Chapter 1

Museums and Web 2.0:
Some Thoughts about Authority, Communication, Participation and Trust

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ABSTRACT

Many museums want to use Web 2.0 applications or feel the pressure to do so. In doing so, they might encounter a significant problem as Web 2.0 is based on the notion of radical trust and unrestricted, equal participation, two concepts that are contrary to the museum's traditional concepts of authority, communication and participation. Until recently, museums presumed control of their content. The crucial question is how much control of its content the museum can afford to lose, since they depend on their reputation for expertise and trustworthiness. The paper analyses the role of authority, its influence on traditional and future museum communication and its effects on participation and trust. The challenge for museums is to find a way to cede authority and control over content without losing status as trustworthy institutions and to open up for social media and user participation in order to attract new audiences and maintain existing ones.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, Web 2.0 is the bandwagon everybody has to jump on. In the museum field, many institutions feel the pressure to join this trend but at the same time they are reluctant to do so because there is still a considerable lack of research about the acceptance of this new phenomenon both inside and outside the museum. Nevertheless, cross institutional projects such as the European Digital Library *Europeana* try out new modes of involving users, for example by providing a community sections for exchange between users and links to Facebook and Twitter.

Outside the museum, the audience is expected to wait for Web 2.0 features to be offered by each and every Web site. According to Web 2.0 enthu-

siasts, the new generation of the Web is supposed to be the medium in which anybody is zealous to participate and to contribute. This might be true for the digital natives among the users – i.e. the generation that grew up in the digital world (cf. Prensky, 2001) – but does this also hold true for the so called digital immigrants – i.e. the generations that adopted information technology later in life – who make up the larger part of the population in many European countries? Is the willingness to participate the same in all strata of society in one country and in all the different cultures all over Europe or even the world? At the moment, there exists little museological research concerning the crucial question of the readiness for participation on the side of virtual visitors from which one could draw substantial conclusions.

Inside the museum, there seems to be a considerable lack of enthusiasm on the side of the curators to accept user contributions (Cooper, 2006; Varbanova, 2008, pp. 171-172). Therefore, irrespective of the widespread enthusiasm about Web 2.0, it is important to find out if curators are really willing to accept user contributions to the online information and online exhibitions they create as this may influence their authority as experts. For the institution, this is an issue of major importance as "[m]useums are one of a handful of institutions in our society that hold authority in matters of knowledge" (Roberts, 1993, p. 98); and authority is closely related to trust. According to a 2001 survey of the *American Association of Museums* on public trust in various sources of information, museums are the most trusted ones, ahead of books and television news (MacArthur, 2007, p. 59). Therefore it is essential for museums to guarantee a high level of online information quality which might be threatened by user generated content of low quality, so called loser generated content.

At the same time, the notion of trust is one of the core issues of any Web 2.0 venture. User participation can prosper only in a climate of radical trust (Fichter, 2006; 2007; Chan, Kelly, Russo

& Watkins, 2008, p. 25). At the same time, the principle of radical trust collides with the legal responsibility of museums for the user generated content displayed on their websites and the fear that digital vandalism and loser generated content on the institutional website might negatively affect the trustworthiness of the whole institution. Considering these issues, it becomes obvious that Web 2.0 poses both interesting and serious questions for the institution museum. Authority and participation are two focus points that reveal the tension museums currently face both in the real and in the digital world. Before looking closer at this issue, it is necessary to take a museological perspective on Web 2.0.

WEB 2.0: A MUSEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term Web 2.0 was made popular by media mogul Tim O'Reilly who identified a number of characteristics that describe how software producers – after the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001 – began to use new ways of collaboration on the Internet in order to produce software and rich user experiences. Although being the evangelist of the term, O'Reilly (2005) had to admit that "there's still a huge amount of disagreement about just what Web 2.0 means, with some people decrying it as a meaningless marketing buzzword, and others accepting it as the new conventional wisdom". Some critics (e.g. Alby, 2008; Kantel, 2009) claim that Web 2.0 is not a new version of the Web as the version number 2.0 may suggest but "a different way of using the Internet" (Yasko, 2007, p. 42). In addition, the criteria established by O'Reilly are meant for producers of software and therefore do not fit the needs of cultural institutions, especially not those of libraries, archives and museums that are traditionally brick-and-mortar institutions with an emphasis on physical objects and not born-digital objects such as software. Nevertheless, these traditional institutions have

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