

Museum 2.0

Nina Simon

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/>

Shelley Bernstein

[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/
community/blogosphere/
bloggers/author/bernsteins/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/author/bernsteins/)

in conversation with

Cathy Brickwood

Shelley Bernstein is Chief of Technology at the Brooklyn Museum. Since 1999 she has worked to further the Museum's community-oriented mission through projects including free public wireless access, podcast subscription feeds, cell phone tours and handheld PDAs. She is the initiator and current administrator of the Museum's web initiatives on MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter. In 2009, Shelley organized the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition, *Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition*. The Brooklyn Museum is widely regarded as being at the forefront of innovative use of social networking tools in the heritage sector.

Nina Simon writes the very popular Museum 2.0 blog as well as advising a variety of museums in the US and Europe how best to use new technologies. She has a background in museum exhibit design and has created interactive and participatory exhibitions at the International Spy Museum, the Tech Museum of Innovation, and others.

CATHY BRICKWOOD

How do you see the link between the online and physical experience of a museum?

NINA SIMON

Museums are progressing slowly: websites are still primarily used to plan the museum visit ('pre-visit'). However, increasingly museums plan the content part of the museum experience and follow it up online for a more in-depth level of information ('post-visit'). It's still too much using the online component as a wrapper for a one-visit experience and there needs to be a more pervasive relationship between onsite and online experience. There are a couple of ways of doing this. Instead of using your website as a single location you can embed your website in other locations on the web where people are having pervasive experiences – like social networks – or you can host more narrative experiences that connect people over time – like game or real time events that are continuing an experience. Some of these are in the museum and others are online.

One example of this happening outside the museum context is the extremely popular TV show *CSI New York*. The fans only have access to the TV show once a week. How can you let these people engage with the show more? In October 2007 there was a cliffhanger ending involving Second Life (you had to log in to track the murderer). I created a game that started where the show left off, allowing viewers to connect their once-a-week

TV experience with a more active, continual online experience. The game lasted for several months, during which players had to find things out and pass on clues, which were shown via Second Life and eventually resolved on TV.

Another area where this is increasingly used is in books. Using game cards and online communities has been proven a successful marketing and sales tool for children's book series. There are also examples of story books with embedded mysteries, that have spawned online communities of people trying to solve the puzzles. Some museums have done similar projects with a long tail of embedded narrative.

CB

Does this have an effect on visitor numbers to the museum itself, and on the frequency of visits?

NS

Absolutely. COSI's *Adventure!* exhibition is an experience that took ten hours to complete. It was wrapped around content that was very specific to that one experience. I have not seen many examples of this being done around a collection. Visitors to the Sony Wonderlab in Manhattan are given a ticket saying: these are exhibits you did see and these you didn't [<http://www.sonywonderlab.com>].

CB

Is there a difference between the different kind of museums and the way they embrace new technology? It is sometimes suggested that art museums are behind science and technology museums in this respect.

NS

Art museums are often less innovative than science museums. Science museums don't tend to start from the authority issue, they're more about education and visitor experience rather than curating and this makes it easier for staff to experiment with new forms of interpretation. On the other hand what science museums don't do well is raise debates on contentious issues because they focus primarily on children.

SHELLY BERNSTEIN

There is more of a history of interaction in science museums than in arts museums. Art museums like the Brooklyn Museum have obvious concerns: art doesn't represent itself

SB

very well on the web; paintings represent themselves better, with sculpture you can't tell the scale, photography is less problematic but the kind of print or reproduction can make all the difference in what you see and experience. For us there's only so far we want to go. Ideally we'd like to see people come in and experience the objects on site but there are people online who will never come in because they live too far away. As far as we're concerned they are just as important as the physical visitor.

Because we have a small staff one of the challenges is doing projects that will work for both kinds of visitors. A case in point is the 11 artists' videos we made at relatively low cost with flip video and presented on iPod Touches in the gallery and we also posted the same videos on YouTube. One of first comments we received was from someone in the UK who produced video who thought it was innovative that we used flip video, but questioned why we didn't show more of the artwork in the videos. Each video starts with a quick pan of the piece, followed by a 3-4 minute conversation with the artist.

In the gallery – which is where this is seen the most by far – we hope the visitor has a personal experience with the artist speaking, and then we hope they shift from looking at the screen to looking at the piece of art while they listen to the artist. On the web, the audience does not have the benefit of seeing the work in front of them. The project just started, so I'm not sure if we did well enough for both audiences, but it was a way we could do the project and try and serve both.

CB

Handheld devices are increasingly used in museums. How do you see their potential?

NS

There are good examples at the San Jose Museum of Art (www.sjmusart.org) and the Tate Gallery using iPods. There's still a lot of experimentation to be done to see what balance of on-demand interpretative content is useful to get on a device versus how much it interferes with the core social experience in the gallery.

There are budgetary concerns. I am also not a fan of multimedia tours that force me to look at the small screen rather than at the objects on display.

NS

A classic case is the Getty Museum in the US that ended up using large arrows on the screens of their PDA tour to encourage visitors to look up at the art work itself.

CB

Museums and other cultural institutions are increasingly focusing on educational programmes and on young audiences. How does this effect choices about new media applications? Should you develop different tools for different audiences?

SB

With most of the things I work on we do not assume that the audience is all young and using social media. It's important with web projects never to make these kind of assumptions. If you do projects geared for kids you're dealing with a specific age group. Very few of our projects have been like that. We don't make assumptions about our audience when they come in the door so why do so in the online context?

NS

Unlike Shelley I get called in by museums to come up with a solution to a specific task. Often the first project that is done is simple and quite experimental. On the first day I often say: let's go and talk to some visitors. If you say for example that you want visitors to be able to talk, what does that mean to you? I often do projects with museums that are about building capacity through trying experiments. It often starts with something that is very basic. Some institutions recognise their inability to take risks but they can say to me: we'll give you a small budget and you can start experimenting with this stuff.

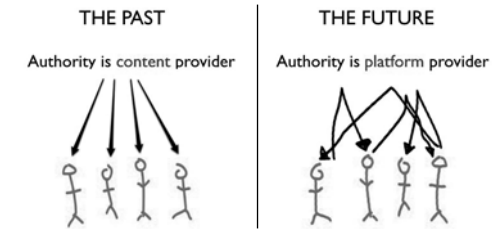
CB

How do you come up with new concepts?

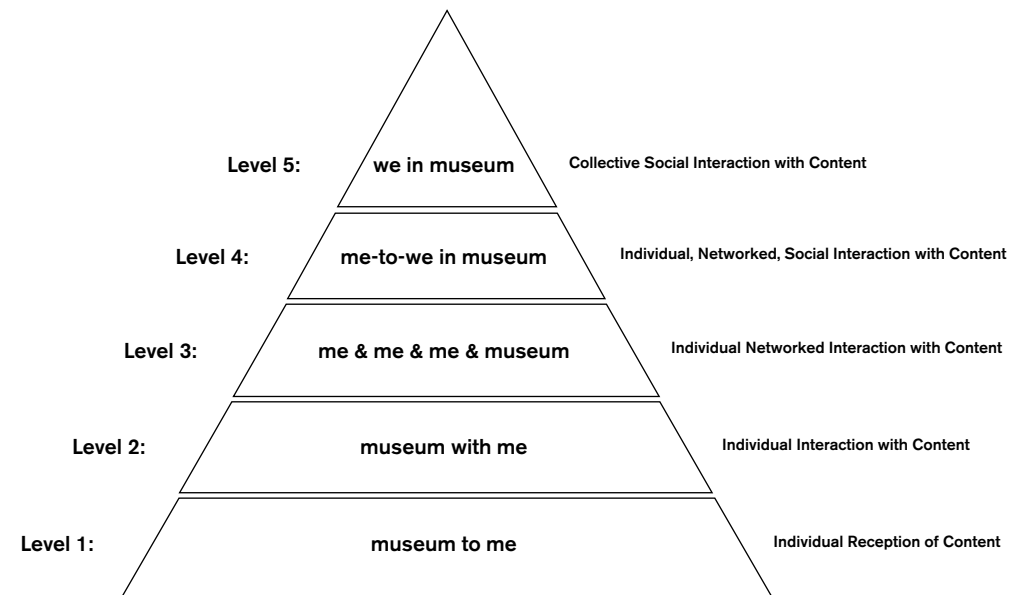
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It's a matter of keeping my ears open and filing stuff away and all of a sudden we're doing a show and I use one of those things I've filed away or sometimes a conversation with a colleague will just spark an idea. The other key requirement for us is that a project should

Illustration on Museum 2.0 blog



Hierarchy of social participation:



require a minimum of programming time. We tend to throw things out there and see how they work, then commit programming time if we see something is working. Also, I try never to predict where content is going to go because half the time I'll post something and I think it's boring, but all of a sudden we get 20 comments and people respond in ways I didn't expect. So, I guess a motto for us is 'just try it' and see what happens.

NS

I'm more systematic. I read blogs, tag interesting projects on del.icio.us, take notes. When I start working with a client I ask what kind of relationship do you want to have with your audience? What's in your comfort zone? If people are able to articulate what they want to achieve, stripped of any technology ideas then it becomes apparent what kind of tools become appropriate. The options are fairly limited. For example if you want to set up something where lots of people are adding things you need a wiki, whereas if you want to put out new content and have people comment on it you need a blog. When it comes to things that are more complex I have a strong vision of how you make these things happen physically in the museum with as little technology mediating as possible. I think that's mostly about being very clever and making creative connections based on what people are already doing in the museum.

CB

Are museums in the US learning from each other? How do they find good practice?

NS

There are 4000 people a week looking at my Museum 2.0 blog, but that's just one resource and the content is filtered through my judgement. I wish there were more people blogging actively about innovative museum practice. There is a small enough number of museums that a museum can find the shining stars pretty quickly. But a lot of museums go to web agencies that are not approaching the situation in the right way, not asking the right questions and the result is the museum often gets something very generic.

The American Association of Museums conference has a Media and Technology track

run by Nick Honeysett. The information is out there, but mainly features big institutions. Museums and the web focuses on technology and is mainly practitioners talking to each other and in that sense rather 'ghettoized'. As long as tech people 'keep to themselves', I don't believe they can do much to change the current state of museums. I'm more interested in changing the way museums relate to the public than what we can do on the web, so I prefer to attend events where you can speak to decision makers—the directors and the curators.

CB

Who reads your blog – the decision makers or the practitioners?

NS

It's a combination of people. The practitioners don't need to read my blog for the technical information, the technical level is very basic. Sometimes I get e-mail from someone very junior in a museum who is looking for help in changing things, and I also hear from the director of that same museum, but they don't know that the other is struggling with the same questions.

The US is seeing a growth of museum graduate programmes. While this is good for professionalisation it tends to promote a very specific way of doing things that is hindering creativity. When I started working in museums it was because all different kinds of people were working there. These days many junior people prefer not to take so many risks.

CB

What is your view on museums outsourcing Internet projects? At the Tate Handheld conference there were heated arguments between design companies and museum staff about the merits of outsourcing versus doing everything inhouse.

NS

Any project you're doing should come from the institutional mission and vision. Some firms can facilitate that. I often do one part of a project and leave a lot to the staff to carry on, checking that they go in the right direction.



Using the iPhone at an exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum

Recently the Netherlands saw the launch of the first Flickr the Commons website, from the National Archive and Spaarne Archive. What are your experiences with Flickr the Commons?

SB

There are a lot of issues. The Brooklyn Museum launched decently high resolution images in to the Commons. We believed that this was what Flickr was there for and this is what the Flickr community would have appreciated. On my blog I talked about the problems we had with our rights statement and the confusion it can cause. Ideally, there's a careful balance that comes into play—share as much as possible, but retain commercial rights which help fund the care and feeding of the collection. Most of these issues have been clarified, but it requires watching the landscape closely, adapting to the situation and being clear and transparent with the community as to what the give and take is. So, far that's working.

A key issue for us is the relationship you have to your community. The standard Flickr site worked well for us because it was very community based. We had between 1000 and 1500 people in that community and I knew all of them, knew roughly who they were, what they uploaded, etc. It was a very tight knit community. It was a community exchange. It was the best that you could want from a Web 2.0 site. What happens with the Commons was that there is a lot of traffic, it floods out everything else with so much chatter. We have trouble maintaining the account the way we used to.

NS

There's a difference between using Flickr in a community capacity and using it in a collection distribution capacity. The former requires very different levels of engagement. Small institutions like the New Mexico photography collection of John Collier Junior [<http://americanimage.unm.edu/>] were thrilled to get more views for their photographs through Flickr Commons. There are two different mentalities and both are ok.

SB

It was an easy discussion for us at the time of the launch because we thought the materials we had would be interesting for our current audience. I fought not to split the account



Brooklyn Museum Archives. Goodyear Archival Collection. Visual materials [6.1.016]: World's Columbian Exposition: Ferris Wheel, Chicago, United States, 1893. View of Ferris Wheel, [which dwarfs surrounding buildings,] Sept.; Starks W. Lewis, Amateur, Brooklyn, N.Y. Image 2194.



Brooklyn Museum Archives. Goodyear Archival Collection. Visual materials [6.1.016]: World's Columbian Exposition: Ferris Wheel, Chicago, United States, 1893. View of Ferris Wheel, [View through support wires from one gondola to gondolas opposite]. Sept.; Starks W. Lewis, Amateur, Brooklyn, N.Y. Image 2193.

because that would split the audience. But what we found when we put all the new material on the site was that the existing audience really had trouble relating to the Commons material and the people on the Commons – cared more about the materials and less about the community at the Brooklyn Museum – it was very disjointed. The example of the Powerhouse Museum in relation to community and Flickr Commons indicates that it may be the case that having a photo collection that is very linked to the locality changes that balance. They do locally focused uploads and this attracts a more local audience. Much of our issues around disconnectedness changed recently when two lovers of the Commons created a group on Flickr so that collection managers and community members could really start talking about the materials and the institutions behind them. That changed the balance dramatically in a good way. Now, we find, there's a better balance. The people who love the Commons material are getting to know the people who love the Brooklyn Museum and this community is starting to really gel in a way it had not before.

CB

What are your views on large companies like Flickr, Google or Amazon organising such public content?

NS

This is an important issue, and I've discussed it recently with a group of librarians. Someone raised the controversial question: Why don't we close down libraries and make Amazon accounts where people have better search options and can get any book? It's a problem that affects libraries more than other organisations because they deal with non-unique commodities.

Libraries have a more direct service role and have recently started services with, for example, instant messaging: You can text a librarian at any time for advice while in the library. Another issue is personalisation: in a library you're not expected to look at the whole collection, unlike in a museum. The library in Haarlem Oost designed by Jan Hanrath has done interesting things with tagging in a very innovative way. Seattle public library now

also has a live continuous feed of what is being checked out, which I find ironic because there is always a sense that what books people take out is a private issue. This is about openness but not individual information. Libraries have their own problems, but they are good models in some ways for the kinds of flexibility and personalisation that museums should consider.

Nina Simon and Shelley Bernstein were two of the keynote speakers at an event called *Kom je ook?* that took place in Amsterdam in November 2008 (<http://www.mediamatic.net/page/48433/en>).

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