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Augmenting the agora

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Augmenting the *agora*:
Media and civic engagement in museums

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Mirroring digital culture developments in society at large, museums are increasingly incorporating social media platforms and formats into their communication practices. More than merely providing additional channels of communication, this development is invested with an understanding of social media as integral to the ongoing democratisation of the museum. The confluences of new media affordances with New Museology objectives along with the underpinnings of the aforementioned understanding is discussed in this article. The article will argue that development in this area is not only driven by solid results and public demand but also by collective assumptions and associations as well as by a political need for institutions to justify their relevance in society. In conclusion, the article suggests that, while the integration of social media communication may serve to market the museum as inclusive, it may also simply pay lip service to genuine civic engagement and democratic exchanges with the public.

Introduction

Much has been written and said about the role of new media in museums. In recent years, a string of anthologies related to the issue have been published, including *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum* (2013) by Drotner and Schrøder, *Heritage and Social Media* (2012) by Giaccardi, *Creativity and Technology: Social Media, Mobiles and Museums* (2011) by Katz et al. and *Det interaktive museum* (2011) by Drotner et al.

Simultaneously, the long-running annual Museums and the Web conference is now supplemented by new forums for best practise presentations and debate, such as Museums and the Web Asia, Nodem and MuseumNext in Europe, and a host of national and international seminars. Meanwhile, the discussion continues online in twitter debates and in response to blog posts by leading practitioners. And, most significantly, perhaps, the discourse is operationalised into guidelines and policies by governing bodies and museum boards.

A general thread running through this discourse concerns the potential of digital media – and social media, in particular – to inspire civic and cultural engagement and, thus, aid the process of democratisation in cultural institutions. As social communication platforms are used extensively across age groups and demographic boundaries, it is presumed that, through these channels, institutions might be able to reach audiences that have hitherto had little interest in museums. Similarly, the technical properties of social media, which allow for shared authorship and open dialogue, mean that they are seen as ideal tools for discussion, co-creation and the sharing of cultural narratives. While reluctant to lose an outmoded image of authority, yet at the same time eager to soften it , museums feel compelled to make best use of these opportunities, even if the adaptation and transformation does not go as smoothly as hoped.

So dominant is this talk about the democratising potential of new media communication in museums that neither the sometimes limited successes nor the potential pitfalls and side effects have been substantially addressed. Although academic and institutional evaluation has increased and knowledge-sharing among professionals touches on the challenges, their conclusions most often focus on how to progress rather than why this practise is universally presented as progressive. Critical scholarly reflection on this development is, therefore, still needed. Similarly, a study of the underpinnings of this understanding might shed light on how assumptions, associations, seductive rhetoric and political pressure, as much as real results, sometimes seem to drive this development. These underpinnings are the focus of this article. It will ask whether this idealistic engagement of the public through social media really leads to more democratic institutions, or whether it merely serves to justify the authority and argue for the relevance of museums in society – a prerequisite for cultural institutions in today's world.

After establishing the current understanding of the museum as *agora*, an institution in the service of democracy, the article will take its point of departure from an example of how the social responsibilities of the museum are promoted as a motivation for the continued effort to provide digital access. A closer look at the rhetoric, however, indicates that museums are still caught in a traditional model of communication in which the institution acts as a hub of knowledge, more interested in sharing out information than caring to learn from the public.

Based on this, I will relate how the commitment to inclusion and the ideological integration of social media in this process derive from political directives – exemplified in a Danish context – and from a paradigmatic turn in the museum field.

Going deeper into the background of the ideological connotations of social media, I will build on the French sociologist Patrice Flichy's (2007) notion of the Internet *imaginaire*, homing in on how the technological allowance for democratic interaction was communicated as an inherent and transformative social quality of the Internet. I will also point to similarities between the original virtual communities and today's professional networks on Twitter in order to call attention to the potential danger of overplaying the promise of social media for cultural mediation.

Finally, with Scandinavian and American examples of how museums have been inspired by social media and participatory culture to facilitate novel ways of engaging the public, I will argue that the seemingly radical sharing of authority is, perhaps, not that challenging to the authority of the museum after all.

From Acropolis to *Agora*

In her inaugural editorial for *Curator: The Museum Journal*, digital editor and museum technologist Nancy Proctor discusses the confluence of new media and new museology as driving forces in museums today and describes the current movement in museums as

> a transition from Acropolis – that inaccessible treasury on the fortified hill – to Agora, a marketplace of ideas offering space for conversation, a forum for civic engagement and debate, and opportunity for a variety of encounters among audiences and the museum (2010, p. 36).

Although Proctor references *Smarthistory*'s Steven Zucker for this description, the architectural metaphor is clearly indebted to Duncan Cameron's seminal article "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum?" (1972[1971]).

The article was written in response to public protests against the authoritative museum institution, which followed the rise of the American civil rights movement and the radical student movement in Europe. In it, Cameron acknowledges the need for critical public forums that question the truths determined and perpetually re-presented by the elite establishment in museums or elsewhere. Yet, he argues not for a transformation of museums as temples or treasuries into museums as forums but for the establishment or nourishment of critical forums outside the museum institutions. This division, he states, is essential for the museum to accommodate change while serving its key function as a temple of knowledge, i.e., a place where we can relate our personal experiences to the accumulated understandings and expressions of mankind. Still, according to Proctor's account, the functions of representation and contestation become merged in modern museums.

However significant the question of the segregation versus the integration of authoritative and questioning spaces may be, so, too, are the different understandings of the museum that underpin these views. While the museum as temple advocated by Cameron essentially serves an existential need, the *agora* museum described by Proctor is a democratic and therefore, ultimately, a political institution.

Today, this notion of the museum as an *agora* or forum – a gathering place for people and an assembly of minds and ideas – is the privileged understanding. Accordingly, museum institutions should no longer simply be open to the public but truly serve and rightfully represent the people. Echoes of the past in the shape of collection artefacts are, thus, required to be supplemented by a polyphony of voices from the present. Therefore, the ongoing democratisation of museums not only entails democratic representation in the collections as well as in audience demographics, it also suggests that museums should work for the democratic formation of the people. Hence, museums must now build new relations with the public and inspire democratic engagement with cultural heritage. A prerequisite for this, however, is inspiring internal commitment to the cause.

Let's get real! – Utopian rhetoric and the social function of museums

In December 2012, The Association of Danish Museums, the National Gallery of Denmark, and The Danish Broadcasting Corporation co-hosted the international seminar *'Sharing is Caring – Let's Get Real!'*, focusing on opening museums' digital assets to the public to allow for cultural engagement. Leading up to the event, the ideals behind the title were expounded by Michael Edson of the Smithsonian as:

> **sharing**, as a deeply moral impulse to take the knowledge, beauty, and secrets that we know are there, locked within our organizations, and make them available to every person on earth, and **caring**, as a manifestation of our collective duty to ensure that everyone in society has access to the full spectrum of ideas, experiences, and resources that they need to live happy and successful lives (Edson, 2012,10 December, blogpost) [emphasis in bold in the original]

Continuing this argument, Edson went on to outline "the next frontier of work: building equity and civic value through openness, transparency, generosity, and community" (ibid.).

While the seminar's subtitle was reflected in a series of illuminating case presentations, the idealistic rhetoric of Edson's inspirational piece above seems somewhat out of touch with reality. The very scale of the vision, reaching 'every person on earth', and the somewhat naïve belief that access to museum resources will enable them to 'live happy and successful lives' are simply overblown. Furthermore, the claimed correlation between institutional transparency and civic equity is not supported by empirical evidence or academic reasoning. Still, the underlying understanding of the museum as a potential "vector for social change and a tool for development" (Dubuc, 2011:503) is a central premise in many museums today. The ensuing institutional responsibilities entail a moral obligation to share resources openly and generously and let the public become involved in the creation of knowledge, to be inclusive of everyone and reach beyond the existing audience, and to be of true service to the community. The operationalisation of this imperative is negotiated both in academic and practice-based museum discourses – including seminars such as

Sharing is Caring – and in the offerings and mission statements of individual institutions, often referencing digital initiatives as key to this process (Rudloff, 2013; cf. Kyed et al., 2006).

It is hard to argue with the ideal of Edson's proposition above. However, when speaking of "the knowledge, beauty, and secrets that **we know** are there, locked within **our organizations**" and of "**our collective duty**" (Edson, 2012, my emphasis), he reveals an implied institutional democracy that understands a division between us (the keepers of culture) and them (the as yet undereducated public) and, thus, relies on a centre/periphery model of outreach in which the museum reinforces its position of authority by deciding to share it (Lynch, 2010; Ekström et al., 2011). I shall return to this discussion of power relations between the museum and the public.

The movement, then, is from the institution, the centre, outwards – it is not the public that is pounding on the doors, demanding to be included, but rather the museums that are taking measures to be inclusive as a particular and essential quality of modern public institutions, needing the participation of the public to succeed. The notion of civic engagement as civil uprising is, thereby, turned on its head. However, responding to political rather than public pressures, the result is an often doomed attempt at top-down facilitation of would-be bottom-up engagement. But the political demands are real, as is the need to secure funding; and opting out of democratic responsibilities is not an option. The search for suitable tools that will spark the interest of the public and allow and inspire them to join the conversation, therefore, continues. To this end, social media are regarded as prospective gamechangers – not only due to the technical communicative qualities of social media platforms but also to the surrounding perceptions of a certain democratising potential of the social web.

Confluences of new media and new museology

As our daily lives and social interactions become increasingly permeated by our use of social and mobile media, so are our cultural institutions steadily transformed by the parallel processes (albeit, on different levels) of digitisation and mediatisation (Rudloff, 2013). Both as cultural media in themselves and as users of a variety of communication media, museum institutions are increasingly relying on digital technologies for the dissemination of cultural knowledge. The influence of (new) media on the development of museums is, thus, undeniable or, as bluntly put by museologist Pam Meecham, "even if the future of the museum's democratic purpose is now foregrounded in museum debates, it is firmly placed in the lap of online activity with its promise of digital democracy" (2013, p. 37).

However, this movement towards a democratisation of museums goes back further than the rise of the social web. It is rooted in a museological shift, which can be summed up in the title of Weil's article "From being about something to being for somebody" (2012 [1999]). This new-museological paradigm is reacting against the traditional authoritarian museum and replaces a practice and collection-oriented museology with a constructiv-

ist cultural theoretic discourse, as well as a strong focus on the visitor experience and the role of museums in society (Vergo, 1989; Teather, 1998; Mason, 2006). No longer content with being keepers of collections, the modern-day take on the role of the curator is to mobilise cultural heritage to make it relevant in a current context, to be a creator rather than a custodian of culture (Troelsen, 2005; Gurian, 2010). Similarly, recognising that knowledge is constructed, museums no longer purport to represent incontrovertible truths but, rather, to present a discourse in which the visitor is invited to find her own meaning (Bal, 2005[1996]; Anderson, 1997). Increasingly, the audience is also invited to share content, insights and opinions, contributing to the building of institutional knowledge as citizens critically engage in the understanding of our shared heritage.

In this way, modern-day museum ideologies still resonate with the *Bildung* ideals of the museums of the Enlightenment (Kahr-Højland & Quistgaard, 2009). By asking the public to participate, museums are still taking an educational role, still trying to build a certain kind of citizen even if, nowadays, we are asking citizens to engage with cultural conundrums and express their own individual minds. Similarly, technological or pedagogical means have changed over time, and new media are held up as the new key tools for the desired democratic dialogue. In a Danish context, Rudloff (2013) shows how the policies and documents supporting the realisation of the Danish Museum Act build on a belief in digitisation as a catalyst for changing and strengthening the relationship between museums and the public. This thinking mirrors international museum literature that suggests that digital media hold a certain potential for inclusion and dialogue (cf. Witcomb, 2003; Meecham, 2013; Giaccardi, 2012). The widespread understanding that young people today are defined by their use of media has further led museums to put faith in digital media as essential tools for attracting and engaging this key audience. Consequently, designs to enable young people to learn with digital tools often spearhead museum experiments in innovative mediation.

A substantial part of the funding granted from the Danish Agency of Culture is, accordingly, earmarked for projects in digitisation, digital communication and digitally-enhanced experiences as well as outreach and user studies.[1] A similar focus is found in the majority of museum research projects currently undertaken in a national context (Villadsen & Drotner, 2012). There is, thus, a strong drive towards exploring and harnessing the potential of new media for engaging the public with museums.

Despite these efforts, however, the latest report on the Danes' cultural habits shows that, while 41 pct. have visited a museum in the past year, only 6 pct. of the population have engaged with cultural heritage online (Bak et al., 2012). Similarly, research into and successive international surveys on the use of mobile media in museums show poor uptake by the public to be among the greatest challenges (Katz et al., 2011; Tallon, 2013, 2012 & 2011). It would seem, then, that, while interest in engaging with cultural heritage in the physical museum is steadily rising, the audience is not as keen on digital experiences of culture as the institutions are on developing them. And, yet, museums continue to build up their digital offerings and strategies – driven, in part, perhaps, by the political impetus and financial

incentives for doing so but also by museological objectives and idealistic beliefs in the social power of museums.

A central tenet in this process is the transformation of 'audiences' and 'visitors' into 'users' and 'publics', active agents leaving behind measurable traces of their activities and understood to be more critically engaged than their passive counterparts (Ekström et al., 2011). The discourse around this transformation not only reports a societal development but also reveals a bias in which activity is valued more highly than passivity, contribution more highly than reception and social involvement more highly than an individual experience. The traditional museum visitor, receptive to impressions rather than looking for outlets for expression, is thereby deemed inactive and uninvolved even if his experience might have been deeply engaging and notwithstanding the fact that hushed spectatorship is a learned behaviour that museums have hitherto demanded visitors to adapt.

A similar bias is found online, where the majority of lurkers on social network sites (Nielsen, 2006) are not as highly regarded as the minority of users who contribute content or even just mark an interest with the click of a mouse. Along with a count of visitor numbers onsite and unique visits to institutional websites, museums are now counting friends, likes and shares on social media platforms as measures of communicative success (Drotner & Schrøder, 2013) although the qualitative impact of these interactions is hard to assess.[2] This tendency is accentuated by the commercial and technical underpinnings of social media platforms, which favour an interest in figures over content. Institutional evaluation reports may, thus, cite a museum's online reach, as gauged by Google Analytics or other media meters, as a marker for general societal clout and relevance.

Mythologies of the social web

The interactive affordances of digital media are often understood not only to make contributions and co-creation technically possible but also to have the capacity to inspire higher levels of cognitive engagement. As argued by Axelsson, "[t]he concepts of participation and interactivity are often intertwined in highly normative and persuasive discourses according to which the technological solutions for interactivity will translate into more active forms of participation, even in the field of traditional governmental politics" (2011, p. 163). Indeed, such 'persuasive discourses' seem to inspire the harnessing of social media for museum purposes on more levels than this.

In *The Internet Imaginaire* (2007), sociologist Patrice Flichy demonstrates how the technological development of the Internet – and, one would add, the World Wide Web – was shaped by the concurrent formation of a collective vision or *imaginaire*. From an analysis of academic and journalistic writings, Flichy argues that the founding myths of the Internet established by authors such as Howard Rheingold turned into self-fulfilling prophesies, thanks to the widespread impact of *Wired* magazine and like-minded media. The communal consensus about the nature of the collaborative web, thus, derived from personal

accounts, such as Rheingold's experiences as a newsgroup user in "The Well"[3] (Rheingold, 1993) from which he painted a picture of the Internet as representing a new dawn for democratic culture (Flichy, 2007, p. 90).

Rooted in an academic culture, the code of conduct governing interaction in these online forums – in order to downplay tensions and dissonances (Axelsson, 2011) – also propagated academic virtues favouring open knowledge-sharing through a temperate and educated debate. Nevertheless, according to Flichy, the presenters of the Internet maintained that this particular mode of sociability could be transposed to the world at large:

> They believed that the principles of egalitarian interaction and free circulation of information in the framework of a cooperative network managed by its users – who constituted the heart of the academic Internet sociotechnical frame – would spread with the new technology. In their opinion, there was a kind of Internet nature, and they saw no reason for that to change in different social spheres of use. [...] By becoming an Internaut, one did not simply become a user of networked computing, communication tools, or data searches; one also penetrated another social world in which relations between individuals were based on equality and cooperation, and information was free (2007, p. 98).

The technological properties of the Internet, which allow for two-way or many-to-many conversations, co-authorship, and data-sharing across the globe, have been conflated from the outset with a utopian rhetoric around the World Wide Web as a common of ideas and democratic ideals. This potential for egalitarian discourse has been rendered as an inherent moral quality, which could not help but influence the participants and affect societal change.

Today, Twitter serves as a modern day parallel to "The Well" for a vibrant community of museum professionals. While the debate is open to all who care to follow, e.g., #mtogo, #musetech, #museweb or #musesocial, it appears that the frequent interaction between a relatively small group of actors has become a hub for a digital museum debate with a somewhat Anglo-American bent. Casual observations over an extended period indicate a core consisting of museum technologists,[4] i.e., professionals with a vested interest in the continuous appropriation of new media in museums. Notably, however, otherwise prominent voices of practitioners, whose enthusiasm for museum technology is more measured,[5] rarely join this particular chorus. Nor is a first-hand user perspective represented in the ongoing debate.

As these visionary technologists represent some of the leading international museums, their consensual understandings of where the digital development in museums is headed has a substantial impact on the initiatives taken both in their home institutions and, subsequently, in the museums around the globe that take their clue from these front-runners. Although Twitter can obviously serve as an invaluable tool for sharing ideas and nurturing connections across borders and institutions, there could be a risk of developing a monoculture of museum ideals if an open forum turns into an echo chamber for the like-minded.

However, trusting these professionals to keep an open outlook, a more imminent danger, perhaps, is the unconscious assumption that our own experiences and media use patterns might be indicative of a more general trend, as was the case in Rheingold's descriptions of the original virtual community (1993). Thanks to the power and communal acceptance of the Internet *imaginaire*, the World Wide Web evolved to realise this vision. However, as the social museum *imaginaire* does not pack the same punch in the collective consciousness, museums could wind up building participatory projects for a public that never comes while remaining blind to all the other interactions taking place around cultural interests on social media platforms today.

Cultivating participation

The rise of the social web has been surrounded by hype and abused by spin, implying that the addition of the magical 2.0 suffix to communication strategies would turn any institution or company into a contemporary democratic organisation. Simultaneously, as increasing numbers have adopted social media for private communication purposes, expectations are that they will accept nothing short of accessibility and equality when communicating with public institutions, too. Accordingly, almost any museum can now be found on Facebook, and many institutions are branching out to include Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube and Pinterest in their communication programmes to supplement institutional websites and blogs.

These social media platforms could potentially represent a rich source of knowledge since the public chronicles everyday life and cultural experiences as well as views and ideas. By tapping into existing social media platforms, such as special interest blogs, Flickr pools, Instagram tags and Facebook groups, rather than insisting on inviting the audience to join institutional projects, museums could gain a deeper understanding of the context and significance of their subject fields. However, museums somehow seem to shy away from exploring this option since the integration of social media, which is steadily becoming the norm in the communicative practice, has yet to seep into the curatorial praxis. Another possible approach, then, is the one tested by Stuedahl and Lowe (2013) in which Oslo museums would push archival images into the Instagram stream around the hashtag #akerselva, i.e., participating at the user level rather than instigating a museum-centric interaction. Experiences from this study, however, also point to the difficulties of becoming part of the ongoing exchange. Similarly, user tests of the mobile museum platform HintMe,[6] a mediation tool developed in a collaboration between nine Danish museums building on the Twitter API, showed that users, although positive about the concept, were not necessarily interested in participating themselves, nor were they interested in comments provided by other users.[7] Whether setting the parameters for or joining the conversation, museums are reluctantly having to realize that, despite their inventiveness and good intentions, it is hard to engage the public in dialogue.

In addition to using existing channels, a wide variety of museum projects have tried to mimic social media formats and digital culture in novel ways in order to engage the public. One of the pioneering, and still most radical examples to date, is Brooklyn Museum's 2008 *Click! – A Crowd Curated Exhibition*.[8] The project explored whether the alleged wisdom of the crowd, as proposed by Surowiecki (2005), could be applied to the curatorial process by asking online users to rank images submitted through an open call to local photographers. Subsequent commentators suggested that the resulting onsite exhibition had been crowd-juried rather than crowd-curated (Stayton, 2008, 23 July), arguing that the real curatorial exercise lay in the design of the the experimental concept and of the online interface which had been developed more or less solo by in-house technologist Shelley Bernstein. While this somewhat weakens the test of Surowiecki's proposition in an artistic domain, the exhibition was successful in terms of online engagement. The deliberate constraints in the interface design, thus, meant that participants contemplated each image for a substantially longer time compared to evaluations from onsite user studies (Bernstein, 2008, 27 May).

Tapping into the wisdom of the crowd has also inspired events such as Europeana Awareness' successive fashion edit-a-thons,[9] which – perhaps, as much as adding to the communal body of knowledge on fashion in Wikipedia – serve to build and nourish a community of participants. Likewise, the tangible outputs of national hackathons, such as Hack4NO[10] and Hack4DK,[11] may be limited, but the effort to engage web developers, software programmers and digital designers with cultural heritage data and GLAM institutions still creates value for the participants in terms of networking, knowledge-sharing and mutual inspiration. In addition, at this level, as pertaining to other types of museum experiences, multiple concepts of engagement may be said to be in operation, and the social experience may be as important as the direct learning outcome or production results.

The most far-reaching example of museums modelling themselves on social media must be the widespread impact of Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* (2010), a manifesto and manual for participatory museum projects. As an exhibition developer and museum debater on her blog "Museum 2.0",[12] Simon builds on digital culture concepts, while favouring hands-on approaches and person-to-person onsite events, arguing that the physical museum should become more like the Web (Simon 2009). Despite having little research-based evidence of the effects of participatory efforts, Simon's writings and many presentations to the museum community have inspired a wealth of projects.

The notion of participatory culture, introduced in a white paper by Jenkins et al. (2006), was originally used to describe learning in particular online environments in order to suggest strategies for digital literacy education. Since then, through discussions and promotions of new media culture by academics and technologists, it has been adopted into the common language along with concepts such as collective intelligence and crowdsourcing. Participatory culture is now often understood as a movement running through society at large, a groundswell of (young) people dedicated to remixing, co-creation and sharing, but

impeded by outdated property rights. However, the description by Jenkins et al. implies a more close-knit community:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (2006, p. xi).

To emulate such a participatory community, Simon (2010) advocates a scaffolding of museum activities to ensure ease of entry and to make sure that contributions have genuine relevance for the institution, which in turn should give participants the feeling that their efforts matter. In terms of providing enjoyable social and aesthetic experiences, and for institutions to avoid having to deal with masses of solicited but worthless material (Rudloff 2013), this is sound advice and delightfully operational.

However, as argued by Lynch, setting up 'collaborations' with inbuilt institutional targets robs the participants of active agency. Furthermore, as harmony and adherence to (n)etiquette become guidelines for interaction, radical disconsent cannot be tolerated. The value of these interactions in terms of democratisation is, therefore, questionable, writes Lynch, since "[t]he utopian rhetoric of mutuality and shared authority, in reality, places the community member in the role of 'supplicant' or 'beneficiary'." (2010, p. 65). This critique echoes Cameron's warning that

> bringing the forum – the place for confrontation and experimentation – inside the temple is to inhibit and in effect castrate the performance in the forum. Admission to the museum [...] is acceptance by the Establishment. So often the introduction of controversial, experimental or radical activities into the museum is little more than paternalism (1972 [1971], p. 198).

Rather than truly sharing authority, then, the museum legitimises its authority by the act of reaching out and inviting participation (Ekström et al., 2011).

The examples above illustrate how museums have been influenced by and have tried to adapt cultural values, technologies and interactive formats from social media to institutional projects and communication practices. Still, as pointed out by Drotner and Schrøder (2013, p. 4): "Centrally, social media serve to advance museum presence where and when actual and potential visitors and their communicative networks are already active ('find us on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook')". However, this communication across a multitude of platforms is rarely leveraged to establish what Proctor refers to as the 'Museum as Distributed Network' in which "every platform is a community, not just a point for content publication and distribution." (2011, p. 54). Instead, the main effect of these activities is museum marketing, making it visible in the public eye as well as signalling openness and contemporary currency.

Conclusion

If communication and initiatives for cultural engagement via social media are more about a show of good will than about truly opening negotiations for cultural matters of concern to the public (unless, of course, one counts likes, shares and casual comments as being crucial cues and valuable inputs into the contemporary cultural debate, which could, indeed, be argued), why are they still perceived as central instruments for the democratisation of museums? As argued in this article, the reason may be a convergence of political and museological objectives with perceived social media affordances.

In order to secure the financial future of institutions, museums must not only adhere to state regulations and political dictates but also make their efforts visible and understandable to the powers that be and the public at large. Back in 1971, responding to a situation in which the public had in very real terms been pounding on the museum doors, demanding representation and revolting against colonial 'truths' and general authoritarianism, Cameron concluded that "[s]ociety will no longer tolerate institutions that either in fact or in appearance serve a minority audience of the élite." (1972[1971], p. 201). This still holds true today. By political and popular demand, museums must perpetually demonstrate their relevance in society or risk losing their funding and support.

Although museums may, in reality, be speaking to the same audience online that visits them on-site, the strong association of communality with social media means that we understand institutional communication via social media channels as a gesture of outreach. Entering – in principle at least – the same communicative space (Witcomb, 2003; cf. McLuhan 2003 [1962]) as the non-visitors, museums appear to be speaking to this wider audience even if, in fact, they may not be heard by anyone other than their loyal followers. Likewise, potential voices of disconsent or discussions taking place outside of the realm of the museum are drowned out by the excitement about growing numbers of friends and likes, which satisfy the demands set by political decrees and institutional communication strategies. Social media, thus, serve museum objectives well by creating the appearance of engaging the public with culture and the institution in the public discourse.

However, the question of whether this communication also serves public interest in fact in terms of spurring on the democratisation of the museum institution is more uncertain. In fact, the feigned transition to a forum and coaxed inclusion of the *vox populi* may turn out to undermine genuine civic engagement and democratic exchange with the public. Far from advocating that museums refrain from using new media channels in any way, this article has pointed out the dangers of a prevalent rhetoric and blind communal consensus around the democratic impact of social media in museum communication. Unquestioned evangelism, hype and unreflected inclusion of social media could end up having the reverse effect, simply paying lip service to the social obligations of the museum.

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Notes

1   http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk/kulturarv-import/import2/museer/museumsdrift/oekonomi/puljer/.

2   Case Study: Europeana & Partners on Tumblr: http://pro.europeana.eu/documents/900548/56e68335-4e83-4d91-b3b8-01f5fcedafdc.

3   An online bulletin board becoming one of the world's first virtual communities – a term coined in fact by Rheingold to describe life in "The Well".

4   Including Edson (@mpedson) and Proctor(@NancyProctor), quoted above but also counting Seb Chan (@sebchan, director of digital and emerging media at Cooper Hewitt museum). Ed Rodley (@erodley, media director at Peabody Essex museum), Lynda Kelly (@lyndakelly61, online manager and audience researcher at the Australian Museum), Koven Smith (@5easypieces, former technology director at the Denver Art Museum, now freelance) as well as PhD museologists Mia Ridge and Suse Cairns (@mia_out; @shineslike).

5   For example., Nina Simon (@ninaksimon), author of *The Participatory Museum* or Brooklyn Museum's Shelley Bernstein (@shell7).

6   http://hintme.dk.

7   These conclusions stem, in part, from my own participation in two of the user tests. They, therefore, partially reflect my personal experience of the concept but are also substantiated as a general outcome in subsequent presentations of the platform by project manager Merete Sanderhof, e.g., in the presentation video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sle3uQEdeNA.

8   http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/.

9   http://www.europeanafashion.eu/2013/04/04/europeana-fashion-edit-a-thon-nordiska-museet-sweden-wikimedia-wikipedia/.

10 http://kulturognaturreise.wordpress.com.

11 http://hack4dk.tumblr.com.

12 http://museumtwo.blogspot.dk.

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