**[Digital participation, engagement and crowdsourcing in museums](http://www.londonmuseumsgroup.org/2013/08/15/digital-participation-engagement-and-crowdsourcing-in-museums/" \o "Permalink to Digital participation, engagement and crowdsourcing in museums)**

Posted by [**Julie Reynolds**](http://www.londonmuseumsgroup.org/author/julie-reynolds/) × 15 August 2013 at 11:03am

**Summary**

**Tips for digital participation, engagement and crowdsourcing in museums | by Mia Ridge Introduction Digital technologies have created exciting new possibilities for museum audiences to engage more widely and more deeply with cultural heritage content and collections. (But I should point out that while I’m a technologist, the Chair of the Museums Computer Group and researching**

**Tips for digital participation, engagement and crowdsourcing in museums | by Mia Ridge**

**[](http://www.londonmuseumsgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Flickr-Image-for-Mias-blog.jpg)**

**Introduction**

Digital technologies have created exciting new possibilities for museum audiences to engage more widely and more deeply with cultural heritage content and collections. (But I should point out that while I’m a technologist, the Chair of the [**Museums Computer Group**](http://museumscomputergroup.org.uk/) and researching crowdsourcing for my PhD, I don’t believe technology is always the right solution.)  Digital strategies should be embedded within a wider public engagement strategy, and decisions about audiences and goals should always come before decisions about technology.

**The advantages of digital engagement**

Traditional physical museum programmes are limited in their ability to reach audiences outside their region, opening hours or venue capacity. Digital public engagement projects allow bigger museums to scale up participation, or to tailor experiences for the specific intersection between their unique collections, mission and audiences to complement their ‘suitable for all audiences’ mass experiences of in-gallery exhibitions. Engaging with museum audiences online isn’t just for the big museums with dedicated online content and tech teams – digital platforms can allow smaller museums to appear as huge museums online.

Engagement is one of those terms that museum people use a lot, but it’s worth stopping to think about what it really means. Stephen Bitgood (2010) defines engagement as ‘deep sensory-perceptual, mental and/or affective involvement’ that ‘requires some type of exertion or concentration as well as a sufficient amount of time to engage (more than a few seconds)’. Engagement that requires a bit of work has more impact than a quick ‘like’ on Facebook or a retweet on Twitter.

Digital engagement often takes place on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, etc, or on specially built websites, but audience participation projects might work equally well in your galleries, over email or on forums.

**Challenges for museums | new relationships, new authorities, dissolving boundaries**

Any project that asks museum audiences to create content (whether comments, votes, tags, images or more creative responses) raises issues about authority, trust, expertise and the changing relationship between cultural and humanities organisations and their audiences. But is asking people to comment on a photo or exhibit without really caring about their response truly ‘engagement’, or just a cheap exercise in adding ‘interactivity’? Another way of looking at it is to ask ‘can a comment from a member of the public change anything in the organisation?’ Dan Spock (2009) thinks ‘If you invite people to really participate in the making of a museum, the process must change the museum’ – you might not go that far, but it’s worth asking how far your museum is willing to be pushed before you start a project.

‘User-generated content’ and ‘crowdsourcing’ projects are also dissolving the boundaries between contributors and experts inside the museum and outside it. Crowdsourcing is a specific form of audience participation that contributes towards a shared, significant goal or research question by asking the public to undertake tasks like tagging, transcribing, researching or describing museum collections. Some museum crowdsourcing projects help participants develop new skills: whether giving text transcribers new responsibilities for checking other people’s transcriptions, or providing participants with a forum where they can discuss the historical or scientific questions that arose from their tasks.

Creating crowdsourcing projects might mean collaborating with other organisations that hold relevant content or knowledge, whether it’s teaming up with climate scientists for [**Old Weather**](http://oldweather.org/), partnering with [**HistoryPin**](http://www.historypin.com/) to reach wider audiences or finding ways to use local records from[**CultureGrid**](http://www.culturegrid.org.uk/).

If you’re interested in specific examples of digital audience engagement and crowdsourcing, you can find out more on my blog, Open Objects (http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk), including posts on [**‘Open for engagement: GLAM audiences and digital participation’**](http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/my-europeana-tech-keynote-open-for.html), [**‘Designing for Participatory Projects: Emergent Best Practice, Getting Discussion Started’**](http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/designing-for-participatory-projects.html), [**‘Notes from ‘Crowdsourcing in the Arts and Humanities’**](http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/crowdsourcing-in-arts-and-humanities.html) and [**‘Frequently Asked Questions About Crowdsourcing in Cultural Heritage’**](http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/frequently-asked-questions-about.html).

**6 tips for designing digital participation experiences in museums**

* Start with what you know about your audiences, collections and context. Audit existing activity around your museum – there may be grassroots or museum-initiated projects going on already, or discussions with existing communities that could have a digital component. Find people who want to work with you or who are dying to get their hands on your content/collections, and work out what interests and motivates them. What do people already love about you?  What’s special and/or unique about your collection, location, staff, or community?
* Start talking to your target audiences early. Look for any existing conversations about your collections online (perhaps with twitter hashtags, online forums or Facebook, mailing lists) to find potential collaborators.  How will you let people know about your project? Think about whom your chosen methods might exclude: you can’t serve every audience with every project, but make conscious decisions about inclusion and diversity.
* Plan for evaluation, and ideally include some user testing during the project, not just at the end when it’s too late to put what you’ve learnt into action. The quality of the user experience can make the difference between success and failure, so test with audiences any way you can. Which existing platforms can you use to test out your idea – you might not even need bespoke software.
* Community management takes time: audience outreach and marketing, moderation, evaluation, providing progress reports for your organisation and audiences all adds up.
* People who bother to comment on your project, whether positive or negative, do so because they care. Assume any criticism comes from the heart and use it as an opportunity to improve your project and maybe meet a future collaborator.
* It can take time for a project to find an audience. This time lag can make it difficult to pilot and evaluate projects quickly, so think carefully about how you’ll measure success over the short and long term.

**2 bonus tips for designing crowdsourcing projects in museums**

* Show the value of the participants’ action by (ideally) making their contribution immediately available on your site. If you’re worried about the staff overhead of moderating content, ask the community to help.
* Try to design small, inherently satisfying ‘microtasks’.  You’ll know you’ve got it right when it feels like eating a Pringle – once you pop, you can’t stop!

Finally, whatever your project, before you invest any resources, ask yourself: why do you really want to do this project? (Tip: ‘because it’s a brilliant fit for our audience engagement plans’ is great; ‘to learn’ is fine; ‘because it’s trendy’ is not.)

I hope this has given you a glimpse of the potential of creating digital opportunities for audiences to engage with museums – if you want to find out more, I’ve listed some further reading and references below. Perhaps you’ve even started thinking about how you could invite audiences to help your museum with real heritage, science and humanities work by designing participatory experiences around meaningful goals.  *I’d love to know what you think: say hello on twitter (I’m @mia\_out) or leave a comment or question on http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk. Together, we can create something bigger than anything any of us could achieve on our own.*

**Author |** Mia Ridge, Chair, Museums Computer Group, PhD Researcher, Open University.

**Image  |** *Group of men and women photographed with their cameras, possibly in the Redcliff area, 1910-20”*

*Image credit: State Library of Queensland) https://www.flickr.com/photos/statelibraryqueensland/8725096366/#*

**Further reading and references**

Museums and the Web past papers http://museumsandtheweb.com/;

Museums Computer Group: connecting, supporting, inspiring museum technology professionals http://museumscomputergroup.org.uk/

Murphy, Oonagh. *Museums and Digital Engagement: A New York Perspective*. Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2012. http://www.wcmt.org.uk/reports/1065\_1.pdf.

Ridge, Mia. 2011. “My Europeana Tech Keynote: Open for Engagement: GLAM Audiences and Digital Participation.” *Open Objects*. http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/my-europeana-tech-keynote-open-for.html.

Ridge, Mia. 2012a. “Designing for Participatory Projects: Emergent Best Practice, Getting Discussion Started.” *Open Objects*. http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/designing-for-participatory-projects.html.

———. 2012b. “Frequently Asked Questions About Crowdsourcing in Cultural Heritage.” *Open Objects*. http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/frequently-asked-questions-about.html.

Ridge, Mia. 2013. “Notes from ‘Crowdsourcing in the Arts and Humanities’.” *Open Objects*. http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/crowdsourcing-in-arts-and-humanities.html.

Simon, Nina. 2010. *The Participatory Museum*. http://www.participatorymuseum.org/

Lynch, Bernadette. 2011. “Whose Cake Is It Anyway? A Collaborative Investigation into Engagement and Participation in 12 Museums and Galleries in the UK”. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. http://www.phf.org.uk/page.asp?id=1417.

Bitgood, Stephen. 2010. *An Attention-value Model of Museum Visitors*.

Spock, Daniel. 2009. “Museum Authority up for Grabs: The Latest Thing, or Following a Long Trend Line?” *Exhibitionist* (Fall): 6–10.