real Thing””, 113.

¹⁸ Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: Controversial Topics in Museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006), 22.

raw research data may be useful in exhibiting contemporary issues, but would be largely impenetrable for the average visitor. Mass digitisation of collection material may well affirm the role of the curator as a storyteller. As Muller argues, “of the thousands of digitised museum images in existence, only a small percentage of them are immediately compelling or engaging. Most digital reproductions only gain depth when they are presented as part of a larger story.”¹⁹ There is therefore a clear requirement for museums to be able to interpret these collections for their audience – including in digital networks.

It is worth considering the fate of the *Getting In* exhibition, if visitor contributions were to be uploaded onto a digital network. My research activity allowed visitors to reinterpret collection items by overlaying their own value judgements on an object or panel. This is an egalitarian and potentially powerful opportunity. Philosopher David Weinberger sees it as the public’s opportunity to “stick it to the man . . . there is inefficiency built into expert-based taxonomies because they have to choose one way of ordering, and that one way is necessarily infested with personal, class and cultural biases.”²⁰ But did these objects and panels lose their relevance once disconnected from the narrative of the exhibition? When viewed by visitors on the iPad, photo contributions were displayed in order of recency – the last picture taken appeared at the top of the photostream. The result was a randomized assortment of objects, unbound by the chronological segments of the physical exhibition. In one instance, an explanation of the White Australia policy was surrounded by images of contemporary detention centres. In this exercise, the visitors had just been through the exhibition and would probably have been able to situate each photo within the museum’s organisational framework. But what if the photostream were to be published online, as was advocated by museum staff and some visitors? Taking these collection items out of their contextual framework could drastically alter the way online visitors interpret their meaning. In the last example, the juxtaposition of detention centres with the White Australia policy could create confusion and potentially elicit the

¹⁹ Klaus Muller, “Museums and Virtuality” *Curator*, 45, no. 1 (2002), 28.

²⁰ David Weinberger, “Folksonomy as symbol”, *Berkman Center for Internet & Society blog*, Harvard University, 19th December 2006, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/node/3281>.

interpretation that contemporary policy is based on race. Therefore in order to retain narrative cohesion, there could be a requirement for organisational structures in online publishing. This may be as simple as assigning tags to pictures to combine related themes, or as complex as specifically curated packages of items. The next chapter includes a more detailed discussion of online publishing strategies. Essentially though, this finding from the *Getting In* research demonstrates the requirement for museums to retain narrative cohesion when digitally disseminating collection material. There is a clear need to build interpretive frameworks into these networked platforms.

Logistical Challenges

The challenge of presenting contemporary issues, facilitating digital access and encouraging audience participation throws light on practical issues faced by museums. It is important to consider these here, in order to appreciate the digital pressures faced by collecting institutions. The immediate challenges facing exhibition developers at the Immigration Museum, for instance, are logistical. *Getting In* curator Moya McFadzean admits “the contemporary section (of the exhibition) is not contemporary anymore. We all know it needs drastically updating . . . but that’s a matter of resources.”²¹ It would be unrealistic to investigate the development of complex digital networks in this thesis without exploring and acknowledging the real-world pressures faced by the museum sector. Although often intersecting, the problems facing digital dissemination can be categorised into three main challenges: the digitisation task; copyright restrictions; and a lack of funding. More than any other philosophical or political obstacles facing networked technology in museums, these are the three difficulties that most often account for museums falling short of the public’s expectations of digital access. This section will delve deeper than the problems associated with simply *interpreting* digital content relating to contemporary issues. To fully appreciate the magnitude of these challenges, a

²¹ Moya McFadzean, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

more holistic approach is necessary, so this discussion will include issues such as digital preservation, orphan works, and crowd sourcing. All museums are bound in some form by restrictions in digitisation workloads, copyright policies or a lack of available money, and can't always achieve the somewhat aspirational programs and technologies referred to in this thesis. However, as this section will attest, there are some emerging strategies in which museums can, to at least some extent, overcome these obstructions.

Challenge 1: The Digitisation Task

It is important to establish the magnitude of the challenge in creating a digitally networked museum. It constitutes the sheer volume of material required to be digitised, and the ever-changing nature of digital technology, which is often more costly and labour intensive. The resulting need for museums to be highly selective in prioritising content for digitisation is itself a curatorial challenge, and has implications for providing sufficient public access to information – information which may be crucial evidence in current discourse and debate. In the first instance, the digital accessibility of a bulk of the collection is critical to a museum's online relevance. As the CSIRO's Dr Joanne Daly argues, in the online era, "digitisation converts collections into knowledge."²² Museum Victoria has digitised and published more than 80,000 records on their Collections Online webpage – a valuable resource, yet still less than one percent of the entire collection. For many collecting institutions, digitisation is an enormous task requiring vast resources, and there is still uncertainty surrounding processes, formats, storage, preservation and security. The Director-General of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), David Fricker expressed the scale of their digitising task at a forum in 2013: "We were trying to calculate how many sheets, how many folios, we might have – probably between six to seven hundred million folios in the archive. So, if the solution was to start digitising every one of them . . . I don't think it will be digitised in

²² Joanne Daly, "The Role of Legacy Collections for Scientific Research in the Digital Age: why physical materials still matter", *Australian Heritage Partnership Symposium: The Future of Heritage*, July 19, 2014.

my lifetime.”²³ With such an enormous collection, the NAA represents an extreme example, but effectively illustrates why many cultural institutions are lagging behind the public expectation of digital access. Hudson and Kenyon warn that these expectations are only set to increase: “digital technologies appear to have amplified public expectations of accessibility, and greater public use of digital collection material prompts continued pressure to digitise.”²⁴

Digitisation is not just about public accessibility – increasingly, it is being used as a form of preservation. But as the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) case study reveals, digital preservation is a highly complex task and doubts remain over its effectiveness. The NFSA faces an immense digitisation task which, as an archive, is focussed on the preservation of collection material. Rod Butler, the manager of the NFSA’s Preservation and Technical Services section, warns that the slow digitisation process means that it cannot yet be a primary form of preservation:

“We’ve got two million items that we (digitally) preserve at a rate of say 6500-8000 titles per year. So as a result, you can see the importance of our vaults as a primary preservation tool. When it comes to digitisation, it’s fast becoming the sole way of preserving the collection, but it isn’t there yet.”²⁵

Even for an institution that is responsible for an audio-visual collection – easily transferrable material that is highly suited for online access – for the majority of that collection, digitisation is not yet a viable form of preservation or access.

The constant evolution of digital technologies and formats also complicates the digitisation task. Archives and other cultural institutions that choose to preserve their collections digitally must be prepared to constantly update those files and the technology on which they are stored. This affects

²³ David Fricker, speaking at *Digitise or Perish* forum, Australian Parliament House, August 12, 2013.

²⁴ Emily Hudson and Andrew T. Kenyon, “Digital Access: The Impact of Copyright on Digitisation Practices in Australian Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Archives”, *UNSW Law Journal*, 30 no. 1 (2007), 21.

²⁵ Rod Butler, personal interview, National Film and Sound Archive, April 1, 2014.

digital dissemination as it effectively reduces the quantity of accessible items. Butler explains: “just in the 24 years or so that I’ve been here, there have been a number of instances in which we’ve said this is the best that we can do, and then something else comes along. And in that way (digital) preservation can be a bit like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge – you get halfway and then you already need to start from the beginning again. It will be never-ending always.”²⁶ One particular example reveals that a digital copy of an item can require *more* labour and resources to preserve than the original collection item. It may seem counter-intuitive, but for the NFSA, preserving film in a digital form is far more expensive than preserving it in its original format. Rod Butler explained that a reel of colour film will last 700 years if stored under the right conditions. Yet with digits “you’ve always got to be chasing the next format – you can’t leave things on an LTO2 tape²⁷ and hope you’ll be able to play it on an LTO6 player.”²⁸ Essentially, for this type of collection, mass digitisation is a highly expensive and labour-intensive form of preservation. Therefore, digitisation can only be an option for highly prioritised collection material. As a result, a significant trade-off is created – relying on digitisation makes the process of access easier, but it also drastically reduces the quantity of accessible collection objects. Thus the selective nature of prioritising the collection is in itself a curatorial challenge, with implications for managing content during digital preservation.

A further example from the NFSA shows how the digitisation has actually decreased the amount of accessible collection material. The NFSA loans films from the collection to cinemas across the world for film festivals, retrospectives and film societies. But increasingly, those cinemas are unable to screen celluloid film, as their *film* projectors are stripped out and replaced by *digital* projectors. This is a reaction to modern film distribution networks, which have moved swiftly away from celluloid film. In North America, only 8% of cinemas are

²⁶ Rod Butler.

²⁷ Linear Tape-Open (LTO) tapes are the cartridges on which the NFSA’s digital collection is stored. With a new generation of the tapes released every 18 months, older cartridges quickly become obsolete, and the NFSA must be constantly migrating its collection to the latest version, at considerable expense.

²⁸ Rod Butler.

capable of screening film, and in January 2014 Paramount Studios became the first major studio to cease celluloid film distribution.²⁹ Australian cinemas are not yet at this stage, but the trend is clear. Distributing modern movies as high-quality digital files has enormous benefits for studios, cinemas and patrons alike, but the ability to view archival films on celluloid is one of the casualties of this shift. In order for the NFSA to continue to loan out archival films, they will need to convert them to a Digital Cinema Package (DCP) – a compressed and encoded set of files on a hard drive that can be projected at cinema quality. Currently, the cost to convert one feature film is approximately \$35,000. Therefore, the NFSA can only create DCPs for a highly limited selection of films – the rest of the titles on 16mm and 35mm film will effectively become inaccessible. This clearly illustrates the digital divide appearing within collecting institutions. Digital access is certainly far simpler, but the rush to accept it has left large swathes of non-digital content behind. Matthew Dessem warns that “films that continue to make money are probably safe, but for bombs – whether they were genuinely terrible or interesting failures – the incentives are all wrong.”³⁰ A demarcation is created between items that are chosen to be digitised and those that aren’t – placing enormous responsibility on the curators charged with making that decision.

To alleviate this problem, museums and archives must formulate solid digitisation plans that prioritise the discoverability of the collection and target the collections’ most salient objects. The National Archives of Australia has implemented a three-pronged digitisation strategy to work towards this result. Firstly, that the majority of incoming collection material is already digitised or digitised upon accessioning. Secondly, that the collection is made ‘discoverable’ by providing online access to metadata: “we can at least make this stuff knowable and discoverable and that starts the transaction with the individual who wants it.”³¹ From here, the required collection material can be digitised for

²⁹ Richard Verrier, “End of Film: Paramount First Studio to Stop Distributing Film Prints”, *Light Iron blog*, January 17, 2014, <http://www.lightiron.com/blog/end-film-paramount-first-studio-stop-distributing-film-prints>.

³⁰ Matthew Dessem, “Film Preservation 2.0”, *The Dissolve*, February 24, 2014, <https://thedissolve.com/features/exposition/429-film-preservation-20/>.

³¹ David Fricker, *Digitise or Perish*.

the benefit of that person and for any future enquirers. This method of ‘on-demand digitisation’ is the most common digitisation policy in Australian collecting institutions.³² The third method is the targeted digitisation of popular records that have an immediate link to a large percentage of the public, such as ANZAC war records for use on the *Mapping our ANZACS* website. Digitisation will be a long-term project for most museums, and will continue to affect the dissemination of online material, but these strategies at least provide a plan for approaching this daunting undertaking.

Challenge 2: Copyright Restrictions

Also problematic to the selection and accessibility of material, especially for exhibitions of contemporary significance, is the issue of copyright. The dissemination of digital content is often shaped by copyright restrictions rather than curatorial significance. The NFSA’s experience shows that these restrictions do have a negative effect on the relevance of online collections. However, the rights of content creators must be respected and as the following paragraphs show, there is little museums can do to overcome this challenge. One of the basic principles of copyright is that there is a differentiation between the tangible ownership of an object, and its intangible intellectual property. Collecting institutions may physically acquire an object, but in most cases the copyright remains with the creator of that object. A museum may be under pressure to digitise, but doing so “necessarily involves performing the copyright owner’s exclusive rights such as reproduction, publication and communication.”³³ In most cases, this is an essential protection of the rights of content creators. The NFSA’s Copyright and Licensing Officer, Shevaun O’Neill argues it is critical to maintain strong relationships with the filmmaking industry: “respecting creators and owners is really key to the NFSA as we’re in a particular position where we don’t have legal deposit³⁴ - so everything we’ve got in the collection is from the kindness of the donators.”³⁵ Where the

³² Hudson and Kenyon, “Digital Access”, 17.

³³ Hudson and Kenyon, “Digital Access”, 22.

³⁴ ‘Legal deposit’ is a stipulation of the Copyright Act that requires publishers of all print material to deposit a copy at the National Library of Australia.

³⁵ Shevaun O’Neill, personal interview, National Film and Sound Archive, April 10, 2014.

copyright of an object is known, cultural institutions have a firm responsibility to adhere to the wishes of that copyright holder.

The push to digitally publish collection items is further complicated by objects with rights holders that are unknown or untraceable. These objects, called ‘orphan works’, are known to be protected by copyright, but without an identifiable copyright holder they remain in a limbo that renders them inaccessible. This is a major problem for collecting organisations – the NFSA has estimated that 20% of its collection is orphaned. In many instances, the copyright holders are simply unaware of their rights ownership – a frustrating situation for museums: “(it’s) a catch-22 situation where a work cannot be identified and therefore rights cannot be cleared for the work to be communicated publicly, however public communication may be the only way a work is able to be identified.”³⁶ Copyright restrictions are therefore skewing the process of selection for digital access. A curator’s decision to display an object in a physical museum exhibition is guided by the perceived social, cultural, historical or scientific significance of that object. In contrast, a curator’s decision to publish an object online is heavily influenced by that object’s copyright status. Asked whether copyright *directs* the publication of content online at the NFSA, O’Neill agreed:

“Yes, it definitely does. Things that we know are public domain, or that have a clear copyright holder who is happy to grant permission – that will go online easily, and that’s actually material that gets reused a lot. Material where we are not confident on the rights will get used a lot less, or not at all. In a cultural sense, that’s problematic because it means that some parts of Australia’s culture won’t be as accessible or visible as other parts, but it’s a practical reality that we have to face.”³⁷

Contemporary issues rely on contemporary sources, most of which will have copyright protection. This factor will shape the museum’s online publishing capacity, and as a result affect the museum’s ability to comprehensively exhibit

³⁶ “Statement on Orphan Works”, NFSA website, June 2010, http://nfsa.gov.au/site_media/uploads/file/2011/02/03/Statement_on_Orphan_Works.pdf.

³⁷ Shevaun O’Neill.

current issues. Infringing copyright law is obviously not an option for collecting institutions, and copyright restrictions will no doubt hamper the digitisation project for some time. There is hope, however, that Australia's copyright legislators can keep up with the changing digital landscape.

At this stage, institutions such as the NFSA are forced to take a low-risk approach to digital dissemination of content where copyright status is uncertain. However, there is hope among the sector that amendments to the Copyright Act 1968, and particularly the introduction of a 'fair use' exception, would provide museums with more opportunities to share their collections online. The Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) recently investigated the need to update the Copyright Act given the changes in the distribution and use of content in a digital landscape. Most pertinent to the museum sector was the recommendation to create a flexible exception called 'fair use'. This exception is already enacted in the United States and described as "a fundamental linchpin of the U.S. copyright system"³⁸ by their Department of Commerce. The proposed 'fair use' exception would be far more open-ended and flexible than our current legislation. Essentially, any use of content could be considered legal, provided it adheres to four broad 'fairness factors':

- the purpose and character of the use;
- the nature of the copyright material;
- the amount of material used;
- and the effect that use has on the value of the copyright content.³⁹

The flexibility of this legislation has encouraged some American museums to be less restrictive of digital dissemination. Carolina Miranda reports that "the deluge of cameras, along with the fact that the vast majority of visitors simply want to snap a pic for a Facebook album, has led (institutions such as MoMA and the Brooklyn Museum to provide) permission to shoot, with the stipulation that pictures are for non-commercial use."⁴⁰ Opportunities such as this are not

³⁸ "Copyright Policy, Creativity and innovation in the Digital Economy", *US Department of Commerce Green Paper*, July 2013.

³⁹ "Copyright and the Digital Economy", *Australian Law Reform Commission Report*, November 2013, 125.

⁴⁰ Carolina A. Miranda, "Why can't we take pictures in art museums?" *Art News*, May 13, (2013) 2.

as readily available in Australia. Some of the content photographed by visitors in my *Getting In* research is currently unavailable for digital publishing due to copyright. The legislation of a ‘fair use’ exception would provide museums with the flexibility to extend this activity to allow online dissemination.

Nevertheless, uncertainty exists about the effect that this flexibility would have on the rights of creators. Cartoonist Jason Chatfield wrote an open letter to the ALRC criticizing the proposal to implement ‘fair use’:

“The statutory licenses that the ALRC is recommending be repealed are very important to me. If my work is copied and shared by teachers in the classroom, I receive a copyright payment from the Copyright Agency. These payments are recognition of the value of the material I have created, using my skill and experience.”⁴¹

The ALRC however believes that ‘fair use’ would not have a negative impact on creators. On the contrary, they argue that this proposal would create a fairer system of remuneration for creators, with the impact on the copyright market directly considered as one of the ‘fairness factors’. From the ALRC report: “a clear and principled standard like fair use is sufficiently certain in scope—and arguably more certain than much of Australia’s highly complex, sometimes nearly indecipherable, *Copyright Act*.”⁴² The proposed changes were welcomed by the NFSA for being “flexible and technology neutral,”⁴³ and having the potential to alleviate the restrictions on publishing orphan works. If legislated, these proposals would certainly provide cultural institutions with more freedom to digitally disseminate their collections.

Challenge 3: Resources

A final and considerable challenge to museums in enhancing public access, participation and debate through digitisation is that it is a costly process,

⁴¹ Jason Chatfield, “An Open Letter to the Australian Law Reform Commission”, *Jason Chatfield Blog*, August 7 2013, <http://www.jasonchatfield.com/an-open-letter-to-the-australian-law-reform-commission/>.

⁴² “Copyright and the Digital Economy”, *ALRC Report*, 88.

⁴³ Shevaun O’Neill and Bronwyn Dowdall, “IP in the picture”, *NFSA Blog*, April 25, 2014, <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/blog/2014/04/25/ip-picture/>.

and many museums are under-resourced to effectively complete this task. The situation at the CSIRO's Australian National Wildlife Collection is representative of many collecting organisations with budgetary pressures. Their repository consists of up to 200 000 donated recordings of animal sounds held in various analogue formats, such as reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes and DAT tapes. The Data Curator of the collection, Margaret Cawsey, is concerned that the recordings in these formats are slowly decaying, and the collection will be lost without appropriate digitisation. The collection is equipped with the required transfer technology and data management software but a lack of resources prevents the CSIRO from hiring staff to begin the digitisation process. "We don't have enough people. We have one person, and that room full of stuff. I've been trying to develop a volunteer program, but that's hard (as we can't offer regular supervision)."⁴⁴ This is not a unique situation for museums – Laura Sonilla argues that "there is often a serious lack of staff available for digitising, classifying and entering data, or of the money to hire an external agency to do the work."⁴⁵ A lack of resources is an ongoing problem for most cultural institutions – one that can only be managed rather than solved.

Resource pressures will continue to hamper digital dissemination, but there are innovative opportunities for easing the workload. In creating contributory, 'crowd sourced' digitisation projects, museums can harness the collective wisdom of an interested public. The National Library of Australia's (NLA) 'Trove' is a good illustration. The NLA encourages online visitors to improve the metadata connected to collection items. Adding 'tags' to objects enhances the site's search capabilities – making an object more 'discoverable' for the next researcher. In addition, the NLA has successfully enlisted users to contribute to their newspaper digitisation project. Trove has more than 120 million digitised newspaper articles accessible online, and has used text recognition software to make the content of those articles searchable. However, the condition of many of the newspapers means that the 'electronic translation'

⁴⁴ Margaret Cawsey, personal interview, Australian National Wildlife Collection, CSIRO Mitchell, April 15 2014.

⁴⁵ Laura Solanilla, "The Internet as a Tool for Communicating Life Stories: a New Challenge for 'Memory Institutions'", *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, 3 (2008), 114.

is inaccurate. Users of the website are encouraged to fix up the mistakes in this translation, as they do their research. The success of this user integrated project is very encouraging. As of 2014, more than 2.5 million tags had been added to objects; 119 million lines of newspaper articles had been corrected; and the site had garnered 120 thousand individual users.⁴⁶

This achievement underlines the usefulness of the Trove resource, and by providing that depth of accessible information, the NLA has utilised crowd sourcing to greatly improve the value of the collection. Online visitors can also contribute unique content to the collection. They can add a comment to an object that provides new information, context or a personal connection. The site also supports Flickr integration, allowing user images to be searchable alongside the NLA's own collection. The Trove success story indicates that although the digitisation process presents immense challenges for collecting organisations, there are also enormous opportunities to enhance the usefulness of the collection. CSIRO's Margaret Cawsey acknowledges the potential for crowd sourcing in improving the metadata of their audio collection: "once we have the analogue to digital conversion, it will be feasible for people to (add metadata to the recordings) and assist us in the process of digitising material."⁴⁷ The CSIRO's Atlas of Living Australia has begun using this technology to great effect, and is discussed in further detail in the next chapter. These projects may help to alleviate the workload of metadata entry, but resource pressures will remain a significant barrier to the digital dissemination of museum collections.

Conclusion

The digital dissemination of museum content significantly alters the way visitors experience collections. The attitudes of visitors and staff at the *Getting In* exhibition reveal a keen interest in extending museum collections and discussions to an online network, particularly in the case of a contested

⁴⁶ "Trove website statistics", <http://trove.nla.gov.au/system/counts>.

⁴⁷ Margaret Cawsey.

contemporary issue such as immigration policy. The digital dissemination of content could allow for a more diverse, intuitive, and lasting conversation about critically important social issues. Yet a significant shift in museum practice is required in order to keep up with the public's "mounting pressure of expectation."⁴⁸ As the experiences of the National Film and Sound Archive reveal, a solid digitisation strategy for both public access and preservation is required to maintain institutional relevance and to overcome logistical hurdles. Problems surrounding copyright restrictions, digitisation workflows and availability of resources will continue to be barriers to comprehensive digital dissemination, but there are innovative ways to ease these issues. Maintaining control of the publishing platform ensures the museum retains influence over the interpretation of content. That interpretation is particularly important for issues of contemporary significance, where museums are relied upon to contextualise digital objects within a wider narrative. This chapter has considered some of the main problems facing digital dissemination. The next chapter will consider the potential solutions by examining the emerging strategies of networked media that could facilitate discussions of significant contemporary issues.

⁴⁸ Loebenstein, 2013

Chapter Four:

Networked Media Conclusions

This chapter draws a number of conclusions about how museums might exhibit issues of contemporary significance using networked media strategies. These findings are based on the results of my research at the Immigration Museum's *Getting In* exhibition, and my subsequent analysis of the curation of visitor contributions and the dissemination of digital content. My conclusions also stem from the discussions of the experiences of the International Museum of Women, The New York Times, Gawker Media, the National Film and Sound Archive, Museum Victoria, the CSIRO, and interviews with museum professionals. This research has informed the set of conclusions which structure this chapter. They fall into three major categories. The first category of conclusions delineates the advantages of integrating physical and digital spaces to broaden and deepen audience participation. The second category underlines the importance of providing visitors with a meaningful voice, if they are to engage fully with the exhibition. The third major category relates to the requirement to build digital partnerships between museums, the public and other institutions.

Each of the conclusions that I draw from my research and analysis is first presented theoretically, supported by examples from the museum sector. They are then 'applied' to *Getting In*, a contested exhibition space. Such applications to an existing museum exhibition serve two purposes: they demonstrate the practicality of my conclusions, and they highlight the potential benefits as well as problems that might arise. It will also be noted that networked media strategies afford more than just another approach or layer of interpretation to exhibits on controversial topics. My conclusions show that a museum's digital strategy can be an experience in its own right and can act as a catalyst for discussion about 'difficult' topics. Although my conclusions fall short of Salazar's prediction that "museums will move from being permanent institutions to being

mobile, networked, tactical institutions”¹, I do concur that they will be “aiming to broker consensus rather than delivering truth (on contemporary issues)”².

The first category of my conclusions relates to the access to digital communication within the physical museum space. Digital devices are basic requisites to the use of networked media in the museum, but it will be shown that there are important considerations to their successful installation or use, as highlighted by the experiences of the museums analysed in this thesis. My conclusions emphasise the utilisation of smartphone and tablet technology, and the need for cautious, selective employment of social media by museums. Also in this category is the advantageous development of standalone applications to ensure a museum’s platform control, and the requirement to safeguard the contemporaneous nature of an exhibition through the use of dynamic digital media.

The second category of my conclusions focuses on the networked strategies that provide visitors with a meaningful voice. I conclude that it is critically important to the exhibition of contentious issues that there is a capacity to continue networked discussions outside the physical museum space. It will be seen how visitor contributions to exhibitions can be effectively utilised by museums through a variety of measures. These include the active featuring of content by curators, the provision of anonymity, and the involvement of museum staff and other experts in the discussion.

The third set of conclusions presents the case for museums, when exhibiting contemporary issues, to build digital partnerships with other museums, institutions, community groups and the general public. An innovative and collaborative solution to this area is the Digital Public Space, which, it will be shown, can help overcome the logistical pressures of digitisation, through collaboration on resource-heavy projects. Significantly, it will be demonstrated how this can provide a practical space for the presentation of important

¹ Juan Francisco Salazar, “The Mediations of climate change: museums as citizens’ media”, *Museum and Society*, 9, no. 2 (2011), 131.

² Salazar, “The Mediations of climate change”, 131.

contemporary issues. My conclusions relating to digital partnerships include the embedding of original data and sources into exhibitions, the use of crowd sourcing to improve the quality of digital collections and metadata, and the opportunities for social development on issues that are important to a museum's audience.

Integrating Physical and Digital Spaces

Successful networked media strategies aim to enable visitors to access a digital space within the physical confines of an exhibition and to interact dynamically with the issues raised by an exhibition and collection. The usefulness of providing access to digital communication technology within a physical museum space was clarified by the comments captured in the Flickr activity in the *Getting In* exhibition. With access to a digital platform in their hands – an iPad – visitors were able to express their immediate thoughts just as they encountered objects in the exhibition. As a result, many of the comments were detailed, specific, expressive and insightful. Rather than simply a summation of the exhibition, as often seen in a visitor comments book, the *Getting In* contributions became a part of the exhibition experience. Carolyn Meehan from Museum Victoria recognised the potential for this mode of visitor engagement: “That's probably an area that we don't capture to the depth that we'd probably find interesting - as they go through the exhibition, what is it that they are thinking? What's going on for them at any particular moment?”³ The addition of digital capabilities into the physical space of the museum allows for up-to-the-minute information and opinion, which is important to exhibitions about contemporary issues that are still in the process of evolving.

Adding digital spaces would help to inject new ideas into an exhibition. This view is promoted by Kocsis and Kenderdine who contend that “the most successful application of the digital in museums is its use to produce creative

³ Carolyn Meehan, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

and educational spaces of interaction that offer meaning in their own right, rather than as an addition to established museological practices centred on the artefact and serving simply as an interpretative aid.”⁴ My first conclusion about achieving such potential for ‘the digital’ relates to the implementation of smartphone and tablet technology. The ubiquity of these personal devices creates an obvious access point to networked content. This is exemplified here by their use at the Museum of Old and New Art, and at the National Archives of Australia. Whilst acknowledging the usefulness of social media as a marketing and communications tool, my next conclusion is the need for selective usage of third party websites for hosting museum content and in-depth discussions. Indeed, my third conclusion commends the development of stand-alone applications which can afford the museum greater platform control and customisable programs. The success of standalone applications such as MCA Insight and ArtClix provide the template for a similar strategy to be employed within *Getting In*. Finally, my fourth conclusion supports networked media as a resource which can be used by contemporary exhibitions to remain relevant in the face of fast-moving issues.

Conclusion 1: Utilisation of smartphone and tablet technology

With the ubiquity of personal devices and visitors’ increasing ease with using digital technology, the use of smartphones and tablets appears to currently be the optimal method for introducing networked media to a museum exhibition. Certainly The *Getting In* research found that more than 80% of visitors were comfortable using mobile devices and online applications, and this figure was consistent across age groups. This figure is significantly higher than research conducted only four years previously at the Australian Museum, in which 66% of visitors felt comfortable with technology.⁵ In fact, the only technological criticisms of the *Getting In* participants were related to frustration at not being able to use their own devices. However, Dr Lynda Kelly, Head of

⁴ Anita Kocsis & Sarah Kenderdine, “Adventures in embodiment: panoramic, panoptic and hemispheric immersion”, *Museums and the Web 2013 Conference Proceedings*, April 2013.

⁵ Lynda Kelly, “How do Australian museum visitors use social media?” *Australian Museum blog*, May 8, 2010, <http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/museullaneous/how-do-australian-museum-visitors-use-social-media>.

Learning at the Australian National Maritime Museum, warns that public interest in technology shifts quickly: “Tablets are still considered ‘cool’ in a museum exhibition, as people don’t expect them because they think museums are old-fashioned. So I think we’ve got another five years using iPads (while) people still think they’re really exciting.” The *Getting In* research may have already captured the beginning of this trend, as younger visitors were found to be less inclined to participate in the activity.

Nevertheless, for now, most visitors seem eager to access new content via mobile and tablet technology and over the past few years many museums have incorporated this into their exhibitions. The 2010 Horizon report found that “Mobile technology has developed at a staggering pace . . . and today affords many more opportunities for museums, such as tying content to location, or taking the museum experience out of the building and into the surrounding geography.”⁶ The use of personal devices is now commonplace in many museums, but there are some notably innovative examples in Australia. The Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart supplies each visitor with an iPod Touch that replaces the need for physical wall labels. Using Wi-Fi to accurately locate the visitor in the museum, the iPod is pre-loaded with custom software that provides a wealth of detail: written analyses of the work, interviews with the artist and curators, and accompanying music. Visitors are also encouraged to indicate whether they ‘Love’ or ‘Hate’ the artwork. The National Archives of Australia went a step further by using augmented reality on a supplied iPad to digitally alter objects in their *Design 29: Creating a Capital* exhibition. For instance, after scanning one of Walter Burley Griffin’s original plans mounted on the wall, the image on the iPad overlays present day landmarks and buildings to reveal how the city has progressed. Thus in an exhibition that confronts a significant contemporary issue, such as *Getting In*, personal devices could be used as an access point for a digital discussion. Just as the photo captioning activity demonstrated, an iPad or similar device could be functional

⁶ L. Johnson, A. Levine, R. Smith, and S. Stone, *The 2010 Horizon Report*, (Austin TX: The New Media Consortium, 2010), 10.

in seeing what other visitors are saying about the exhibition, and thereby could contribute to an evolving conversation and debate.

Conclusion 2: Selective use of social media

Social media is undeniably useful for museum marketing, however the research analysed in this thesis indicates that it is important museums be selective in the ways they employ social media, especially when dealing with issues of contemporary significance. The experiences of the cultural institutions discussed in previous chapters present a somewhat conflicted depiction of the usefulness of social media, and it can be seen that this is related to the skills, purpose and disposition of these institutions to the role of social media, audience participation and exhibition of contentious issues.

The marketing potential of social media in reaching new audiences was recognised by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, becoming the first museum to join Snapchat in August 2014, an application that allows users to send messages, images and videos that self-destruct after viewing. The Museum's social media manager Maritza Yoes described the application as "a great way to reach a younger audience (and is also) a platform where we can create stories and experiences around the museum, our collection, and our staff."⁷ An impressive example of effective visitor interaction with social media is that of the Art Gallery of NSW, which has a large following across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and Instagram. A Facebook post about the 2014 Archibald Prize garnered more than 2500 likes and sparked some impassioned comments about the artistic integrity of the people's choice award. This demonstrates that people will participate if the issue is relevant and contentious, but it seems this example is an exception. It contrasts with the experience of *Contested Sites* researcher Dr Lynda Kelly, who argues that traditional museums often struggle to engage audiences on social media: "I taught 'Museums and the Digital' at Sydney University and we looked into museums' Facebook pages and what they were doing online, and where you

⁷ Maritza Yoes, quoted in Hrag Vartanian, "LACMA is the first museum to join Snapchat", *Hyperallergic*, August 21, 2014. <https://hyperallergic.com/144822/lacma-is-the-first-museum-to-join-snapchat/>

think a lot of discussion would be happening, it wasn't happening. It's hard to generate interaction."⁸ This has been the case for the Immigration Museum. Despite more than nine thousand likes, very few people are interacting with the content.

On the other hand, as seen in Chapter Two, the International Museum of Women (IMOW) has been successful in its social media interaction. This success appears to lie within the IMOW's role as an activist institution, using social media to connect users with social campaigns as well as museum content. For Catherine King, Executive Producer of the IMOW, the benefits of social media are clear: "what we found out very quickly, after having built a custom social community (within the IMOW website) is that custom social communities really aren't where people are going. To set up a unique profile, to check the imow.org site to see what's going on, that's not really where people were engaging . . . some people will comment on the site, but the real buzz and the real dialogue is happening on Facebook and increasingly Twitter."⁹ Much can be learnt from the success of the IMOW by other cultural institutions, while still maintaining curatorial expertise and content control. Although it is in a unique position, as an explicitly online activist organisation, with campaign-oriented social media activity, it does demonstrate that online museum-goers are keen to participate in discussions they deem relevant. Yet inexperience with digital publishing is also relevant, as noted with the problem of the re-transmission by a third-party commercial organisation of the significant 1904 Living London exhibition. Although social media applications are useful in that they come with a ready-made audience and are designed for user interaction, this choice of publishing platform resulted in the undermining of the National Film and Sound Archive's curatorial expertise.

The widespread use of social media by the museum sector clearly demonstrates its potential as a tool for marketing exhibitions, increasing awareness of museum practice, reaching out to a larger audience, and

⁸ Lynda Kelly, personal Interview, Australian National Maritime Museum, September 4, 2014.

⁹ Catherine King, Skype Interview, August 28, 2014.

communicating directly with visitors. To some extent, museums such as the IMOW and the Art Gallery of NSW can also use social media to foster meaningful discussion about contemporary issues. However, by outsourcing the discussion, the museum forgoes any effective control over that discussion. For exhibitions like *Getting In*, which deal with highly contested and contemporary issues, a digital discussion on a controlled platform through the targeted introduction of a purpose-built standalone application may be more effective.

Conclusion 3: Benefits of standalone applications

The most important factor in integrating physical and digital application is the development of a controllable publishing platform. The *Getting In* research demonstrates there are significant benefits for museums designing their own networked media applications in order to promote meaningful discussion amongst visitors. Maintaining control of the museum's digital platform was found to be a critically important factor for integrating networked media into a contentious exhibition. This conclusion stems from the problems that cultural institutions analysed in this thesis have had publishing content with 3rd party social media. The previous chapter found that museums, by developing their own digital spaces, can more effectively control the interpretation of content and retain narrative coherence. A standalone application enables museums to construct the framework within which the visitor can contribute. Nina Simon stresses the importance of this factor when creating participatory experiences: "a good contributory project scaffolds the contributory experience to make participation accessible."¹⁰ While cost-effective for short-term research purposes, the use of the third-party application Flickr in the *Getting In* activity would not be sustainable over a longer timeframe, as it required detailed instructions to explain its parameters.

The following examples illustrate how specifically designed smartphone and tablet applications can enhance the exhibition experience and foster digital discussions. The 'MCA Insight' app uses WiFi within Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art to locate artworks close to the visitor's position in the

¹⁰ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010), 212.

exhibition. The app provides more detailed information and artist interviews, but also compiles all of your ‘favourited’ artworks into a personalised online gallery that can be explored in greater detail at home. The UK’s Tate uses a smartphone app to extend its collection to anywhere in the world, and curate it to fit the user’s surroundings. The ‘Magic Tate Ball’ (Figure 4.1) assesses the user’s time-of-day, date, GPS location, ambient noise and localised weather to choose an appropriate artwork for that specific app user, accompanied by a short educational blurb. These two apps are innovatively designed to broaden their audience reach and share their collections. Furthermore, the depth of information that they afford is useful to the exhibition of more complex and arguable issues.

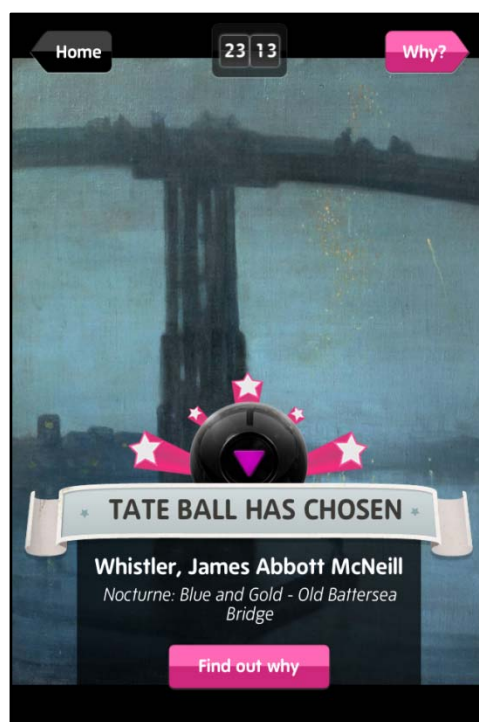


Figure 4.1
The Magic Tate Ball’s art-based assessment of my mood, during late night thesis revisions.
App by Tate (UK).

These benefits are further extended by the High Museum of Art, based in Atlanta, which allows visitors to provide their own comments using their specifically designed app ‘ArtClix’. Visitors photograph an artwork in the exhibition and the app recognises that artwork to provide detailed information and new content. Unique to this app is the ability for visitors to then add a comment to that artwork. ArtClix developer Bruce Wyman indicated that “from the start, the focus wasn’t on delivering content, but rather as a tool for visitors

to share their experiences,”¹¹ and it appears to have worked, with Wyman reporting that “Social media presence substantially increased and demand has remained high for the app across multiple exhibits. It’s become a platform that has sustained over time.”¹² A similarly designed app for the Immigration Museum would have created a more intuitive networked media experience in the *Getting In* activity than using Flickr. It could provide the scaffolding for participation advocated by Nina Simon to induce meaningful discussion. Additionally, it would not require museum staff assistance, and would therefore be more likely to be sustainable as a long-term project. When coupled with an online space that is accessible from outside a museum, a standalone application also contributed to ‘platform control’, which is another key conclusion to emerge from this thesis’ research.

Conclusion 4: Networked media ensures contemporary exhibitions remain current

A key advantage of integrating digital networked media into the physical exhibition space is the ability for museums to stay up-to-date with evolving contemporary issues. Museum Victoria curator Moya McFadzean acknowledged that this was a crucial problem for the *Getting In* exhibition: “The hole in that exhibition now, as we are well aware, is that the contemporary section is not contemporary anymore. We all know it needs drastically updating, and we could do more with that, helping people through the thorny issues like offshore detention.”¹³ It was clear that visitors were interested in engaging in more recent developments in the immigration policy debate. Six visitors made direct references to recent immigration policies, and many more made general comments about the contemporary treatment of refugees. Museums don’t necessarily need to be reactionary in response to current affairs – the *Contested Sites* research project advocated the museum as a place that can provide reasoned and considered information about difficult issues.¹⁴ Yet when dealing

¹¹ Bruce Wyman, comment submitted on “Are Museum Apps Boring?” *edgital blog*, October 11, 2014, <http://www.edgital.org/2013/08/08/are-museum-apps-boring/>.

¹² Bruce Wyman, *edgital blog*.

¹³ Moya McFadzean, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

¹⁴ Fiona Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, “Edgy” Topics, Civic Responsibilities and Modes of Engagement”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8 (2006), 23.

with significant contemporary issues, there is a requirement for those exhibitions to remain relevant. McFadzean sees opportunity in the integration of networked media in these situations: “the digital aspect will allow a lot more flexibility in terms of using digital elements in a built form to continually update and provide current information. It’s difficult when it’s all text on walls, to provide that depth as well, when the issues are so complex.”¹⁵

The integration of mobile technology, standalone applications and social media into the *Getting In* exhibition would facilitate faster connection with current issues that visitors are keen to engage with. For instance, the Immigration Museum could have used networked media to help explain the context of 457 working visas, which were the subject of public debate in 2014 following the Federal Government’s plan to ease restrictions on businesses sponsoring foreign workers to immigrate to Australia. As well as summarising the viewpoints of proponents in the debate, a standalone application could direct visitors to aspects of the physical *Getting In* exhibition that relate to this contemporary issue, such as the section about the Skilled Migration Stream of the 1980s. The contextualisation of the app’s current networked content with the exhibition’s physical thematic content creates new meaning about an evolving and significant contemporary issue. Importantly, this digital information is both dynamic and disposable. As these issues are fluid, the content can be altered or superseded as details in the issues change. Additionally, an exhibition’s relevance is also achieved by facilitating visitor comments, allowing them to project contemporary attitudes on the historical elements presented by the museum. The significance of this networked strategy is presented in the next section of conclusions.

¹⁵ Moya McFadzean.

Providing Visitors with a Meaningful Voice

Visitors should have the opportunity to respond in a meaningful way to museum exhibitions dealing with contentious and contemporary issues. This is a claim made by the *Contested Sites* project, and one that was reiterated by visitors surveyed at the *Getting In* exhibition. Chapter Two of this thesis considered the definition of a 'meaningful voice' and examined models of contribution used by online news sources and the online International Museum of Women. Museums could build on the experiences of these institutions, particularly in their success with ongoing visitor engagement. Obviously however, the physical nature of the museum space alters the functionality of these online models of participation. Unlike these, museum contributors will visit a physical exhibition space before engaging digitally with integrated networked media. Therefore, the level of participation will be considerably less than readily accessible online platforms. On the other hand, a visitor's physical presence is a marker of their increased level of investment in the subject matter. This section draws from the Chapter Two case studies, and the *Getting In* research, to present conclusions on how museums can best use networked media to provide visitors with a meaningful voice, and therefore cultivate discussions that enhance visitors' comprehension of significant contemporary issues.

The term 'meaningful' represents not the quality of the visitors' contributions, but instead the precedence they hold within the context of the exhibition. That is, that comments made by a visitor have the power to influence other visitors' views. The requirement for meaningful visitor contributions was rationalised in Chapter Two of this thesis, the central argument being that if museums are to foster a valuable and dynamic discussion within their exhibitions, they need to create a platform that is worth the visitor's intellectual investment.

Many participatory activities ask visitors to 'leave' a comment, implying that their engagement ends there. For many museum exhibitions, and indeed

visitors, this may be an appropriate level of interaction. But for exhibitions that deal with contentious issues of contemporary significance, museum visitors may benefit from involvement in a more complex and continuing conversation. When this concept was tested in the *Getting In* exhibition, visitors relished their opportunity to be involved in the discussion. As Diana Lorentz has observed, “This wave of museum visitors (generations X and Y) seem less inclined to participate on the periphery and more inclined to opt for experiences in which they can contribute in meaningful ways to the content presented.”¹⁶ The question for this section is, how do museums create those opportunities?

The fifth conclusion of this chapter relates to one of the most effective methods of providing a meaningful voice to visitors: to promote the continuation of the discussion outside the exhibition. The experience of the Brooklyn Museum shows how networked media can provide offsite accessibility and therefore allow visitors to engage in more detailed and challenging conversation. Conclusion six addresses the challenge for museum staff to curate visitor interactions in order to feature meaningful content. It will be seen that by drawing upon the experiences of online news comment models, museums can inject a sense of value into contributions and encourage visitor involvement. The seventh conclusion proposes that museums allow visitors to remain anonymous in their engagement in museum discussions. As will be seen, there is evidence to suggest that anonymous commenting encourages more visitors to be involved and elicits contributions that are more diverse and thought-provoking. The eighth conclusion relates to how networked media allows museum staff and other experts to engage with visitors, answer questions and rectify inaccuracies. By utilising this opportunity, museums can develop an online discussion space just as meaningful as the physical exhibition.

Conclusion 5: Facilitating continuous discussion

Networked media can afford museum visitors with offsite accessibility, which can prolong engagement with an exhibition, and may thus provoke

¹⁶ Diana Lorentz, “The Next Wave: digital culture and exhibition design” in *Exhibition Design for Galleries and Museums: an insider’s view*, ed. Georgia Rouette, (Carlton South: Museums Australia, 2010), 148.

continuing discussion. The substance of this form of audience engagement is highlighted by museum professional Kathleen McLean: "Conversation nourishes the exchange of ideas, with reciprocity and mutual respect, creates new knowledge and insights. And conversation, I submit, is arguably the most powerful form of participation in which a museum can engage."¹⁷ Museum Victoria staff suggest that this strategy would alleviate the problem encountered in the *Getting In* research: that most visitors did not want to leave comments on other people's photo contributions. This is the gist of Audience Insights Manager Carolyn Meehan: "What's the point of starting the conversation if there is no opportunity for that continued contact?"¹⁸ Continued accessibility could enhance visitors' comprehension of an exhibition, as argued by artist and academic Anita Kocsis:

"The psychology of participation means that, following the installation, the audience can debrief cognitively. Seeing their own experience visualised in relation to other audience members' experiential expressions stimulates and furthers the co-experiential aspect and creates a sense of communal meaning making. The visitor is no longer atomised, but can understand his or her own reception in the context of others."¹⁹

And the particular value of this prolonged interaction via networked media in a contemporary issue exhibition like *Getting In* is recognised by Exhibitions Manager Emily Kocaj:

"That's very interesting dialogue which a lot of in-gallery staff misses, because there's not that opportunity for a person to put something down for someone else to come and say something else and for that response to layer upon response . . . you could see people's opinions and thoughts changing about an issue or being challenged potentially."²⁰

¹⁷ Kathleen McLean, "Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation", *Professional Development Report*, American Folklore Society (2013), 2.

¹⁸ Carolyn Meehan.

¹⁹ Anita Kocsis, "Designing with the experiential in digitally augmented exhibitions", *Cumulus 38° South Conference Proceedings*, Melbourne, November 2009, 8.

²⁰ Emily Kocaj, personal interview, Melbourne Museum, April 8, 2014.

There is a museum-based precedent for the implementation of digitally accessible discussions. The Brooklyn Museum installed 'Electronic Comment Books' on computer kiosks into one of their exhibitions in 2007 which allowed visitor comments to be visible both within the exhibition and on the museum's website. A later incarnation of this strategy also accepted further comments from visitors directly from the website, without them needing to physically return to the exhibition. The museum reported that "visitors can easily see how others are interpreting exhibitions and objects, and to some degree, engage in conversation. That is, when visitors leave questions that necessitate answers, we can formulate responses and post them directly in the comment forum."²¹ In some instances the museum contacted the artists to provide expert responses to visitor questions. So by providing online accessibility, the notion of leaving a question or a comment becomes much more meaningful.

The Brooklyn Museum's experience with electronic comment books revealed another important outcome that correlates with the *Getting In* research. The museum allowed visitors to comment on individual pieces of art as well as the overall exhibition and discovered that "when given the choice to comment on the exhibition or works within it, nine out of ten people chose to comment on a specific piece."²² Essentially, this is an example of 'atomic commenting', the technique discussed in Chapter Two, used within a networked museum space to elicit more detailed and specific comments about the issues raised by an exhibition. This is a positive result that was mirrored by my research in the *Getting In* activity, and is a key component in implementing meaningful and continuous networked discussions.

The research and analysis in this thesis attests to the imperative for ongoing digital discussions in order to provide visitors with a meaningful voice on issues of contemporary significance. An exhibition such as *Getting In* could build on the Brooklyn Museum's 'Electronic Comment Books' model to provide digital and continued access through a standalone app on visitors' own personal

²¹ Shelley Bernstein, "Where do we go from here? Continuing with Web 2.0 at the Brooklyn Museum" *Museums and the Web 2008 Conference Proceedings*, April 2008, 6.

²² Bernstein, "Where do we go from here?" 7.

devices. Emily Kocaj considered this to be plausible within the Immigration Museum: “(visitors) could be given a notification to go back and check because someone has commented on their comment.”²³ As well as enhanced visitor comprehension through this continued accessibility (Kocsis’ argument), this strategy may also benefit the museum’s outreach. Selective social media integration could allow visitors to share their own comments on third-party websites while linking back to the original conversation on the museum’s platform. Providing digital access to continue discussions is therefore a critical strategy for injecting a sense of value into visitor comments, and thus fostering meaningful conversations which are longer-lasting, more detailed and dynamic. To enhance its effectiveness, however, museum staff must still play an active role in curating those visitor interactions.

Conclusion 6: Curating discussions to feature meaningful content

Curating visitor contributions is necessary if museums are to promote meaningful discussions through networked media. Chapter Two examined the ethical considerations surrounding the curation of visitor discussion. Although an unrestricted dialogue can be useful, it is clear from the experiences of online news sources that highlighting meaningful content creates a more balanced and interesting conversation. The analysed examples of meaningful online discussion, such as the *New York Times* and *Kinja*, place a level of ‘radical trust’ within its audience, but also construct systems of curation that promote valuable user-generated content. ‘Radical trust’ is the concept that communities can be trusted to be constructive in online participation – a notion equally relevant for museums. This term was coined by Darlene Fichter in 2006 when she claimed that: “we can only build emergent systems if we have radical trust . . . we allow and encourage participants to shape and sculpt and be co-creators of the system.”²⁴ Moreover, this radical trust is essential to maintaining relevance, as asserted by Catherine Styles: “Institutions that publish without participation, that continue to rely on the strength of their traditional authority, and which fail even to embrace a notion of shared authority, may find that their relevance and

²³ Emily Kocaj.

²⁴ Darlene Fichter, “Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and Radical Trust: A First Take”, *Blog on the Side*, April 2, 2006.

influence wanes.”²⁵ The concept of ‘radical trust’ need not obviate the importance of some structures and guidelines. Sebastian Chan acknowledges it as a positive way of considering the promise of Web 2.0, while stressing that “systems of trust in Web 2.0 applications are specifically constructed to encourage and protect, through safeguards and small but not insignificant barriers to participation.”²⁶ This equally applies to museums – constructing ‘barriers’ within networked media strategies is critical in creating a space that ‘encourages and protects’ its users.

‘Curating the public’ does impede the visitor’s opportunity for uninhibited comment, but the selection of ‘worthy’ user content is necessary in order to foster meaningful debate. It is worth considering the difference between moderation and curation in this context. As seen in the analysis of online models at *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The New York Times*, the moderation of contributions to exclude derogatory, irrelevant or advertising comments is a relatively simple task. Museums have a justifiable obligation to prohibit this material from becoming public content. The far more difficult and subjective task is that of ‘curation’ – creating an engaging networked debate that is worth the visitor investing their time and effort. For the standalone app used in the *Getting In* activity, the *New York Times* model is a simple and appropriate mechanism for valuing visitors’ comments. The app could allow a visitor to sort the photo contributions based on different criteria: ‘Staff Picks’, ‘Most Comments’, ‘Most Recent’. For instance, one visitor to *Getting In* took a photo of an immigration advertisement that states “A Million Chose Australia!” and used the caption activity to ask “What attracts people to Australia?”²⁷ By featuring this contribution, museum staff are inviting other visitors to submit their answers to the question. Sorting the contributions thematically could also help to retain narrative coherence within the networked platform and stimulate discussion: for instance, Skilled Migration; the Population Debate; Detention

²⁵ Catherine Styles, “How Web 2.0 Will Change History: Possible futures for websites of the National Archives of Australia”, paper from Australian Historical Association conference, Canberra, July 6, 2006.

²⁶ Sebastian Chan, “Radical Trust and Web 2.0”, *Fresh and New(er)* blog, August 31, 2006.

²⁷ Photo contribution (no. 62).

Centres, the White Australia Policy, Colonial Settlement. Visitors can also play a role in curation by ‘upvoting’ content that resonates with them. Some visitors may be more accustomed to this form of interaction than commenting, was Curator Moya McFadzean’s suggestion in reference to the *Getting In* research activity: “Maybe if they’d just been given the option to do ‘likes’: people know that form of approving and disapproving.”²⁸ All of these methods of curation inject value into a visitor’s comment, and provide more incentives for visitors to be involved in the discussion.

Conclusion 7: Visitor anonymity creates meaningful contributions

Providing visitors with the opportunity for anonymity in networked conversations about museum exhibitions will attract a more diverse audience. Broad visitor involvement across a range of demographics is important in eliciting contributions from differing perspectives. It is true that for the online news sources analysed in Chapter Two, anonymity is often considered the source of vitriolic comments. A study of online comments on several United States newspaper websites about the immigration debate found that anonymous comments were twice as likely to be deemed ‘uncivil’ than non-anonymous comments.²⁹ As a result, many of these commenting models require users to disclose their identities and often participate through their social media profiles. However the evidence presented in this thesis suggests that vitriolic commenting is not a significant issue for the museum sector, and that the requirement to provide a real identity is, in fact, an excessive barrier to participation. At the *Getting In* exhibition, only half of the surveyed visitors agreed they would submit a personal opinion if attributed to their real name. This would result in a significant drop in participation, and much less diversity in the discussion of contentious issues. Anonymity is one of the advantages of digital commenting, argue McClusky and Hmielowski, in that it expands the range of voices, particularly amongst ‘vulnerable’ demographics.³⁰ The

²⁸ Moya McFadzean.

²⁹ Arthur D. Santana, “Virtuous or Vitriolic: The effect of anonymity on civility in online newspaper reader comment boards”, *Journalism Practice*, 8, no. 1 (2013), 27.

³⁰ Michael McCluskey and Jay Hmielowski, “Opinion expression during social conflict: Comparing online reader comments and letters to the editor”, *Journalism*, 13, no. 3, (2011): 12.

protection of these visitors is critically important in the discussion of significant contemporary issues, as the perspective of those most ‘vulnerable’ may often be the most enlightening. The value in anonymity is well highlighted by the observation of Gawker Media founder Nick Denton: “the most interesting things on the web tend to come from people who are disguising their identity.”³¹ The notion that anonymity in museum discussions would lead to the hostility seen in online news comments is unlikely. The necessity for visitors to firstly engage physically with an exhibition discourages vitriolic or derogatory contributions, according to Lynda Kelly.³² In any case, as the previous conclusion attests, moderating contributions that are clearly malicious is a comparatively easy task. Anonymous participation is widely used in museums, including the Immigration Museum, and this would remain suitable on digital platforms.

Demonstration of the positive results of anonymous participation is The ‘Japanese Wishing Tree’ in the Immigration Museum (Figure 4.2). At the exit of the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition, a presentation on what it means to ‘belong’ in Australia, visitors are asked “What do you wish for yourself, for your loved ones, for the world?” In line with the traditional custom of the Japanese Tanabata festival, visitors write their wish on a piece of paper, and hang it



Figure 4.2
Visitors’ handwritten wishes hanging from the Japanese Wishing Tree, Immigration Museum.

³¹ Nick Denton, quoted in Noah Davis, “Can Gawker’s New Commenting System Improve Quality Without Creating Chaos?” *Fast Company*, 167 (2012).

³² Lynda Kelly.

amongst hundreds of other visitors' contributions. The responses reflect John Suler's definition of *benign disinhibition*: that with anonymity people often "reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes . . . to explore new emotional and experiential dimensions to one's identity."³³ Although Suler warns of the opposite outcome – *toxic disinhibition*, where "we witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats"³⁴ especially online – the evidence provided by the museum professionals in this thesis indicates that this is not true of anonymity in the museum sector. The Wishing Tree is an example of what Nina Simon describes as a 'contributory project'³⁵ rather than the facilitation of a meaningful discussion (although the combined mass of visitor 'wishes' does result in an inspiring piece that is symbolically meaningful). This form of anonymous participation would be equally beneficial within a networked media activity such as the *Getting In* photo caption exercise. The only caveat to this strategy is that for logistical reasons, each visitor must have an individual identity that differentiates them in the discussion. In the Immigration Museum case, the most straightforward strategy would be to allow visitors to choose their own username when logging in to the standalone application. Thus visitors would be free to select their own level of anonymity, which would encourage people from a diverse range of demographics, including 'vulnerable' demographics, to participate in discussions.

Conclusion 8: Engaging museum staff and other experts in discussions

By playing an active role in networked discussions, museum staff can both optimise the value of user-generated contributions and enhance visitor understanding of important issues. Through answering questions, rectifying inaccuracies and/or explaining curatorial decisions online, staff can legitimise visitor discussions and add connection with the original exhibition. Such museum staff involvement was exemplified in Chapter Two, in the response by Immigration Museum Curator Moya McFadzean to online accusations that the museum's collection policy was racist: "I wrote a response that framed the

³³ John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 7, no. 3 (2004): 321.

³⁴ Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", 321.

³⁵ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 187.

rationale as to why we would collect an object like that (the White Australia Sheet Music), and then the debate continued.”³⁶ As a result of McFadzean’s online post, other visitors engaged in the conversation, and the comment thread for this object now has significantly more comments than other objects in Collections Online. McFadzean contributed the post under the profile of ‘Museum Victoria’ but, if we accept a principal conclusion of the *Contested Sites* project, it may have been even more effective if she had posted using her name and job title. It suggested that in order to build trust among visitors and foster constructive debate, museum staff should be transparent about their involvement in the discussions and their curatorial control. When dealing with controversial issues, Linda Ferguson suggests dismantling the institutionalised museum voice and replacing it with curator by-lines, “to let visitors know who is speaking in an exhibition.”³⁷ This imperative is heightened when museum staff are themselves involved in the discussion and are also curating user-generated content. By remaining visible in the selection and promotion of user content, staff can help to maintain the integrity of the discussion.

Networked media can also allow expert contributors other than museum staff to be involved. As the *Contested Sites* project advised, when dealing with an issue of contemporary significance, a museum should attempt to openly present a variety of viewpoints rather than speak with an authoritative voice. This was the conclusion of Researcher Fiona Cameron: that “institutions have a responsibility to dispel this myth (of apolitical authority), by demonstrating their capacity and willingness to truly engage divisive topics in an open and honest way.”³⁸ One way to do this is would be to introduce the exhibition’s key contributors into the networked discussions to help structure the debate and to maintain the exhibition’s relevance. New York’s Guggenheim Museum runs a series of online panel forums on its website, inviting the public to join in the conversation with experts. A discussion on the role of ‘empathy’ in modern society was held in 2012 whereby a panel including a journalist, a disability

³⁶ Moya McFadzean.

³⁷ Linda Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons: Controversial topics in museums”, *Open Museum Journal*, 8, 2006: 35.

³⁸ Cameron, “Beyond Surface Representations”, 34.

rights advocate, a neuroscientist and a neurobiologist contributed lengthy posts to themed sessions over three days, and then answered online visitor questions in a one hour live chat. This is an example of the participatory strategy outlined by Russo et al in which “cultural and scholarly dialogue (can be used) to propagate authentic and authoritative museum knowledge within a community of interest using a many-to-many communication model.”³⁹

The *Getting In* exhibition and networked discussion would benefit from the structured involvement of museum staff and other contributors, on top of their participation in the ‘Collections Online’ comments section. As well as the contributions of museum curators such as Moya McFadzean, the museum could invite other experts, commentators or community members to periodically engage with the conversation. For instance, one of the museum panels features the ‘Immigrant’s Story’ of Zurlia Ismail, an Indonesian woman who came to Australia to study Agricultural Science in 1988 and then successfully applied for permanent residency. If made a continuing contributor to the networked discussions, Ismail could share new stories of her life in Australia, respond to visitor questions and provide another informed voice to the discussion. This involvement of contributors who have first-hand experience of these significant issues or other experts in the field, would help to legitimise discussion and increase the value of comments made by visitors – which as has already been shown, is the ultimate factor in providing visitors with a meaningful voice. Furthermore, it fosters ‘digital partnerships’ with other museums, institutions and community groups – the subject of the final set of conclusions in this chapter.

Building Digital Partnerships

Networked media can enhance museum exhibitions not only through optimising visitor discussions but also through empowering digital

³⁹ Angelino Russo, Jerry Watkins, Lynda Kelly, and Sebastian Chan “Participatory Communication with Social Media”, *Curator*, 51, no. 1 (2008): 24.

partnerships - collaboration with other institutions and crowd sourcing from the public. Indeed, the logistical demands of digital collections may necessitate these partnerships to consolidate resources into functional networked spaces. In reference to the role of the museum as mediators of the highly contested climate change issue, Salazar argues “the long term relevance of museums into the second decade of the twenty-first century rests, in great measure, on linkages with external organisations, including citizen action groups . . . acting as catalysts and junctures for a variety of movements and organisations.”⁴⁰ The importance of these digitally mediated partnerships is evident in some of the case studies examined in this thesis – the International Museum of Women, the Australian National Wildlife Collection and the Immigration Museum. All of these institutions have, to some extent, extended museum responsibilities to external organisations or an interested public by sharing collections or data, developing crowdsourcing strategies, or creating links to social development organisations . As well as sharing the costs of digital networks with other institutions, these partnerships “build a sense of meaning and context from their inter-relationships.”⁴¹

The ninth conclusion of the chapter introduces the concept of the Digital Public Space as a shared resource amongst cooperative cultural institutions. Learning from the innovations of the BBC, this strategy solves some of the logistical challenges discussed in the previous chapter, but as a contained space also offers museums the platform control required to deal with difficult issues. Conclusion ten builds on this concept to present a useful application of digital partnerships. Through networked media, museums can embed into the exhibition some of the original data and sources used by curators to present these contemporary issues. As shown, the Immigration Museum is already applying this strategy to great effect. Crowd sourcing is the focus of the eleventh conclusion in this chapter. As examples from the CSIRO and the National Museum of Australia show, crowd sourcing assists museums in the creation of important metadata, but it also provides visitors with a sense of ownership in

⁴⁰ Salazar, “The Mediations of climate change”, 131.

⁴¹ Jennifer Trant, “When all You’ve Got is ‘The Real Thing’: Museums and Authenticity in the Networked World”, *Archives and Museum Informatics*, 12 (1998): 118.

exhibitions about issues that are critically important to them. Finally, the last conclusion reflects on the social development role played by the International Museum of Women and considers how this success could translate to museums with more binding funding arrangements. Using networked media to form digital partnerships with the community and other institutions, museums can contribute to social development in the important issues that they exhibit.

Conclusion 9: The emergence of a 'Digital Public Space'

Museums and other cultural institutions can be advantaged, building on the notion of digital platform control, by combining their resources in a 'Digital Public Space' (DPS). A DPS is a publically accessible, online resource that pools together information and objects from a group of participating collection sources. What results is a dynamic online space with ideal conditions for dealing with contemporary issues. It is as yet a developing concept, and therefore the precise definition is dependent on the applications most relevant to those institutions. However, the essential theory behind a DPS is centralised digital access to the archives of numerous collecting organisations. That is, cultural institutions would contribute to a shared space with digital collections that adhere to industry best-practice file standards. Beyond this foundation, there are enormous opportunities for storytelling and discussion – such as online, interactive exhibitions; visitor comment sections and forums; integration with physical museum spaces; content mash-ups; and staff profiles and interviews. This concept would help to alleviate the logistical resource problems encountered in the previous chapter. The considerably large initial costs incurred by the development of such a space can be shared across multiple organisations working together. Following the construction of the digitisation workflows, it should become more cost-effective for museums to build online exhibitions or to initiate programs that draw from those already uploaded collections. The possibilities of the DPS are clear to Art director Professor Neville Brody: "A digital archive is not a closed space . . . but, through the premise that digital data is fluid, is an active and dynamic one, wherein every interaction with any piece of content, plus the paths, journeys and

connections through the content space itself, will be stored as part of the growing pool of knowledge.”⁴²

The notion of a Digital Public Space first emerged from the British Broadcasting Service (BBC) in 2011, whose ambition is outlined by Project manager Jake Berger: “to create an online space in which much of the UK’s publicly-held cultural and heritage media assets and data could be found – connected together, searchable, machine-readable, open, accessible, visible and usable in a way that allows individuals, institutions and machines to add additional material, meaning and context to each other’s media, indexed and tagged to the highest level of detail.”⁴³ Thus this concept would still embrace the contributory benefits of networked media; yet do so on the BBC’s terms. Rather than simply using social media as a distribution channel, cultural organisations can create their own evolving digital spaces, thereby “being part of the Web, rather than just on it.”⁴⁴ As Jemima Kiss notes, this is a multifaceted undertaking: “It’s a complex and bewildering long-term project, whose challenges include reconciling rights for content owners, resolving legal issues about content use and linking up multiple, incompatible systems, not to mention convincing what is still a broadcast-centric organisation of the importance of its own legacy.”⁴⁵ The BBC’s prototype project *The Space* was released in 2012, compiling 53 separate arts projects, from the vinyl record collection of disc jockey John Peel; to a set of modern short films from the British Film Institute; to the live recordings of Shakespeare plays in the Globe Theatre. The three month pilot program was considered a success by Managing editor of *The Space*, Hilary Bishop, with more than 250 000 visits within the first

⁴² Neville Brody, “Modelling the Digital Public Space: The New Renaissance” in *Digital Public Spaces*, eds. Drew Hemment, Bill Thompson, José Luis de Vicente and Rachel Cooper, (Future Everything, 2013), 10.

⁴³ Jake Berger, “Digital Public Space: Turning a big idea into a big thing”, *BBC Internet Blog*, October 14, 2011.

⁴⁴ Mo McRoberts, “BBC Digital Public Space Project”, *BBC Internet Blog*, April 19, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/legacy/bbcinternet/2011/04/bbc_digital_public_space_proj.html.

⁴⁵ Jemima Kiss, “BBC makes Space for cultural history”, *The Guardian*, January 7, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/06/bbc-digital-public-space-archive>.

few weeks, and it provided the BBC with a basis for a broader, more complex, long-term project.⁴⁶

Curatorial accuracy is cited as one of the major benefits of the next phase of their DPS by one of the BBC project's data analysts, Mo McRoberts: "(it being) an access point (that utilises) the rich information which has been carefully collated, checked and double-checked over the years by experts in their respective fields."⁴⁷ Their project aims to combine the collections, metadata and curatorial expertise of, among others, the BBC, the British Film Institute, the British Library, the National Archive of Births and Deaths, the Tate Gallery, and the Arts Council into one centralised public access point. A visitor's search of World War II, for instance, could return a history podcast from the BBC; service records from the National Archives; actuality footage from the BFI; and paintings from the Tate. Each entry would be carefully curated by the original institution, providing the description and other metadata; including links to further related resources or online exhibitions; and/or sparking discussions among visitors and staff. Essentially, the individual institutions would benefit from the enhanced discoverability afforded by the federated search engines of the DPS, whilst still maintaining curatorial control over their collection.

A Digital Public Space can help streamline the complex digitisation project that many institutions such as the National Film and Sound Archive are facing. Cross-institution standardisation is central to the success of a Digital Public Space, but this is by no means an easy task. Reporting on the implementation of *The Space*, Jemima Kiss revealed there were "painstaking technical negotiations . . . over linked data and metadata, cataloguing, file formats and streaming that identified and ironed out many of the key principles of collaboration."⁴⁸ As discussed previously, most collecting institutions are already grappling with immense internal digitisation tasks. Reconfiguring those workflows in order to standardise with partner institutions may pose some

⁴⁶ Hilary Bishop, "Digital Public Space: Watch This Space", *BBC Internet Blog*, June 22, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/internet/posts/space_arts_projects.

⁴⁷ McRoberts, "'BBC Digital Public Space Project'".

⁴⁸ Kiss, "BBC makes Space for cultural history".

difficulties, but it would certainly be beneficial in the long term. Developing meaningful partnerships is therefore key to this concept: “achieving what we have in mind will take a collaborative effort, on a global scale, between all interested parties to organise their currently disorganised resources around a common purpose.”⁴⁹ There is exciting potential for this standardisation of digitisation to allow institutions to combine their resources into new projects. Through the ‘Resource Description Framework’ – a web standard of the World Wide Web Consortium – this collated data could be combined and outputted into new digital exhibitions, or a myriad of unforeseen applications. As Brody explains “the DPS is essentially a protocol, a common compression algorithm and universal metadata language, meaning any piece of information can be cross-referenced and accessed from any point. This allows new forms of evolving narrative to be told.”⁵⁰

The Digital Public Space has specific implications for museums conducting discussions on issues of contemporary significance. By using their own frameworks to control moderation and isolate discussions from broader social media or the news media, the DPS could digitally emulate the walls of the physical museum. Designing a contained space that asserts the combined authority of all the contributing institutions has the potential to reclaim the influence that museums may have lost in their current digital presence. As a result, the DPS could become an ideal space to create networked exhibitions about issues of contemporary significance. All of the key factors discussed in this thesis would be accommodated by this type of system – retention of museum authority; networked integration between physical and online museum spaces; a facility for visitors to make meaningful contributions and continue discussions over an extended period of time; greater contextualisation of significant issues; and museum control over the moderation of visitor contributions. This possibility has not yet been discussed by proponents of the DPS, but there is a clear opportunity here for museums to advance meaningful

⁴⁹ Tony Ageh, “Why the Digital Public Space Matters” in *Digital Public Spaces*, eds. Drew Hemment, Bill Thompson, José Luis de Vicente and Rachel Cooper, (Future Everything, 2013), 7.
⁵⁰ Brody, “Modelling the Digital Public Space”, 10.

discussions on issues that are important to their communities. A key application of these online partnerships is the subject of the next conclusion.

Conclusion 10: Embedding original data improves transparency

Museums can further accommodate visitors' needs and legitimise exhibitions by providing networked access to original data. The impetus for this strategy stems from the *Contested Sites* project, which recommended "a reframing of museum authority to one of expert mediator, informant and facilitator . . . where information gathering and analysis are in the hands of individuals."⁵¹ Whilst museum curatorship is important and has been clearly cited in this thesis, there are definite advantages in providing visitors and researchers access to the original data, sources and policies that underlie exhibitions on significant issues. This strategy has been employed, with significant results, by both The Atlas of Living Australia and the Immigration Museum.

The benefits of supplying visitors and researchers with access to original data are exemplified by the Atlas of Living Australia, headed by the CSIRO. Testament to the advantages of cross-institutional partnerships, the Atlas combines data from museums, government departments, universities and community groups to create a multimedia portfolio of Australia's natural history. An entry for the Grey Butcherbird for instance, contains distribution maps made with data from varying museum records of occurrence; an audio recording of the birdcall from the CSIRO's Australian National Wildlife Collection; historical field notes from the Biodiversity Heritage Library; and an assortment of creative commons photographs. The result is a comprehensive and trustworthy source of information, all accessible from the one website. Importantly the raw data used to create this information is also available to download and can be analysed and manipulated by researchers and general users. One of the initiators of the Atlas, Joanne Daly, reports staggering statistics on the usage of this data: "there are 50 million records in the Atlas, and we've recorded more than 1.5 billion downloads . . . and most of those downloads are

⁵¹ Cameron, "Beyond Surface Representations", 23.

occurring from people who are not normally associated with collections and who never had access to that data before.”⁵² The data is then being used by external researchers for conservation management plans, environmental impact assessments, and education purposes, among others.

A museum striving for transparency in its presentation of contemporary issues could benefit from facilitating access to the original data, policy documents, oral histories, or other sources used to create an exhibition. This strategy would further legitimise the curatorial choices of the exhibition creators, and may also alleviate the concerns of some of the *Contested Sites* interviewees, who felt that contemporary issues could not be exhibited because they were not based on anything: “they’re so modern – there’s no history.”⁵³ The Immigration Museum has already implemented this strategy by installing touch-screen booths with detailed migration statistics. Drawing from census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, these booths provide detailed information about Victorian communities from 85 countries of origin, since 1854. Visitors can examine and compare the immigration statistics by country and by year. Further information details religious denominations; age, gender and language demographics; and population by suburb. The raw data is also supplemented by interpretive information about the immigration history of each country and the communities that now reside in Victoria. The success of this strategy at the Immigration Museum is testament to the value of providing transparency in contested exhibitions.

Conclusion 11: Crowd sourcing can be utilised to build collections and improve metadata

Complex contemporary exhibitions, when integrated with networked media, provide strong opportunities for crowd sourcing initiatives. These strategies can enhance and diversify the museum’s collection and metadata, and furthermore, they can ease logistical strains of the digitisation process, such as

⁵² Joanne Daly, “The Role of Legacy Collections for Scientific Research in the Digital Age: why physical materials still matter”, *Australian Heritage Partnership Symposium: The Future of Heritage*, July 19, 2014.

⁵³ Ferguson, “Pushing Buttons”, 22.

interpretation and transcription of data. The benefits of crowd sourcing were championed by Margaret Cawsey from the CSIRO's Australian National Wildlife Collection, in the chapter concerning Digital Dissemination. Grappling with a deteriorating and inaccessible collection, Cawsey argued that crowd sourcing would provide valuable assistance in interpreting the collection once digitised. Examples of these projects are increasingly emerging in the museum field. The Atlas of Living Australia, also coordinated by the CSIRO, is one of the most successful collection-based crowd sourcing initiatives in Australia. Hundreds of online volunteers have given their time to transcribe more than 100 000 digitised notes. The crowd sourcing of digitised material could also assist exhibitions dealing with issues of contemporary significance. To maintain connection with evolving issues, museums could encourage networked visitors to contribute new data to the exhibition. This strategy was effectively employed by the National Museum of Australia in its *Bottles from the Basin* project, which invited residents of the Murray-Darling Basin to test the quality of their local water system (Figure 4.3). The results were plotted on a customized Google

Map, thereby showing “the important connections from state to territory across Australia's largest water system, to help reveal the issues we are facing as a nation and to recognise some of the people in our communities who are working to resolve them.”⁵⁴ The benefits of these initiatives are clear: the museum can build audiences outside of its geographical region; visitors can observe the value of their individual contributions and feel included in the museum’s research program; and new and useful data is created that can be integrated into exhibitions. The success of *Bottles from the Basin* lies directly with the issue’s contemporary significance. The volunteer contributors across the Murray-Darling basin are stakeholders in the health of their river system, and have an interest in its long-term survival. By participating in the museum’s project, they are making a significant contribution to water management data that is of direct relevance to them. Networked media, through mobile devices and custom-made applications allow for these types of projects to be successfully implemented by museums.

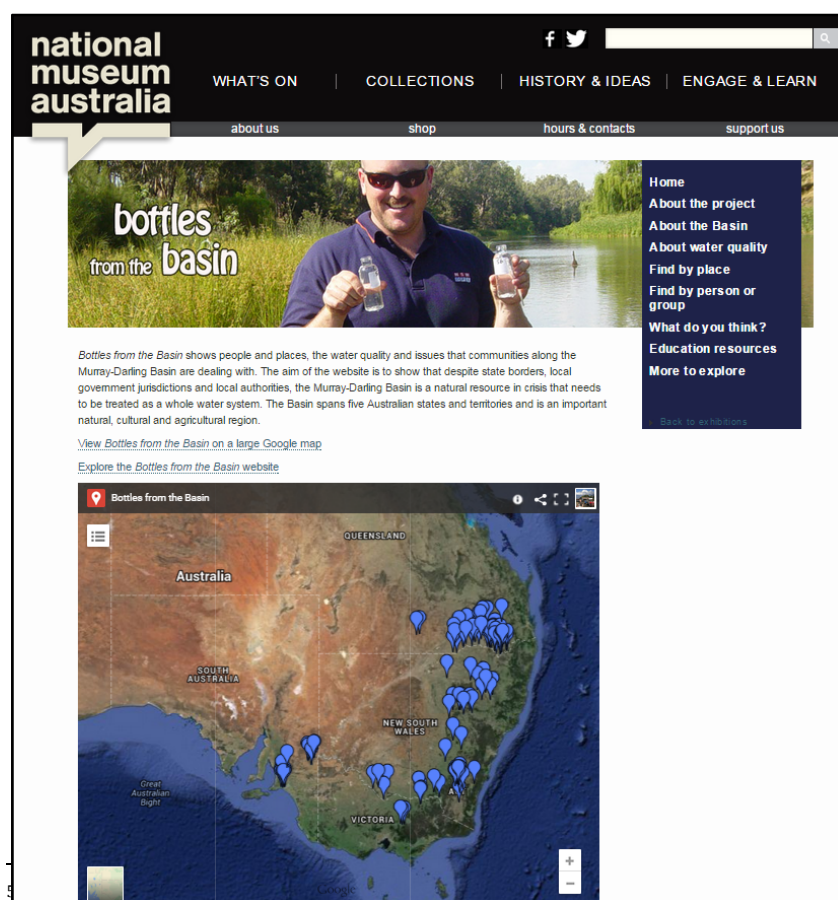


Figure 4.3
Water quality tests contributed by the public, with locations plotted on a map. ‘Bottles from the Basin’ website, National Museum of Australia

[http://www.nma.gov.au/online/features/bottles from the basin/about tl](http://www.nma.gov.au/online/features/bottles-from-the-basin/about-tl)

Crowd sourcing, as revealed by these examples, can be used to empower networked visitors through participation in museum research. Although visitor contribution of metadata and new content to digital collections may make only a small impression on the daunting digitisation task facing museums, the important aspect is the engagement of visitors in the contemporary issues that matter most to them. This strategy could be applied successfully to the *Getting In* exhibition at the Immigration Museum. The research survey revealed a significant proportion of visitors identified as immigrants to Australia, and the photo contributions activity showed they were keen to share their own stories of immigration. A simple networked application could utilise this enthusiasm to create a crowd sourced representation of the backgrounds of the museum's visitors. Gathered information such as country of origin could be plotted on a digital map displayed within the exhibition or on the website. Clicking on one of the map's markers could prompt a dialog box with further information about that visitor's immigration story. As other crowd sourced projects such as *Bottles from the Basin* have found, participation in these types of programs can be "overwhelming"⁵⁵, as visitors have a personal investment in the issue. The *Contested Sites* project argued that a major benefit of creating exhibitions about significant contemporary issues is that visitors often have strong connections with the subject matter and are eager to contribute. Crowd sourced projects are well placed to utilise this enthusiasm, allowing the museum to effectively employ a networked audience as research contributors and form significant partnerships with its digital visitors.

Conclusion 12: Opportunities for social development

The research conducted for this thesis contends that, despite funding protocols, there are opportunities for networked museums to be in some degree involved in social development or change. The International Museum of Women (IMOW) represents an institution that clearly states its role in progressing the status of women around the world. Although her colleagues in the museum field initially believed that "social change doesn't really belong in

⁵⁵ "About the Project", *Bottles from the Basin*.

the context of museums”⁵⁶, Executive Producer Catherine King contends that regardless of intentions, all museums play an inherent role in social change. Therefore she argues that the IMOW possesses a transparency that may be lacking in the broader museum sector: “to the extent that we remain a trusted source . . . there was no equivocation about the fact that we are about women’s rights, women’s agency, and women’s leadership. And that’s not something we would be willing to give way on.”⁵⁷ The museum’s activism consists of encouraging visitors to donate to charities, sign petitions, lobby politicians and support a range of campaigns.

Government funded museums such as the Immigration Museum may not be able or willing to directly advocate political causes in the manner of the IMOW, but networked media still affords room for social development. Discussions with museum staff in Australia suggest that direct social activism would be inappropriate in their museums, given their funding sources. When dealing with immigration issues, Museum Victoria staff confirmed they were bound by Victorian Public Service rules that prevented them from making judgements about contemporary policy: “there are restrictions around the things that we can and do say, because we are funded by the government.” This mirrors the sentiments of some government museum staff interviewed in the *Contested Sites* project, who sensed that promoting certain controversial causes would have an impact on the museum’s funding and even their own employment. However, there are other measures that museums can employ to affect social change other than direct political activism. Kylie Message’s argument is relevant here: that whilst an effect on concrete political change is difficult to measure, museums “can and do register in a very real way changing attitudes and practices of representative democracy.”⁵⁸ The Immigration Museum can and already does contribute to less politically motivated forms of social development using networked media. Its ‘Talking Difference’ program takes a portable studio to schools, libraries and community centres across Victoria to record people’s experiences and promote diversity and inclusiveness

⁵⁶ Catherine King.

⁵⁷ Catherine King.

⁵⁸ Kylie Message, *Museums and Social Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 231.

in Australia. Additionally, the museum hosts exhibitions developed by community groups, and advertises external multicultural festivals and events on its social media. All of these programs, digital or otherwise, build partnerships with the community and promote social development.

Conclusion

These twelve conclusions represent the foremost findings of the research undertaken for this thesis. Stemming from the research at *Getting In*, as well as from analysis incorporating a range of case studies, these conclusions provide a basis for answering the thesis' central question: to what extent is networked media an effective strategy for museums to utilise in the discussion and debate of important contemporary issues? As the first set of conclusions show, exhibitions about contemporary issues can benefit from the ubiquity of mobile and tablet devices, standalone applications, and to some extent, social media. This technology provides museums with an inexpensive and intuitive method of creating discussion within an exhibition. Additionally, the *Contested Sites* project claimed that any effective communicative strategy must provide visitors with a meaningful voice. It is clear that by featuring significant content, enlisting staff and experts into discussions, and by allowing anonymity, museums can utilise networked media to provide a meaningful space for ongoing visitor discussions. The last set of conclusions provide an insight into the long-term opportunities afforded by the introduction of networked media into the museum. The Digital Public Space, crowdsourcing and digital partnerships with community organisations could all serve to increase visitor engagement with contemporary issues, as well as relieving some logistical problems.

Thesis Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to evaluate the effectiveness of networked media as a strategy for fostering meaningful discussion in museums on issues of contemporary significance. There is a clear mandate for museums to deal with such issues, as found by the extensive research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites*. The researchers from this project concluded that museums were well positioned to present these contentious issues fairly, with the proviso that visitors be given an opportunity to contribute their own views meaningfully to the exhibition. How this might clearly be achieved, however, was lacking from this research in the early 2000s. In more recent years, the advance of networked media to become a ubiquitous form of communication has been aided by developments in mobile technology and social media services. Many museums have seized on opportunities presented by this technology to further their audience outreach and improve their inclusivity. Yet there has been relatively little focus on the potential of networked media to provide visitors with the meaningful voice on contemporary issues advocated by *Contested Sites*. The research and analysis conducted in this thesis confirms that networked media has the potential to be very effective for this purpose, as long as it is carefully designed and implemented to overcome some of the challenges associated with the technology.

This positive finding stems from my original research, in which a networked media activity was introduced to a physical exhibition that deals with Australian immigration – a contentious issue of undeniable contemporary significance. The results, based on contributions made by the research participants, and their responses to an accompanying survey, reveal strong support for the use of networked media. Of the fifty participants, 79% believed that museums should deal with contemporary issues, and 82% indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to this exhibition. There was indication also that the networked media activity ‘forced visitors to think’ more carefully about the content presented to them. My research provided

evidence that this form of visitor involvement was more than token participation, that indeed, this activity provided opportunity for the meaningful contribution required for difficult issues.

However, as well as these affirmative results, my research also revealed two broad problem areas that might hinder the long term efficacy of the introduced networked media strategy in the *Getting In* exhibition. One problem involves the notion of staff 'curating' public contributions to encourage meaningful participation whilst maintaining important museum responsibilities. The other problem encompasses the various challenges associated with the digital dissemination of museum content and visitor contributions. Subsequent analysis of these problem areas, with reference to relevant case studies such as the International Museum of Women and the National Film and Sound Archive, demonstrate that some of these problems are easier to solve than others. For instance, 'moderating' visitor contributions to exclude derogatory, inaccurate or off-topic comments was considered by museum staff to be a relatively simple undertaking. However, 'curating' contributions to foster diverse perspectives poses difficulties, as this task creates ethical issues regarding the museum's authority. A similar dichotomy was found in terms of digital dissemination. The retention of curatorial control by a museum over its collections can be largely ensured by maintaining control of the platform used for digital publishing. On the other hand, there are no straightforward solutions to the challenges associated with funding and resources of digital projects for museums.

How these challenges might be tackled is considered in the conclusions in the final chapter of this thesis. Here in are presented the strategies deemed to be most effective, as evidenced by analysis of several museums, cultural institutions and online news media. It is clear that the simplest method of introducing networked media to the exhibition space is through the visitors' own personal devices. For exhibitions dealing with contentious issues, it is apparent that the development of a standalone application is favourable over the utilisation of third-party social media services. Despite the advantages of

social media, including affordability of implementation and compatibility with visitors' external networks, its use requires caution, as revealed by the experiences of the museums analysed here. It has been shown how publishing content on external commercial services can compromise a museum's authority over its content. This could be particularly problematic concerning controversial issues that require the museum to carefully contextualise museum content and visitor contributions.

Networked media can be an effective means by which visitors are given a meaningful voice on issues that are particularly important to contemporary society. Meaningful here has referred to contributions that add value to an exhibition and that have the potential to influence other visitors. One of the key factors in ensuring this meaningful voice was the ability for discussion to continue beyond a visitor's time in the physical exhibition space. This need was strongly supported by the *Getting In* research, by interviews with staff from various museums, and by analysis of selected online case studies. Thus in order to create discussion worthy of a visitor's investment, there must be opportunity for them to periodically access that discussion online. There are other methods that transform potentially tokenistic participation into meaningful contribution. Visitors' responses can be provoked by a system which highlights the most interesting content from an otherwise unstructured mass of uninterpretable digital content. The value of these digital discussions is further improved by the involvement of museum staff and other relevant experts, as this allows them to steer the debate, and to correct any unsubstantiated claims or inaccuracies expressed by visitors. The provision for anonymity can also add to the meaningfulness of discussion, particularly in relation to contentious issues. Whilst anonymity has been blamed for some problematic online discussion, the professionals interviewed in this thesis agree that this isn't an issue in the museum sector, and that it actually enhances the potential for honest and thought-provoking discussion.

Another significant conclusion of this thesis is that visitors' involvement with contested exhibitions is made more meaningful through the museum's

creation of digital partnerships with other museums, institutions and the public. Whether they be through embedding raw data and policy documents into an exhibition, or through soliciting crowd sourcing to improve collection metadata, digitally-mediated partnerships serve to increase the transparency and inclusivity of contested exhibitions. Digital partnerships can also assist museums with the considerable resources required to digitally disseminate museum content. The 'Digital Public Space', as pioneered by the BBC, is an instructive example of the benefits for institutions that pool resources and collections in order to create valuable online spaces curated by experts in the field. These online spaces allow for the development of the other networked media strategies discussed in this thesis, such as standalone mobile applications and remote access. Furthermore, there is greater legitimacy provided to a contentious exhibition which involves partnerships with other respected institutions and digital access to the collections, data or policies used to produce the exhibition. Crowd sourcing is another form of digital partnership, this time with an interested public, which alleviates the intensive labour required in digitising a collection's metadata, whilst simultaneously encouraging visitors to invest their time in a museum's collection and engage with issues that are important to them. A further step would be to create digital partnerships with related community organisations in an effort to encourage social activism. This type of partnership may be outside the practical parameters of government-funded museums, but nevertheless that opportunity is certainly presented by networked media.

This thesis constitutes a rationale for the use of networked media to foster meaningful discussion in a museum exhibition presenting an issue of contemporary significance. It has drawn on three major sources for this argument. The museum studies literature provides the case for a meaningful audience voice. My original research reveals that both museum visitors and staff see the benefits of adopting networked media. The experiences of various museums attest to the design strategies that can overcome the problems associated with the curation of visitor contributions and the digital dissemination of museum content. It is clear from this evidence that networked

media has the *potential* to be very effective in fostering meaningful discussion on important issues. A more definitive test of this technology would come, of course, from a real-world implementation of this idea on a long-term basis. At the time of writing, the Brooklyn Museum in New York was in the process of installing a networked form of contribution similar in purpose to the activity trialled by my research in the *Getting In* exhibition. The Museum has built a standalone application called ASK, which is intended for use by visitors throughout all of the exhibitions to converse with expert staff and other visitors. As these exhibitions are largely artworks, the nature of the discussions will differ to those specifically dealing with issues of contemporary significance. Some evidence may emerge, however, from some of the subject matter that the *Contested Sites* researchers would have considered to be 'hot topics', such as the Black Power revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and the spiritual significance of fertility and death for indigenous Americans. Most ground-breaking about this strategy, which is currently still being tested, will be the capacity for visitors to access these on kiosks within the exhibition and on mobile devices outside the exhibition. This design element mirrors a key conclusion of this thesis regarding the fostering of a meaningful voice. The Brooklyn Museum has been openly documenting the development of this technology on their blog: BKM TECH.¹ The lessons learnt from this trailblazing effort will no doubt be of great interest to any museum exhibiting contemporary issues.

The Immigration Museum in Melbourne belongs to this category of museum, especially with regard to the exhibition *Getting In*. This presentation about immigration policy and Australian identity is undoubtedly a contested site. The *Contested Sites* researchers argued that this type of museum should be providing visitors with a meaningful method of contribution. The evidence gathered for this thesis shows that most visitors agree with this assertion in relation to the *Getting In* exhibition. The networked media activity provided to visitors for this research was relatively rudimentary out of logistical necessity. Even so, it was very well received by visitors and museum staff, and notably, it encouraged closer engagement with the contentious content presented. It has

¹ BKM TECH blog, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/>.

been more than ten years since the exhibition was developed and the Museum Victoria curators have indicated that it needs to be updated. If a mechanism for meaningful visitor contribution were to be considered for the exhibition's next incarnation, it is clear that networked media would be a highly effective approach.

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