

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MUSEUMS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE FOG OF COMMUNITY

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In the early twenty-first century, museums increasingly turn to “social media” to engage audiences and in these efforts they routinely imagine them as “communities.” This dissertation tends to the politics of that choice, which extends a long history of museums employing community as a strategy towards institutional reform. Museums invoke community in numerous ways but without typically articulating those meanings, even though they influence the implementation and evaluation of social media projects. I argue that this lack of articulation creates a “fog” over practices—an ambiguous and confusing context of work—in which community operates as a “self-evident good,” but serves traditional interests as much as transformative ones.

To expose the many ideas that lay within this fog, I examine how American museums invoked community throughout the last century, showing how they use it both to reinforce their power and alter relations with audiences. After exploring how community has been conceptualized through networked digital media and social

media—technologies and a culture that emphasize openness, communication, collaboration, and the materialization of digital bodies—I show how museums continue to use community in complex ways. As social media conflate community with communication—specifically “face-to-face,” or immediate, communication, I argue they influence museums to over-value visible acts of communication, which narrows their understanding of online visitor engagement and dilutes the potential of community to shape projects that more conscientiously serve audiences and institutional reform.

To illustrate the complexity of these ideas at work, I present three case studies of museums using social media to construct community: the Getty Center’s blog, *A Different Lens*; the Japanese American National Museum’s website, *Discover Nikkei*; and the website of the Science Museum of Minnesota’s *Science Buzz*. I expose the definitions of community at work in each, examine how they influence the use of social media, and work to limit and serve the project’s various democratizing goals. The conclusion offers a nascent problematique that suggests more critical approaches museums may take for invoking community and using social media towards democratizing aims.

MUSEUMS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE FOG OF COMMUNITY

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Introduction

Writing about public exhibitions of science and technology, anthropologist Sharon Macdonald notes that science centers in the late twentieth century were increasingly turning to “hands-on interactivity” to appeal to visitors:

This is sometimes embraced by those involved as a democratizing attempt to, as [Frank] Oppenheimer put it, ‘bridge the gap between the experts and the laymen’. Whether this is how the ‘hands-on’ experience is seen by visitors remains however, an under-researched question, though ... democratization is not necessarily an effect of such representations, and ... in analyzing interactive and electronic technologies of display, we need also to consider the politics of the way in which the visitor is imagined.<sup>1</sup>

Today it is possible to note a similar trend. Museums, across all types and sizes, use newer types of “interactive and electronic technologies of display”—currently referred to under the umbrella term, “social media”—to reach out to audiences. Institutions often embrace these technologies for their potentially democratizing effects, which can mean various things: increasing access—both in terms of appealing to more people and making resources more available; diversifying audiences and content; encouraging audience members to share their experiences and participate in dialogue; making museum practices and structure more transparent and responsive to

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Macdonald, “Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: An Introduction to the Politics of Display,” in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2007), 190; original emphasis. Includes quotation from Hilde Hein, *The Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 17.

external feedback; and shaping the formation of citizens.<sup>2</sup> Some also celebrate social media for how they can facilitate collaboration with audiences and foment new models of knowledge-building. Whatever goals they do intend, museums' uses of social media often "imagine" visitors in a particular way: as "community."

My point of departure for this dissertation is Macdonald's admonition that critiques of "interactive and electronic technologies of display" must consider "the politics"—the dynamics of power—of how museums imagine their audiences.<sup>3</sup> In the case at hand, this critical viewpoint is brought to bear on how and why museums are

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<sup>2</sup> This list expresses the variety of ways that museums regard "democracy" and the "democratization" of their work. Defined by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "democracy" may be broadly understood as "a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making." (Tom Christiano, "Democracy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/#DemDef>, accessed 19 April 2011). I use it here in a similarly broad sense to refer to the ways museums try to democratize their processes by recognizing the equality of people and thus their right to be represented in museums, which are spaces that shape cultural, social, and political narratives. The recognition of this equality influences museums to try to incorporate aspects of group decision-making or representation into their work, such as by bringing audience voices into gallery space or exhibit design. Further, as museums are institutions that, whether publicly or privately funded, play roles in civil societies that support various forms of democracy, I am also attentive to the ways that museums "democratize" by trying to shape citizens that act within democracies. The use of "citizen" and "citizenship" throughout this dissertation refer to acts of self-making that seek enfranchisement by states in terms of rights to act and be recognized in the realms of politics, the economy, and society. This definition of citizenship is influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, who understood the citizen-subject to be made in the process of negotiating structures of power, discipline, and control in a society. See, for instance, *Power. Volume 3 of Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Examples of how museums have historically shaped the formation of citizens may be found in Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> I am concerned here with power as it has been theorized primarily by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Antonio Gramsci. From Foucault's work I draw a sense of power as the means to establish and circulate what is knowledge and truth in a society. From Bourdieu's and Gramsci's writings I draw on ideas about power that focus on how institutions and people retain resources and status within a society. These viewpoints allow me to consider how museum practices can reinforce or subvert the power of elites and structures of oppression. On Foucault's work on power and knowledge, see *Power and The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994). An overview on Bourdieu's summation of different types of capital can be found in "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John R. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 241-258. Gramsci's seminal writings on power as hegemony are contained in "The Prison Notebooks," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/index.htm>.

imagining their audiences through social media as communities. My purpose is to discern the politics at play in this effort since democratization is not necessarily a straightforward effect of these technologies. Indeed, Michelle Henning has offered, “We could conclude that, far from democratizing, increasing access, and otherwise progressively changing the museum, new media is caught up in ‘power plays,’ furthering the museum’s role in the production of an acquiescent citizenry who are now positioned as consumers of the museum experience.”<sup>4</sup> By investigating how and why museums address their audiences through social media (a form of “new media”) as communities, I am attending to how that rhetoric ties these activities to a long history of museum reform, the object of which has been to democratize museums and the information and knowledge in which they traffic.

This intrigues me because referring to audiences as communities is a choice, and as a democratizing strategy is an odd one. These semantics are evidence of museums’ struggle to revise relations with audiences.<sup>5</sup> The use of community is a conscious one, purposefully chosen over words like “audience,” “public,” “visitors,” and “users,” which are equally abstract, but “colder” descriptors; sounding welcoming, quotidian, and humble, it counters the intimidating connotations of “museum” as both term and thing.<sup>6</sup> Yet, why use a concept that is so ambiguous and

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Henning, “New Media,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 315.

<sup>5</sup> See Zahava D. Doering, “Strangers, Guests, or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 42, no. 2 (April 1999): 74-87.

<sup>6</sup> Noting the positive connotations of “community,” Anthony Cohen remarks on the “capacity of language to express attitude as well as to denote object;” in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester: E. Horwood, 1985), 14. On negative impressions of museums, see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s *Museums and Their Visitors* (London: Routledge, 1994) and “Audiences - A Curatorial Dilemma,” in *Art in Museums*, ed. Susan Pearce (London: The Athlone Press, 1995), 143-163, as well as Nina Simon, “Is Museum a Four Letter Word?,” *Museum*, January/February 2008, <http://www.aamus.org/pubs/mn/fourletterword.cfm>.

unstable in meaning, as well as suggests commonality on one hand, and exclusion on the other, to address power relations with audiences and advance the democratic reform of museums? At a point in time when museums “are in a state of constant upheaval with respect to their use of information technologies and the development of their sociotechnical activities,” and while audiences face similar unrest as networked digital media alters social and cultural behaviors from news-gathering and mourning, to dating and museum-going,<sup>7</sup> I explore the politics of museums choosing to construct online audiences as communities through social media in the hope of making a formative contribution to their practice, and address museum practitioners who have some power to shape how their institutions approach and utilize social media, as well as how they conceptualize and serve audiences.

### *The Trouble with Community*

Community is a loaded term, all the more because of its rosy-tinged ambiguity. As observed by cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams, “unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.”<sup>8</sup> This alluring ambiguity has invited much attention from scholars, who spent the bulk of the last century trying to define community and to discern its characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Today, the concept is understood to be exceedingly complicated,

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Marty, “An Introduction to Museum Informatics,” in *Museum Informatics: People, Information, and Technology in Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7; Sylvia Engdahl, *Online Social Networking* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2007), 198.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Sociologist George A. Hillery Jr.’s 1955 article identified 94 definitions at play among his peers. George Hillery, “Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement,” *Rural Sociology* 20, no. 2 (1955): 111-123.

elusive, and not as rosy as it once seemed. Iris Marion Young critiqued community as a “normative model of ideal social organization” that glosses over difference and privileges face-to-face dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Cohen observed that evoking community is a defensive posture since it signifies the establishment of a boundary for inclusion and exclusion.<sup>11</sup> In her book *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph describes how the taken-for-granted goodness of community obscures understanding of effective collective action.<sup>12</sup> Scholars studying the conceptualizations of online community are similarly critical. For instance, Craig Calhoun observed that celebrations of “virtual community” for mobilizing political resistance overlook networked digital media’s ability to perhaps “foster ‘categorical identities’ [rather] than ... dense, multiplex, and systematic webs of relationships,” as well as ignore the everyday realities that motivate collective action.<sup>13</sup>

While critical considerations of community have penetrated museum scholarship and practice (a review of which follows later in this chapter), the concept still goes typically undefined and unexamined in the museum field. It is bandied about emptily in marketing language as often as it signifies genuine attempts to renegotiate power flows between institutions and individuals. It is tethered to face-to-face conversation, grass-roots activism, the collective good, and to non-professionalism, as well as used to refer to “the people” and as a euphemism for inner

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<sup>10</sup> Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” *Social Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 1-26.

<sup>11</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2001) and Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*.

<sup>12</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Community without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68, no. 3 (August 1998): 373-397.

cities, urban populations, and historically marginalized ethnic and racial groups. Its looseness allows museums to construct it as something they are “counter to” and “part of,” often at the same time. Meanwhile, community is a central feature of social media technologies and culture, where it similarly goes undefined and unexamined.

In both contexts of museums and social media, community is strongly attached—conflated, really—with democracy. As the aforementioned critiques of community imply, projects that use the concept without defining it fail to interrogate how hidden expectations, values, norms, and goals shape them and affect their ability to advance change. Consequently, what democracy and democratic reform mean in museums and social media is clouded. As before, it can mean everything from making museums more appealing or concretely accessible, more representative, or more responsive. Further, the use of social media by museums in the interest of democratization in general needs to be approached more critically, for networked digital media may be used as readily to serve totalitarian interests as it may revolutionizing ones.<sup>14</sup> Various “digital divides” also circumscribe their potential. At base, these are imbalances in access to networked digital media. And, even as access to the Internet and the use of social media increases throughout the world, imbalances remain apparent in the skill-sets people have to utilize this media for finding information and securing rights and privileges.<sup>15</sup> As museums will likely only

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Richard Kahn and Douglas M. Kellner, “Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Rev. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 703-725.

<sup>15</sup> For evidence of increasing access to the Internet, see the statistics provided by the World Bank, “Internet Users,” *World Bank* (website), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER>. Statistics on the increasing use of social media are provided in by Jennifer Van Grove in “Social Networking Usage Surges Globally [STATS],” *Mashable* (blog), March 19, 2010, <http://mashable.com/2010/03/19/global-social-media-usage/>; in the US context, see: Kathryn Zickuhr, *Generations Online in 2010* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 16,

increase their uses of social media, it is important to remember that, as historian Ross Parry has baldly noted, “to use the Web medium is not to reach out to the entire community.”<sup>16</sup>

### Research Questions and Structure of Dissertation

Being concerned with the politics of why and how museums imagine their audiences, my main objectives are to, first, interrogate how and why museums use social media to try to construct audiences as communities. Second, and in concert, I examine the democratizing intentions of these efforts and how they actually work towards or against them.

I approach these questions by, in the next chapter, explicating the several meanings of community that have accreted over time within twentieth century museum history. That chapter elucidates scholarly critiques of community and the imbrication of community and democracy. It also introduces how communication has become conflated with both of those concepts and why this is problematic for museums’ democratizing efforts. The following chapter continues this contextual discussion by examining community as it has functioned in the history of networked digital media and modern online social media, which illuminates the current ways community and democracy are conflated with communication and the challenges this situation presents for museum reform. Those chapters offer a general picture of museums constructing community; the next three offer specific pictures of museums

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2010), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Generations-2010/Overview/Findings.aspx>. For a discussion of racial, urban-rural, navigational, and operational digital divides in the United States, see James C. Witte and Susan E. Mannon, *The Internet and Social Inequalities* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Ross Parry, *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change* (London: Routledge, 2007), 98.

doing this through social media in the interest of varying democratizing goals. These are the Getty Center's blog, *A Different Lens*; the Japanese American National Museum's website, *Discover Nikkei*; and, the online component of the Science Museum of Minnesota's *Science Buzz*. Having used these case studies to illustrate the complexities at work when museums invoke community through social media in the interest of democratization, the conclusion offers a nascent problematique for more critical approaches to social media for museums.

### Thesis

My overarching claim in these chapters is that museums' current usage of community in social media acts like a fog over practice—that is, community produces an unclear, uncertain, and confusing context of work for using social media to advance democratizing goals. Assumed to be inherently democratic, community is left undefined, ambiguous, and inchoate. Construed as a self-evident good, community is viewed as the achievement of reform when it signifies only its starting point. In this context museums tend to assume that simply using social media and invoking community are transformational. This is problematic because hidden definitions and ideas about community shape how museums implement social media and I illustrate here how they shape practices that can as often reinforce established museum practices as they can trouble them. Hence, when the concept remains ambiguous in the execution and evaluation of social media projects, the benefits and value of this media for democratization are diluted. This is unfortunate because both community and social media have potential for museum reform. Addressing audiences as communities appears to be valuable for orienting museums more

conscientiously towards audiences; it is also apparent that social media can help address power hierarchies with audiences in meaningful ways. Thus, I argue here that articulating how community hides various values and democratizing goals can help museums better assess and apply social media toward change.

By delving into what lays within the fog of community in museums' social media practices, I bring to light many definitions, values, and ideas that are as much about serving the self-interest of museums as they are about better serving audiences. In terms of self-serving uses, it is firstly apparent that museums turn to community through social media because it helps mitigate their enduring anxiety about networked digital media. It connotes a defensive posture, a way to find stability in the face of the seemingly immaterial nature of this media and the amorphous and anonymous nature of online audiences. Community acts as an antidote to this situation by encouraging audiences to "write" themselves into visible being.<sup>17</sup> This materialization of the audience assures museums that there *is* an audience. It gives them something to count for the purpose of evaluation, and in demonstrating the existence of an audience, it also demonstrates the museum's relevance to it and supports claims for their material survival. Further, as materialization is arguably essential to a sense of ethics online, community affords a mechanism through which museums try to assert normative frameworks of behavior—regulating the audience and encouraging the audience to regulate itself. This materialization is concerning for how it creates an audience vulnerable to risk and surveillance, although I will also explain that materialization can work for various goals of democratization since the

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<sup>17</sup> Jenny Sundén discusses how online writing embodies subjects in *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

assertion of norms can help cultivate a productive space for dialogue about difficult issues. Finally, the emphasis that museums put on community in order to materialize an audience around its brand and resources suggest to me a continued hesitancy to embrace networked digital media for their immateriality—their seemingly intangible nature, which I argue in the conclusion prevents them from breaking loose from the limits of material boundaries and participating in the building of networks that may better assert their relevance and better serve their audiences no matter how they imagine them.

The next element of community that I interrogate for confusing democratizing goals is its association with communication, which I use to refer to acts of conversation and participation. In the past fifty years, museums interested in staying relevant and pursuing democratization have been preoccupied with improving communication with their audiences—as museum scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has put it, “Museums must communicate or die.”<sup>18</sup> Within this mandate, community has long been appealing for its suggestions of frequent and face-to-face communication. Additionally, the “anxious desire for transparent communication has shaped the deployment of new media in museums, in particular, interactive new media.”<sup>19</sup> This desire is particularly on display with social media, which regularly employ language and technical conventions to construct online communication as immediate, simultaneous, and spontaneous, and as the building block of community and democracy. As many critiques of community show, the:

... ideal of a society consisting of decentralized face-to-face communities is undesirably utopian in several ways. It fails to see that alienation and violence

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<sup>18</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Henning, “New Media,” 311.

are not a function of mediation of social relations, but can and do exist in face-to-face relations. . . . It fails to address the political question of the relations among face-to-face communities.<sup>20</sup>

If they accept that frequent and immediate communication manifests community and democratic social relations, I argue that museums are over-privileging the value of dialogue, while under-valuing other types of communication that occur within the spectrum of museum experiences. For instance, museum professionals typically regard “lurking”—the use of networked computing without “writing” oneself into being—as passive behavior. It is seen as a problem to overcome, rather than a moment in a spectrum of possible interactions. This construction devalues privacy, forgetting “the lived experiences and activities, the conditions and constraints, the identities and relationships of people in their status as private individuals” that affect people’s choices to act in public.<sup>21</sup> It also fails to consider how observation means attention and possibly desire, but perhaps not readiness, to act. Nurturing a visually articulated community—the supposedly “active” audience—is to forget who remains invisible, yet still engaged with museum content. I argue that the over-emphasis on public communication influences museums to implement social media for public actions when instituting opportunities for private actions may be equally useful, and perhaps more inviting to audiences.<sup>22</sup> Further, this over-valuing of public

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<sup>20</sup> Young, “Community and Difference,” 2.

<sup>21</sup> Sonia Livingstone, “Introduction,” *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*, ed. Sonia Livingstone (Bristol: Intellect, 2005), 29.

<sup>22</sup> This view also attends to research that suggests many people do not want to participate publicly in museum practice. Visitor research at SFMoMA and the National Museum of Natural History have indicated that opportunities to use social media in museum experiences are not always an audience priority. See Dana Mitroff and Katrina Alcorn, “Do You Know Who Your Users Are? The Role of Research in Redesigning sfmoma.org,” in *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*, ed. Jennifer Trant and David Bearman (Toronto: Archives and Museum Informatics, 2007), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/mitroff/mitroff.html>, and Matthew MacArthur, “Can

communication seems to stunt museums' understanding of audience engagement and how they evaluate their social media projects. Finally, a subsidiary concern in this discussion is that the stress on visible dialogue and participation in social media works in service of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, with "its celebration of freedom, progress, and individualism," supports a construction of citizenship based on a person's ability "to reduce their burden on society and build up their own human capital."<sup>23</sup> Here, I read this charge in social media's general call to take visible and frequent "actions" in everyday life. As museums' social media activities often lack structures meant to absorb such actions in ways that provoke meaningful change for the institutions—they are often opportunities just for the sake of action—they are similarly concerning.

The ambiguous context of community is thus revealed to hide a multitude of definitions and goals, some of which operate more in the self-interest of the maintenance of museums than they do that of establishing more democratic relations with audiences. But, I also observe community to provide intriguing instances of supporting practices in the interest of advancing democracy in museums and society. As previously noted, community seems to be useful for provoking museums to attend to the needs of audience members as individuals and to confront them in their complexity.<sup>24</sup> And, by enabling open flows of information into institutions, they can engender surprise that can lead to critical thinking and empathy. Also, the invitation

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Museums Allow Online Users to Become Participants?," *Museum News*, September 2007, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/webexclusive/digitalmuseum.cfm>.

<sup>23</sup> Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (December 1996): 739.

<sup>24</sup> Gaynor Kavanagh, *History Curatorship* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 66-69.

to people to contribute their voices and experiences to museum displays is shown to automatically render community a complicated picture of inherent difference, diversity, and conflict. Further, community used in social media as a rallying call to common interest also suggests the ways social media can be used in the interest of “collective intelligence,” which is a model of knowledge-building that relies on networks of distributed individuals and improves with the participation of many, diverse people. As seeking to contribute and tap into collective intelligence signifies the dematerialization of museum boundaries and thus the deterritorialization of their hold on knowledge, I conclude that the democratization of museums may be best served by using social media for this purpose.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This thinking has been informed by various modes of thought from cultural studies, media studies, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, which provide my theoretical framework and methods. My dissertation is an example of the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, which delves into the meanings of social activity by putting them within historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, I am concerned here with how community functions as lived culture and discourse, and within flows of power between institution and individual. As such, I am not seeking to define community for museum practice, but to consider how definitions of it influence that practice towards the democratization of museums.

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<sup>25</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and Mitchell R. Lewis, “Cultural Studies: 2. United States,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), online.

Being a project informed by careful attention to words, it is important to note that I am not interested here in the definitional ambiguity of “museum” or “social media.” The definition of the former is fascinating and for that discussion I encourage readers to turn to extant publications.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of defining this project, I confined my study to museums that exist as physical entities and operate chiefly in the interest of public education. Meanwhile, my use of “social media” as a term conveys the recognition of a particular suite of technologies and culture of the current media environment, which encourage openness, conversation, participation, collaboration, and the articulation of digital bodies. Its definition and usefulness are debated—obviously non-digital media forms enabled social interaction and continue to do so—and will be delineated in chapter three, but overall “social media” as a term suggests a preoccupation with public and personal action through networked digital media.

I approach my subject with various methods of analysis. The major one is discourse analysis. A term used to describe various modes of critical thinking, discourse analysis may be understood broadly as attention to how formal and normative patterns of thinking are evident in language. Hence, I am informed by the same attitude that Michel Foucault brought to his “archaeological” investigations of the sciences, in which he discerned “rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and

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<sup>26</sup> Paula Young Lee, “The Musaeum of Alexandria and the Formation of the Museum in Eighteenth-Century France,” *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 3 (September 1997): 385-412. Also see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

objects of study.”<sup>27</sup> I also rely on Jacques Derrida’s method of discourse analysis, deconstruction, to discern and trouble accepted discourse in museum practice and scholarship.<sup>28</sup> Deconstruction examines naturalized values in order to suggest alternate ways of thinking. It sees dyads like “black”/“white” or “man”/“woman” as hierarchical constructions, where one word is perceived positively at the expense of the other. These values are taken for granted—at least by elites—unseen and unquestioned until challenged. To deconstruct binaries of this sort is to consider their definitions in relation to each other and to try to permanently unsettle them. Deconstruction informs my efforts to rethink museum attitudes about digital media (e.g., material/immaterial, real/virtual) and communication and interactivity (e.g., face-to-face/mediated, active/passive, participant/observer, visible/invisible). Further, in considering how latent anxiety about digital media appears in current museum practice, I am influenced by feminist critics of culture who have complicated ideas about “the virtual.”<sup>29</sup> Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s discussion of the “virtual” space of cyberspace, Patricia Wise’s summation that women are “always already virtual,” and visual studies scholar Anne Friedberg’s historicization of the term inform my considerations of how museums approach the use of social media.<sup>30</sup> Further, I have drawn from studies about audience to think about how museums construct audiences

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<sup>27</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xi.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> Computer gaming and cyberpunk fiction’s celebration of a “virtual reality” that supposedly freed people from their physical bodies and identities prompted feminists to weigh in on the problematic nature of viewing the “virtual” in this manner—as either “not real,” and thus without consequences, or “real,” but without real consequences.

<sup>30</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture From the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001); Patricia Wise, “Always Already Virtual: Feminist Politics in Cyberspace,” in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, ed. D. Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 179-196; and Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

as active and passive.<sup>31</sup> In particular, I use Michael Warner’s theory of “publics” to complicate ideas about active and passive engagement, and to rehabilitate the “lurker”—the common term in online parlance for people who read, but do not visibly contribute to discussion lists, etc.—within social media.<sup>32</sup>

The attention to discourse in this dissertation provides the basis for thinking about the democratizing potential of social media for museums. It provides entry points for examining how social media function within a context of “cultural hegemony.” Building off Karl Marx’s thinking on the persistence of social inequality, Italian journalist and critic Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony interprets culture as unstable political terrain on which mainstream values and alternatives compete for purchase in a society. It involves an elite group achieving and maintaining power over other members of a society with the latter’s consent, which is won by the distribution of degrees of power and resources throughout levels of a society.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Gramsci stresses that all hegemonies are pregnant with opportunities for resistance—“counter-hegemonies” co-exist with hegemony and may become dominant.

Networked digital media and museums are both sites for asserting and challenging hegemony.<sup>34</sup> Although now typically critiqued as bastions of

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<sup>31</sup> Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, eds., *The Audience Studies Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003); Livingstone, *Audiences and Publics*.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> See Gramsci, “The Prison Notebooks,” and Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Much literature about networked digital media is concerned with shifts in power. Some of these, like Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (London: Penguin Books, 2006) and Seth Godin, *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008) are written with a mind to inform business leaders how to take advantage of the changing system, and do not advocate structural shifts in power. Others are more interested in the capacity of this media to support counter-hegemonies by allowing alternative models of production to bubble up. See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), Yochai Benkler, “Freedom in the Commons: Towards a Political

Enlightenment values, museums have never been stable sites of power and many currently strive to be specifically counter-hegemonic.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, while networked digital media was developed in the Western industrial-military complex, it has a parallel history in 1960s counter culture.<sup>36</sup> Today, government, capitalist, and commercial forces do daily battle with millions of individuals who also generate and circulate content, some of which is resistant to majority culture. It is a situation in which currently “[everything] is up for grabs,”<sup>37</sup> although even as I write this opportunities for open access to the internet are threatened by network providers fighting to control, and governments trying to police, the content to which their customers have access.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, museums’ engagement with social media to materialize their audiences exemplifies hegemonic activity. In contrast, museum staff’s embrace of community and social media is often motivated by genuine desire to combat the elitist attitudes and practices of their institutions. That museums’ social

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Economy of Information,” *Duke Law Journal* 52 (2003): 1245-1276, and Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum, “Commons-based Peer Production and Virtue,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (2006): 394-419.

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Witcomb is an especially articulate advocate of the historicization of museums. See Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003). Studies about cabinets of curiosity, dime, and novelty museums are also reminders that modern museums draw from multiple traditions. See Lucian Gomoll, “Objects of Dis/Order: Articulating Curiosities and Engaging People at the Freakatorium,” in *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities*, ed. A. Levin (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 201-215.

<sup>36</sup> See Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, “Introduction,” in *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture*, ed. L. Rabinovitz and A. Geil (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-22.

<sup>37</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 258.

<sup>38</sup> For an overview of the “net neutrality” debate, see Francois Bar, Walter Baer, Shahram Ghandeharizadeh, and Fernando Ordonez, “Infrastructure: Network Neutrality and Network Futures,” in *Networked Publics*, ed. Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 109-144. For instances of governments’ Internet filtering, or attempts of, see Berkman Center for Internet & Society, “Government Internet Filtering Increases in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Berkman Center for Internet & Society* (website), 12 August 2009, [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/newsroom/ONI\\_2009\\_MENA\\_report](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/newsroom/ONI_2009_MENA_report), accessed 13 August 2009, and Marina Kamenev, “First, China. Next: the Great Firewall of... Australia?,” *Time*, June 16, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1995615,00.html>.

media projects are rife with examples of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic energy is evident in my case studies.

Further, as that hegemonic activity comes to light as social media materializes online users as digital bodies, my explanations of this activity draw from the work of many scholars studying how people adopt and adapt to networked digital media. They are cited throughout the dissertation, but Nancy Baym, danah boyd, Ananda Mitra, Don Slater, and Jenni Sunden were particular influences.

Finally, I am influenced here by Henri Lefebvre's theories of "social space." Lefebvre asserted that "space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it."<sup>39</sup> It is impossible to study museums and digital media and not attend to how the latter prompts the former to reconceive its space—its environment of experience—and to reconceive how it can maintain control over that space. My attention to how social media provide ways for museums to materialize audiences and processes of communication is informed by the sense that museums are still negotiating how to deal with how digital media change their environments of experience.

### Methods

These theoretical influences are applied to the principally qualitative evidence collected for this dissertation. Thousands of museums throughout the world are engaging with social media. The projects I selected as case studies adhered to the

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<sup>39</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

following requirements. As an Americanist, a native English speaker with minimal fluency in other languages, and without sufficient resources or time to travel internationally, I focused my research on projects in the United States. During the course of my graduate studies and dissertation research I perused hundreds of museum websites, blogs, Facebook and MySpace profiles, YouTube and Vimeo channels, Flickr accounts, and Twitter and Tumbler feeds, as well as in-house projects. These were assessed for inclusion based on whether, and how, they deployed an *explicit* rhetoric about community. They were also selected based on uniqueness—what were they doing differently than the herd—and to express the variety of ways museums were engaging with social media towards community. That the museums selected are examples of larger museums and are located in urban areas was not by design. That they represent an art museum, science museum, and a history/community museum was simply luck. Further, in one of those serendipitous insights that make for the more pleasurable moments of scholarship, I also realized after selection that each case study illustrates the degrees by which museums are allowing social media to penetrate their physical boundaries, from not at all to very much. My approach thus did not aim for comprehensiveness, but is illustrative of general patterns and trends among museums in the United States.

The evidence collected for these case studies is mostly qualitative. Ideally, I would make use of scientifically-sound quantitative data as well, especially as it would help discern the democratizing impact of social media in terms of access and the diversification of audiences traditionally served by museums. But, collecting data of that sort would have been a project unto itself as collecting useful statistics about

social media use is problematic. Hooper-Greenhill has described the challenge of trying to comprehend the physical museum-going public: “The figures overall are very confusing, and it is difficult to form a complete picture of what proportion of the population visits museums on a regular basis.”<sup>40</sup> The same is true of trying to measure the numbers of people who interact with museum content through social media, which are incorporated into institutional websites, external social media sites, and through the mobile web and applications. The metrics available for collecting information concern visits (not visitors) and are not comprehensive. And, even if they can eliminate activity by non-human actors like “bots,” the data is difficult to interpret as it is still not clear what a meaningful or successful encounter is for each visit or visitor.<sup>41</sup> Finally, data only takes on meaning when it is read within a suitably comparative context, and at this point what data museums do collect is not only siloed, but also collected in myriad ways by myriad tools.<sup>42</sup>

In the absence of meaningful quantitative data, I rely on qualitative research informed by wide exposure to scholarship, and the ethnographic methods of interviews, surveys, and participant-observation. For each case study I interviewed the project’s manager for about two to three hours on-site at their employing museum; interviews were recorded and faithfully transcribed. I corresponded via e-mail with them for follow-up questions. In the interest of trying to bring visitor voices into my study to gauge their impressions of the projects in comparison to those of

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<sup>40</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Museums often point to raw numbers of visits or how long a user spends on a site to suggest what constitutes a successful online visit, but as Nancy Proctor, director of mobile at the Smithsonian, has said in conversation, a long visit on a website may mean a person was having a frustrating time finding the information she needed.

<sup>42</sup> Maxwell Anderson observes this in general practice in “Metrics of Success in Art Museums,” “The Compleat Reader,” Getty Leadership Institute (2004).

staff, I created online surveys for each project that were open for roughly four weeks each.<sup>43</sup> These surveys were not pursued to collect scientifically-sound evidence, but to provide some sense of external viewpoints.

Limited in these ways, the bulk of my research involved participant-observation, an immersive technique that promotes intimate familiarity with a research subject. It aims for the “thick description” of sociocultural life advocated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which describes not only what a person is doing, but also the background context that informs the doing.<sup>44</sup> Participant-observation, no matter how entrenched, cannot account for all happenings, but it helps researchers acknowledge the complex and often contradictory nuances of human experience (especially those of the researcher) that are obscured by broad proclamations about culture. It is an exercise in negotiating between the insight afforded by being critically distant, and the insiderness that provides “experience ... in its own terms.”<sup>45</sup> Beyond the hundreds of hours I spent researching museums’ social media activities, I spent many more engaged with the selected case study projects—browsing, reading, observing, collecting data on activity, and visibly participating by creating user profiles, following Facebook and Twitter accounts, and sometimes voting in polls or making comments. Equally important, I participate in social media production by museums on an almost daily basis: since November 2008 I have worked full-time at

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<sup>43</sup> The survey for *Science Buzz* was promoted through the Facebook page of the Science Museum of Minnesota, as well as through solicitations posted by me directly to the project. That for *Discover Nikkei* was promoted through its Facebook page, as well as on its bulletin board and through e-mails that project manager volunteered to send to users. In the case of the Getty’s blog, which was closed when this study began, I could not solicit audience participation in the survey as the blog was no longer promoted by the museum’s website. Instead, because it involved using online content about the Getty published by Getty visitors, I contacted over 50 people who had been featured to take the survey.

<sup>44</sup> Geertz borrowed the term from Gilbert Ryle. See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-32.

<sup>45</sup> Grosz, “Architecture from the Outside,” xv.

the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum managing its social media outreach. It is part of my job to research social media generally, as well as to attend conferences, workshops, informal meetings, and webinars about social media. I also organized the first “un-conference” about museums and social media hosted by a museum in December 2009, which motivated me to initiate regular conference calls with six other museums about using social media for progressive aims.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, I used interface analysis, which treats interfaces as texts that carry sociocultural values.<sup>47</sup> danah boyd has demonstrated how interfaces reflect culture, such as when Brazilians purposefully colonized Orkut or race and class shaped the adoption of Facebook and MySpace.<sup>48</sup> Ananda Mitra has dissected websites to show how they speak to insiders and outsiders through language, design and format.<sup>49</sup> Social media are texts like any other—they are designed with imaginary audiences in mind and that design effects who they can effectively talk to and how they do so. Where they differ is in affording the audience opportunities to generate content with their own audiences and agendas in mind. Interface analysis helps reveal these different messages, audiences, and values. I applied this method to my case studies to consider how their design and user contributions may shape user reception and

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<sup>46</sup> The Conscience Un-Conference: Using Social Media for Good occurred on December 5, 2009. Details may be found at <http://www.ushmm.org/social/blog/>.

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> See danah boyd, “Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,” in *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning - Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007); “The Significance of Social Software,” in *BlogTalks Reloaded: Social Software - Research & Cases*, ed. Thomas N. Burg and Jan Schmidt (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2007), <http://www.danah.org/papers/BlogTalksReloaded.pdf>; and “White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook,” in *Digital Race Anthology*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>49</sup> Ananda Mitra, “Diasporic Web Sites: Ingroup and Outgroup Discourse,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 14 (1997): 158-181.

experiences and how they may produce, reinforce, and counteract problematic sociocultural practices.

These methods and theories provide the means for uncovering what lays within the fog of community that pervades museums' uses of social media. They are the basis for critiquing how each case study conceives of community; what sort of community it materializes and how it does so; its evaluative process; and its democratizing goals. They also provide the direction for offering a general critique of how and why museums currently imagine their audiences as communities through social media and how they might use social media in more pointed ways to foster institutional reform.

### Literature Review

By seeking to complicate museums' dealings with community in the networked digital media environment, I am extending and commingling two threads of museum scholarship. Both began in the late twentieth century and strive to historicize and problematize their subjects: that of the challenges and potential of community in museum practices, and that of networked computing in the same. My ruminations are particularly inclined to contribute to museum studies, but my statements about museums, community, and social media may also be made of wider use in American studies and critiques of social media.

The literature about community and networked digital media in the museum field share similarities. Each subject has been largely addressed through how-to articles and case studies. Publications on networked computing tend to concern how to implement this technology, the challenges it presents in gallery space and online,

and how to evaluate it.<sup>50</sup> Studies about community tend to consider the challenges of working intimately with audiences and offer advice on best practices. While critical and sensitive to those processes, they are not typically critical of the concept of community itself.

Scholarship that critiques networked digital media and community from standpoints that attend to historical, cultural, and social contexts began around 1990. Prior to that, the professional literature about networked computing from the past several decades, which are discussed in chapter three, exhibit the deep anxiety and ambivalence that met the introduction of computing into museum practice in the 1960s. Its seemingly immaterial and thus intangible nature appeared as a threat to museums' traditional reliance on materiality for their relevance. Meanwhile, techno-enthusiasts expressed curiosity and openness towards the media, seeing its immateriality as offering new ways to overcome the limitations that materiality places on organization and knowledge. Only within the last several years, though, has the literature begun to address networked digital media through the lens of cultural critique.<sup>51</sup> As the museum profession continues to struggle with rectifying digital media with its materiality-based practices, much of this work focuses on explicating the idea of the “virtual museum” and its relationship to physical museums. Such work takes note of the ways that digital media is used to reassert the material boundaries of

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<sup>50</sup> Three publications by the American Association of Museums express these leanings: Katherine Jones-Garmil, ed., *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1997); Selma Thomas and Ann Mintz, eds., *The Virtual and the Real: Media in the Museum* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998); and, Herminia Din and Phyllis Hecht, eds., *The Digital Museum: A Think Guide* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, eds., *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007).

museums and to reinforce traditional curatorial practices.<sup>52</sup> Ross Parry takes up similar concerns in the first comprehensive history of computing in museums. *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change* (2007) masterfully illustrates how digital media's adoption by museums showed both compatibility and incompatibility, examining it in contexts rife with crises about purpose, materiality, place, identity, resources, and relevance.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, he has charted the introduction of theory into the field of museums and digital media, sometimes called "museum informatics," wherein growing attention is paid to the "agency" of this media, to the discourse that surrounds it, and to its history.<sup>54</sup>

In specific regards to social media, this critical attitude is somewhat lacking in the nascent literature. Social media is the hot topic at professional museum conferences, in blogs written by museum staff, consultants, and students, and of a growing number of articles in magazines and journals.<sup>55</sup> Through the "grapevine" of

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<sup>52</sup> Dominique Langlais, "Cybermuseumology and Intangible Heritage" (paper presented at Hybrid Entities: Intersections 2005, Toronto, Canada, March 18-20, 2005), 72-81, <http://www.yorku.ca/topia/docs/conference/Langlais.pdf>; Lianne McTavish, "Visiting the Virtual Museum: Art and Experience Online," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 226-244; and, Michele White, "The Virtual Museum" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1999). Also see Elisa Giaccardi, "Collective Storytelling and Social Creativity in the Virtual Museum," *Design Issues* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 29-41.

<sup>53</sup> Parry, *Recoding the Museum*.

<sup>54</sup> Ross Parry, "Digital Heritage and the Rise of Theory in Museum Computing," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20 (2005): 333-348. Paul F. Marty also attends to "sociotechnical" factors that influence museums' uses of digital media in "An Introduction to Museum Informatics," in *Museum Informatics: People, Information, and Technology in Museums*, ed. Paul F. Marty and Katherine Burton Jones (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3-8.

<sup>55</sup> Having taken center stage at the annual Museums and the Web conference, papers on social media are copious. It was also the theme of the Institute of Museum and Library Services' WebWise 2009. Blogs that frequently focus on social media include museum consultant Nina Simon's *Museum 2.0*, the Powerhouse Museum's *Fresh + New*, and the Walker Art Center's *Off Center*. Meanwhile, social media projects have also produced reports and papers, including the Steve Art Museum Social Tagging Project (see [http://steve.museum/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogsection&id=5&Itemid=14](http://steve.museum/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=5&Itemid=14)), and the Library of Congress's Commons project with Flickr. See Michelle Springer et al., *For the Common Good: The Library of Congress Flickr Pilot Project* (Library of Congress, October 30, 2008). Recent

the web, I know that graduate students, mostly in museum studies departments and some from information schools, are working on master's and doctoral theses regarding this subject.<sup>56</sup> Written by information scientists, museologists, and museum professionals (administrators, technology specialists, designers, and educators), much of this work concerns itself at this point with stating the field and delineating best practices, but tends not to criticize social media as a cultural phenomenon. Informed by my training in the interdisciplinary field of American studies, my dissertation is the first academic, book-length manuscript to take a more culturally incisive viewpoint of museums and social media.<sup>57</sup>

My dissertation also builds on critical studies of community in museums and in networked digital media. Media scholars and sociologists since the early 1990s have investigated community in networked digital media, a review of which I will provide in chapter three. Similarly, historians, anthropologists, museologists, and cultural studies scholars have interrogated and problematized the concept of community increasingly in the last two decades.

Among the early acknowledgements of the problematic side of community in museum practice is a short section of Gaynor Kavanagh's *History Curatorship*

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publications on the subject include MacArthur, "Can Museums Allow Online Users," James Yasko, "Museums and Web 2.0," *Museum News*, August 2007, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/museumswweb.cfm>. Nancy Proctor, "Digital: Museum as Platform, Curator as Champion, in the Age of Social Media," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53, no. 1 (January 2010): 35-43.

<sup>56</sup> See Lynn Bethke, "Constructing Connections: A Museological Approach to Blogging" (Master's thesis, University of Washington, 2007), and Alex Curio, "A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Impact of Contextual Factors on Museum Blog Facilitation" (Master's thesis, University of Washington, 2010). Other projects are discussed in the Museum 3.0 online group for doctoral students interested in "museums and the use of new technologies." See "Doctoral studies related to museums," *Museum 3.0* (website), <http://museum3.org/group/doctoralstudiesrelatedtomuseums>.

<sup>57</sup> Professional texts like *Twitter for Museums: Strategies and Tactics for Success* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2010) have been recently published.

(1990). He does not provide a definition, but notes how community has become “a useful means of identifying common interest and concerns” and that it is permeable and in flux. Kavanagh complains that it is “imprecise” and subjective, but, sees it as redeemable for “creating a point of cohesion for people otherwise divided and isolated, or undergoing social stress or dislocation.” In respecting that sense of belonging, Kavanagh observes: “The notion of community helps the museum locate the common-interest social groups within its area and the broad spans of cultural patterns to which these gave rise.”<sup>58</sup> He thus provides a shrewd and foundational insight for museums: attention to community can give them a point of focus in a local context and steer them away from making generalizations about audiences.

Kavanagh’s piece illustrates how scholarship at that point commonly constructed community and museums as discrete formations, a viewpoint also expressed in the first book-length effort to deal with the complexity of community for museums. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (1992) is a volume comprised of papers from a series of conferences hosted by the Smithsonian Institution in 1988 and 1990. In exploring the “political questions of how museums relate to the changing configurations of communities that surround them, ranging from the neighborhood to the nation-state, from groups defined in ethnic and racial terms to social classes,”<sup>59</sup> it constructs museums and communities as multifarious and separate entities within “civil society”—the realm of society between the allegedly private spaces of domesticity and the public spaces of government agencies and

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<sup>58</sup> Gaynor Kavanagh, *History Curatorship*, 66-69.

<sup>59</sup> Ivan Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture,” in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 2.

processes in which citizenship is enacted. Editor Ivan Karp's introduction paints a picture of American civil society at a moment of considerable contest, in which "newly emergent communities" and new questions force museums to consider their role in "the process of according or denying identity to communities." Concerned primarily with affording representation to disenfranchised populations, Karp writes that museums must reassess their conceptions of their audiences: "The best way to think about the changing relations between museums and communities is to think about how the *audience*, a passive entity, becomes the *community*, an active agent. This is a process in which self-appointed or delegated representatives of a community contest a museum's perspective by articulating a community point of view."<sup>60</sup> In concert with this view, the chapters, which implicitly define community in terms of locality, disenfranchised ethnic groups, and profession, construct communities as agents that make themselves active through communication.

Hence, the anthology also expresses how museums have long interpreted community as inviting audiences into dialogue with the idea that it nurtures a more democratic and collaborative model of museum work. The most radical iterations of this idea are known as "community museums" and "ecomuseums," both of which emerged out of the fire of the civil rights and environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They placed communication at their heart, understanding it to not only make museum practice more collaborative and attentive to the people they hoped to serve, but also to empower audiences. In giving people the encouragement and space

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., "Introduction," 12-13.

to talk and be heard, voice and dialogue were thought to mobilize them as actors within civil society.<sup>61</sup>

While offering progressive stances on museum work, these writings also show that the concepts of audience and museums' relationships with them were in question—community as a concept was not. Soon, though, scholars were attacking it head on. Many of these investigations focused on its relationship to identity and museums' roles in producing communities. For instance, Dominique Poulot suggested that ecomuseums are “[mirrors] held simultaneously to the community and to others,” which work in “a process of self-discovery and recognition, [and] also the development of representations suited to communicating with others.” For insiders they reinforce shared identity, while outsiders, who recognize themselves as non-members, can identify with “everyday objects and ... the cultural cohesion implied in shared interests and practices.”<sup>62</sup> In another critique, anthropologist Yvonne M. Lassalle and National Museum of American History curator Marvette Perez took issue with how it impedes non-essentialist construction of identities. While understanding community to indicate process and power, they also explained how, in

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<sup>61</sup> See specifically Nancy J. Fuller, “The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project,” in *Museums and Communities*, 327-366, and John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Creating a *Dialogic* Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment,” in *Museums and Communities*, 285-326. Also see Ruth J. Abram, “Harnessing the Power of History,” in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 125-141, and “Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 59-76.

<sup>62</sup> Dominique Poulot, “Identity as Self-Discovery: The Ecomuseum in France,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 66-84.

their academic and museum contexts of work, it functioned to reduce their performances of Latina identity to the homogeneous “Other.”<sup>63</sup>

As Lassalle and Perez’s piece indicates, by the late twentieth century community in museum discourse was perceived as a battleground for the expression of cultural identity. Seeking to combat centuries of exclusion, dehumanization, appropriation, and misrepresentation of people of color and the working class, museums were in the thick of trying to renegotiate rules of engagement with people they sought to represent in gallery space, as well as with their audiences. Peter Davis’ *Ecomuseums* (1999) charts this battle in the first comprehensive survey of that genre of museums, locating cultural identity and community at the heart of their definition and operations. Recognizing the tendency in museology and often sociology to use “identity,” “cultural identity,” and “community” interchangeably, he identifies community’s “essential elements” to include geographical locality, shared religions, political systems and ownership, common culture, interdependence, common needs, and the notion of “community spirit,” before concluding that trying to identify a “museum community” reveals it to be “an almost meaningless expression.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately he states that museums serve and interact with multiple communities, “and through their actions define for themselves what their ‘museum community’ is. The status, collections and location of museums will inevitably affect their choice of ‘community’.”<sup>65</sup> Davis’ book acknowledges the role museums play in constructing

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<sup>63</sup> Yvonne LaSalle and Marvette Perez, “‘Virtually’ Puerto Rican: ‘Dis’-locating Puerto Ricanness and its Privileged Sites of Production,” *Radical History Review* 68 (1995): 60, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

communities and that museums and audiences play different roles and hold varying degrees of power as they construct meaning together.

With his post-colonial theory of museum/community relations, anthropologist James Clifford delivered an influential way to renegotiate that relationship in the interest of more democratic museum practice. Borrowing a term from Latin Americanist Mary Louise Pratt, Clifford suggested that museums and communities encounter each other within “contact zones,” in which colonizing and colonized cultures interact in complex displays of relative power.<sup>66</sup> Clifford’s contribution was in complicating understanding of communities’ agency and in asking museums to decenter themselves in the field of power that they share with communities. To do this he advised seeing both museum and community as constructed and permeable, which involves conceiving the former as a depot in a continual journey rather than a depository, and the latter as also manifested in a process of indicating insiders and outsiders.

Clifford’s museum-as-contact-zone theory has inspired much play, including as a way to reconceptualize the museum on the Internet,<sup>67</sup> but has also attracted criticism. Tony Bennett argued with Clifford’s construction of museums and communities as opposites and autonomous, saying it falsely views the former as an imposition of the state and the latter as an organic grassroots phenomena.<sup>68</sup> In order to de-romanticize community, he explicates its cultural baggage and how it “[implies] a

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<sup>66</sup> James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188-219.

<sup>67</sup> Charlie Gere, “Museums, Contact Zones and the Internet,” in *Selected Papers from ichim97*, ed. David Bearman and Jennifer Trant (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1997), [http://conference.archimuse.com/biblio/museums\\_contact\\_zones\\_and\\_the\\_internet\\_0](http://conference.archimuse.com/biblio/museums_contact_zones_and_the_internet_0).

<sup>68</sup> Tony Bennett, “Culture and Policy,” in *Culture: A Reformer’s Science* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 189-213.

condemnation of whatever has been constructed as its opposite.”<sup>69</sup> Interested in rehabilitating the concepts of the museum and the state, he argues that governments and museums construct communities and that a more positive sense of museums and government can serve reform. In the end, Bennett reformulates Clifford’s theory as not counter to government, but consistent with the state’s historic interest in museums as sites of civic reform.

Bennett’s critical approach to the concepts of community, state, and museum are well-received, but he fails to acknowledge that reform might be imagined in a more volatile manner than is typically desired in human relations—in other words, productive exchanges between museum and community may be agonistic rather than transcendent. Museologist Andrea Witcomb offers a related critique in her 2003 book, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*. Acknowledging that the history of museums is not simply a linear one of institutional domination, she makes space for “museums [to] relate to a variety of communities, understood not in terms of opposition but in terms of cross-cultural forms of communication.”<sup>70</sup> In the chapter, “‘A Place for All of Us’? Museums and Communities,” Witcomb measures the value of Clifford’s and Bennett’s positions against her curatorial experience. Placing Bennett’s argument in a specific material context—one that was trying to mobilize cultural studies within policy and to claim museums for all—Witcomb supports the idea that museums play an active role in producing, rather than just representing, communities. She offers as evidence her work with Portuguese community members in Perth creating an exhibit for a community access gallery

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>70</sup> Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 17.

(CAG).<sup>71</sup> She construed her task as curator as not trying to represent an “authentic” community, but to serve as a representative of the professional museum community and as an interpreter who “[had] to work within a notion of community that could be recognized by all but which was also attentive to the cultural work which it would do – to explain a group of people to outsiders as well as to themselves.” Where Bennett’s argument falls down, she argues, is in his disregard for the “dialogue between actual communities and museum policy makers and curators,” and for essentially “[reducing] culture to government” in a manner that suggests government and community interests are always in line.<sup>72</sup> If that were so, creating exhibits with communities would be easy, whereas Witcomb’s personal experience assures her that the exhibition process is not only difficult, but frequently so because communities’ goals for museum exhibits are often averse to those of the state. CAGs operate within the Australian government’s framework for democratizing access to representation and for teaching the merits of cultural diversity, but Witcomb found some members of the Portuguese community resistant to interpreting their artifacts for outsiders. Further, her experiences “professionalizing” community museums throughout Australia often met with communities that were not interested in cultural diversity.

In the interest of deromanticizing community, Witcomb suggests that museums should too be construed as communities.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, “the curatorial process is seen as the result of a set of exchanges between *different* communities”—albeit with unequal power—which may help represent multiple discourses and values

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<sup>71</sup> CAGS are spaces set aside within many Australian museums (often initiated internally) for people to participate in exhibitions about themselves and to transfer professional skills to the public. *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>73</sup> This idea was previously proffered by Vera L. Zolberg in “Art Museums and Living Artists: Contentious Communities,” in *Museums and Communities*, 105-136.

in any resulting exhibit. She embraces Clifford's museums-as-contact-zones theory for its ability to situate the museum not "as a static, monolithic institution at the centre of power," but "as an unstable institution attempting to come to grips with the effects of the colonial encounter, an attempt which has both positive and negative affects on those involved." To participate mindfully in this complex dance, Witcomb asserts that museum professionals must accept that some in a community may not want to accept New Museological values: "We have to be more open to internal contradiction in our positions—we cannot use a rhetoric of community self-representation without accepting that many communities may have different ideas of history."<sup>74</sup> Witcomb's unsentimental critique thus belies a key weakness in museums' use of community towards democratic reform: the attitudes and opinions of audiences are not necessarily congruent with those of museums that desire to construct more just spaces, nor with projects that encourage people to embrace democratic values.

The interrogation of community in museum practice is thus attentive to power dynamics with audiences. Hooper-Greenhill has proposed this is a problem of communication between curators and audiences, a product of the different interpretations of museum objects and exhibitions that result because they occupy different "interpretive communities."<sup>75</sup> Formulated by literary theorist Stanley Fish, the theory of interpretive communities says that communities cohere only "in relation to interpretive acts;" they are fluid, unstable, and do not correlate with identity positions. They share "intelligibility, interpretive repertoires, knowledge, and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.,79-101.

<sup>75</sup> My description here is based on Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Interpretive Communities, Strategies and Repertoires," in *Museums and Their Communities*, 76-94, but she wrote about it earlier in *The Educational Role of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1999).

intellectual skills” that inform how curators decide what is important to describe in museum displays and how audiences interpret that information.

The most recent scholarship on community in museum practice continues to attend to these issues of difference, power, identity, and communication. It contributes by providing historical and comprehensive analysis of the concept itself. In the introduction to her edited anthology, *Museums and Their Communities*, Sheila Watson notes pervasive use of community without definition within museum work, observing that sources of funding, especially from government agencies, often promote the use of this loose rhetoric. In pointed response to Karp et al.’s *Museums and Communities*, which rejected using “their” in its title for its possessive connotations,<sup>76</sup> *Museums and Their Communities* acknowledges that museums “still identify the communities they wish to work with and they exercise the power to represent *their* communities.”<sup>77</sup> (The title also reflects the anthology’s focus on professional museums working with communities, as opposed to museums controlled by particular communities.) As Watson asserts museums’ interests in community are related to reform, she asks, “how can museums establish transparent, inclusive and fair relationships with all communities?”<sup>78</sup> In accord with modern practice, she understands community to be a fluid force that helps individuals make identity and meaning, and hence is “the essential defining factor of . . . the sense of belonging that comes to those who are part of it.” She borrows Hooper-Greenhill’s “interpretive communities” as a “useful way of conceptualizing communities in order to

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<sup>76</sup> Karp, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>77</sup> Sheila Watson, “Museums and their Communities,” in *Museums and Their Communities*, 2-3, original emphasis.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

understand the multiple meanings they make” and explores and critiques seven versions that appear within museum practices. They are based on geographic location (which Watson complicates by noting the importance of time to building up a sense of place and belonging); shared historical and cultural experiences that cohere in the process of memory; specialist knowledge derived from participation in specialist communities; demographic and socio-economic factors (which, as traditional measures for targeting audiences, result in homogenizing people); national, regional, local, sexual, ability, age, and gender identities; visiting practices (e.g., people who come to meander versus participate in a program); and finally, “communities defined by their exclusion from other communities,” which she describes specifically in relation to the United Kingdom’s policy rhetoric of “social inclusion” and “exclusion” for identifying marginalized groups.<sup>79</sup>

Explicating community in terms of ownership, power, identity, and memory, *Museums and Their Communities* contributes to the field by combing through rhetoric and exposing how community is a dicey reform strategy for museums. Watson’s introductions to the book and its parts stress how power-sharing is difficult for museums because it involves negotiation and because communities may not always be interested in portraying full portraits of themselves that include negative aspects of their experiences. Further complications include alienating some communities by working with others, as well as limiting audiences because community-focused exhibits and programs may discourage outsider visitation. She cautions museums to remember that neither they nor communities are institutions; they are individuals who

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3-8.

work with individuals. Patience, listening, and building relationships over the long-term, she cautions, should be the order of the day.

Museologist Elizabeth Crooke brought an equally critical mindset to her 2007 book, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, which expanded the conversation by taking into consideration how communities use museums and museum-like activity for their own purposes. Focusing on Northern Ireland, but also reviewing practices in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Crooke explores the “symbiotic” relationship between museums and communities, delving into the complex relations that are obscured by the too “simple duality” that views communities as needing history and identity to be preserved and interpreted in museums, and museums as needing people to recognize their value and validate their maintenance.<sup>80</sup> Taking a critical and historical viewpoint of community as a concept, she proffers that it does not need one definition, but that museums should consider carefully the characteristics it is assigned, such as: ethnicity, religion, class, politics, large, small, “thinly” or “thickly” attached, locally based, globally organized, supporting or subverting hegemony, reactionary, and progressive. Ultimately, she makes it clear that understanding community today means not depending on ideas about pre-modern and rural societies, but on those of power and sustainability.<sup>81</sup>

For Crooke, community connotes “of people” or “an active agent representing needs and aspirations.”<sup>82</sup> Exploring community enacted in formal ways by museums, and in informal and “unofficial” ways by communities, she identifies three main

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<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

manifestations: “as a form of identity creation,” “in public life,” and politically for “social action.”<sup>83</sup> She characterizes performances of heritage (e.g., collecting oral histories, creating exhibits, forming local history groups) by museums as “sometimes transient, often personality led, and frequently only best used and known amongst the community;” they are also frequently motivated by a political, economic, or social goal that is felt to require the assertion of a defined cultural identity and often reveal the “less attractive characteristics of community ... its exclusiveness, the boundaries, and its limits.”<sup>84</sup> Also, Crooke explores how museums utilize community in some cases to introduce professional standards to informal community heritage projects, in others “to rethink the entire museum concept and working practices across the institution.”<sup>85</sup>

As I have observed about the peculiarity of museums turning to an unstable concept to resolve highly charged relations, so Crooke observes the oddity of using a concept based on “intangible and highly subjective” experiences to shape decades of public policy, where it has been entwined with ideas about empowerment, social inclusion, social capital, and diversity.<sup>86</sup> She concludes: “Community may be a concern for group identity; it may be a desire to gather people together to challenge established structures; or it may be an interest in communicating state policy in relation to social change.” Feeling it likely that community will continue to act as a strong driving principle in museum work, Crooke issues a problematique that

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4, 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>85</sup> The Leicestershire County Council Community Museums Strategy in the United Kingdom, Ontario’s (Canada) “Standards for Community Museums” initiative, and Nova Scotia’s “Community Museums Assistance Program” are examples of the former, while Glasgow Museums Service’s promotion of the “Open Museum” in the early 1990s was meant to better engage with the local community. Ibid., 9.

<sup>86</sup> This was especially true in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Ibid., 32, 42.

observes that community discourse in museum practice too often occurs only among its most progressive practitioners. To revise the culture of community in museum work, museum culture must also be revised.<sup>87</sup>

To date, then, the literature has exposed community to be an ambiguous and power-laden concept, and has increasingly recognized it as an uneven tactic for affecting museum reform and for fostering democratic values in audiences. My dissertation extends these considerations into the online context. Literature that does discuss community online for museums has so far failed to pay mind to these issues; in general, authors accept community as an a priori reality and self-evident good of networked digital media and social media.<sup>88</sup> My discussion of the ways definitions and assumptions about community skew how museums use social media troubles these assumptions. Further, my interjections offer another way to think about community in practice. While the literature has so far accepted it as present in relation to (if not defined by) place, to groups of people, and to a sense of belonging, I offer a view that regards community as institutions' attempt to organize various spaces for managing social relations. Clifford's museum-as-contact-zone theory moves in this direction, but conceptualizes the space of negotiation as the museum. My sense from

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 133, 135.

<sup>88</sup> See, for instance, Jamie McKenzie, "Building a Virtual Museum Community," (paper presented at the Museums and the Web, Los Angeles, California, March 16-19, 1997), <http://fromnowon.org/museum/museweb.html>, accessed 22 November 2009; Kevin von Appen, Bryan Kennedy, and Jim Spadaccini, "Community Sites & Emerging Sociable Technologies," in *Museums and the Web 2006: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2006), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2006/papers/vonappen/vonappen.html>; Nicole Caruth and Shelley Bernstein, "Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum: A Timeline," in *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2007), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/caruth/caruth.html>; and Sebastian Chan, "Levels of Participation/Community," *fresh + new(er)* (blog), April 19, 2007, <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/index.php/2007/04/19/levels-of-participation-community/>.

museums' pursuit of community through social media is that community appeals because it creates a social space that is informed by museums, but exists outside of their physical spaces. Like museums, social media can act as public spaces of private leisure in which civic culture is negotiated and transformed. As museums struggle to redefine and maintain relevance within a civil society that is changing in combination with the transforming media environment, community signals the desire to create a liminal, somewhat stabilized, space to negotiate these changes. The typical segregation of social media from the physical institution provides some protection from these disruptive forces.

### Conclusion

I took up the subject of my dissertation with the desire to influence museums to approach social media with a critical and broadly informed understanding that may better serve their democratization. This is important for increasing access and diversity in museums, and for opening them to the flows of information provided by audiences that can mutually enrich both institution and audience—a symbolic means of loosening their investment in materiality and order as the cornerstones of knowledge. Ultimately, this excavation into the fog of community leads me to assert a problematique that is interested in activating community in social media projects more genuinely in the interest of democratic reform. As it affects the use of social media in projects, museum staff should clearly articulate how they are defining community. This would direct them to discern in what ways they hope to use social media for democratic reform and enable them to more critically assess how to use them to meet those goals.

At the same time, I am also mindful of how this environment is in “constant upheaval” as to how it is best studied. As such, this project should be interpreted as exploratory in its intentions and methods. My desire was to get a sense of the lay of the land and suggest a path of navigation, but I am aware that the knowledge as to how best to do that will continue to evolve. My hope was to provide a possible starting point.

## Chapter 2: What's Old is New, Again and Again: "Community" in American Museum History, 1900-2011

### Introduction

The definitions, ideas, and values that are at play in how museums imagine community for institutional reform are many. They may be elucidated by a discussion of the various meanings the concept has taken on in the past hundred or so years of museum history in the United States. In 1919, pioneering museum advocate John Cotton Dana was envisioning a "new museum" that would be of "service" and of "interest and help [to] its community;"<sup>1</sup> by the late 1960s, community museums were proliferating, and, by the early 1970s, community had become a cornerstone of progressive professional discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1990s, the American Association of Museums (AAM) started a "Museums and Community Initiative" to explore museums' obligations to "civic engagement," as well as launched a marketing campaign called "America's Museums: Building Community," which was intended to educate media and government about the importance of museums.<sup>3</sup> Today, the term

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<sup>1</sup> John Cotton Dana, *The New Relations of Museums and Industries: The Story of the First Ten Years of a Group of Experimental Museums* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum Association, 1919), 18.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) proclaimed "Museums and Communities" as the first resolution of its 18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. See Annette B. Fromm, "Museums and Communities as Seen in the Profession - and in the History of ICME," in *ICME Papers 2006* (presented at the Connections, Communities and Collections, Miami, 2006), 1-3. At this point, community was also enshrined in the ethical codes of ICOM and the Museums Association (UK). See ICOM, "Chronology," *International Council of Museums* (website), <http://archives.icom.museum/chronology.html>; Museums Association, "Code of Ethics for Museums," 2007.

<sup>3</sup> American Association of Museums, "America's Museums: Building Community" (American Association of Museums, 1999); American Association of Museums, "Museums and Communities,"

appears frequently on museum websites, including in global navigation bars, where it typically groups together a museum's communicative options through social media. These shifts over the past century suggest how many definitions, values, and goals of community are sedimented into museum practice.

In this chapter, I survey these meanings in order to show how modern uses of community carry many connotations that prevent it from being a straightforward strategy for museum reform. This is not offered to assert a "best" definition, but to peel back its layers and complicate how community is deployed in museum practice. For, this chapter charts the movement of the concept towards its current conflation with communication, specifically with communication as active participation and face-to-face, or immediate, dialogue. It records the conflation of community and communication as the achievement of democracy.

These shifts towards greater participation and dialogue in museum space have not always equated with more democratic practice and it is clear that community may be utilized by museums for both self-serving and democratizing interests. Conveying a sense of self-evident good and a sense of lateral social relations, community is allowed to function in museum practice without much critique. It may be invoked only as a smokescreen, deflecting real critique into how power flows in hierarchical ways through a museum. Its use may be a gesture from marketing, a gimmick aimed at increasing museum visitation.<sup>4</sup> It may be used defensively, to shore up concrete

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*American Association of Museums* (website), <http://www.aam-us.org/sp/m-and-c.cfm>; and David Thelen, "Learning Community: Lessons in Co-Creating the Civic Museum," *Museum News*, June 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Some argue that "people's shows" in the United Kingdom felt to build community ties and increase audience numbers. Janine Lovatt, "A People's Show Means a People's Show," *Museological Review* 1, no. 2 (1995): 66-71.

senses of museums and of their audiences. Or, it can be a way to dissipate power in the interest of preserving it. For instance, as Boris Groys has pointed out, participatory art troubles the authority of the artist, but does so in part to minimize the artist's accountability.<sup>5</sup> Further, as museums embrace social media for the purpose of generating more communication with audiences, it is not clear if they systematically use such information to better serve their audiences, or if they do so just for the sake of appearances.

At the same time, community does appear in this history as a starting point for democratization efforts since it can encourage museums to be audience-oriented. If it cannot achieve instant reform, it may at least orient museums towards its continual pursuit. Such a reflexive program of practice, though, must be carried out with a clear sense of the meanings and values embedded in community. This is because community is associated with multiple democratic goals, not all of which can likely be served at the same time. It appears as a call for improving access; being more responsive and responsible to audiences; cultivating a sense of reciprocity between institutions and audience members; fomenting a sense of collectivity in the interest of a "common good"; fomenting a sense of rights among visitors; breeding an appreciation for equality, diversity, and/or social justice in society; and/or encouraging public dialogue, and sometimes public action. For museums interested in

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<sup>5</sup> As Boris Groys has written about the participatory art movement, which sought to redress the traditional, divided relationship between artist and audience: "When the viewer is involved in artistic practice from the outset, every piece of criticism he utters is self-criticism. The decision on the part of the artist to relinquish his exclusive authorship would seem primarily to empower the viewer. This sacrifice ultimately benefits the artist, however, for it frees him from the power that the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer exerts over the resulting artwork." Boris Groys, "A Genealogy of Participatory Art," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 21.

these things, understanding the range of meanings and democratizing goals implied by community may help them direct their efforts more reflexively and pointedly.

To begin, I briefly explain why museums are felt to be in need of reform, a position that explicates why community appeals to these institutions. I then borrow a structure of discussion from sociologist Gerard Delanty to unpack the meanings of community, their relationship to various democratic ideas and goals, and use illustrations from museums to illustrate how they work towards and against institutional reform. I close with an explanation of community's conflation with communication, and how communication must be carefully wielded for the purpose of democratization. This conclusion offers a bridge into the next chapter, which discusses communication as community in the context of social media.

### *Museums and Reform*

The relationship between museums and society is a tense one; museums are at once regarded as a tool for social reform and as in need of it. This situation is a product of their origins, which root them equally in traditions that, on the one hand, privilege the elite, and, on the other, aspire to serve everyone. Connotations of privilege and privileged spaces are built into the etymology of “museum”: scholars locate the word's origins in *mouseion*, “the ancient Greek word for cult sites devoted to the museums,” and in the Musaeum of Alexandria, which was founded in the third century B.C.E. as “a group of literary and scientific scholars supported by the Ptolemies, who provided them with palatial housing and a now-legendary library.”<sup>6</sup>

Seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe also nurtured the correlation of

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 115; Lee, “The Musaeum of Alexandria,” 385.

“museum” as space dedicated for elites, particularly in Italy among the natural history enthusiasts who collected artifacts for the purpose of research and displayed them in spaces to which only the patriciate were invited.<sup>7</sup>

Later, in 1793, the museum would gain connotations of serving a universal humanity and the collective good when the revolutionaries of France claimed the deposed king’s palace and art collection as the property of the new French citizenry. The Louvre was supposed to be a new symbol of universal citizenship, a public monument in which the French people could gather and see the democratic body politic of which they were now a part. But, as Paula Young Lee argues, the choice to name their new public art institution a *museum* purposefully linked it to the ancient Musaeum and its elite connotations.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, its visiting population reflected that reputation.<sup>9</sup>

These seeds of tension bloom furiously today, when museums’ relationships to modern states firmly shape their missions of universal public service, yet their principal audience remains the highly educated middle class. Mainstream museums developed in the West as sites of public education and virtuous leisure, supported by states and private patrons for their capacity to bless them with status and legitimacy, reinforce national narratives, and shape citizens and laborers within a nationalistic

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<sup>7</sup> Findlen, *Possessing Nature*; Giuseppe Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor: Italian Cabinets of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Origins of Museums*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986,) 1-16.

<sup>8</sup> Despite vanishing in the fourth century B.C.E. and leaving little documentation, the Musaeum enjoyed a reputation of symbolizing “the glory of ancient Alexandria, the cultivation of the intellect, a monumental architecture, and the positive expression of political power.” Lee, “The Musaeum of Alexandria,” 385.

<sup>9</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 21-46.

agenda.<sup>10</sup> They are thought to serve the common good and have been regularly enlisted as tools for social reform.<sup>11</sup> By the Industrial Age, they were “considered the ‘universities of the people,’” meant to deliver “utility and progress, instruction and innocent recreation.”<sup>12</sup> These ideas were often partly informed by a “utopian optimism” informed by “a profound belief in the transcendent, life-enhancing potential of art,”<sup>13</sup> but as Tony Bennett observes, they were also designed to initiate the public in the ways of the modern state, their exhibitionary architecture allowing the public to observe itself as a body politic and cultivate self-regulation.<sup>14</sup>

As tools for social reform and public education, museums are supposed to be theoretically accessible and appealing to all comers. This charge has motivated museums throughout the twentieth century to try and attract new and diverse audiences, often by remaking themselves as spaces of “fun” or by extending their spaces into new places. While the Newark Museum offered free ice cream and music in the 1920s, today, music and cocktails are on the menu at weekend and evening programs.<sup>15</sup> By the 1970s, museums housed in mobile homes were making the rounds, a new-fangled version of the “Loans-Car” described in 1932 by a museum

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Annie E. Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities.” *Oxford Art Journal* 11, 2 (December 1988): 57-68.

<sup>11</sup> One of the earliest public art galleries in the United Kingdom was established at the Foundling Hospital in 1740s London. Its charges being mostly illegitimate children, the hospital had found little support from a public fearing to encourage immorality; an art gallery was hoped to help foster acceptance of the hospital. Watson, “Museums and their Communities,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors*, quoted in Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 34; Andrew McClellan, “A Brief History of the Art Museum Public,” in *Art and its Publics*, ed. Andrew McClellan (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 7.

<sup>13</sup> McClellan, “A Brief History,” 1.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 89-105.

<sup>15</sup> Dana, *The New Museum: Selected Writings*, 121. Art museums like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Getty Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum today offer such evening programs and science museums and aquariums tend to offer experiences for “sleep-overs.”

director as “a symbol of the Modern Museum whose influence penetrates every nook and corner of its community.”<sup>16</sup>

These methods suggest how museums still fail to attract a universal audience. Part of the reason why is, historically, they have not addressed one. As Bennett describes, these public institutions used visual vocabularies (e.g., labels for artwork that lack description) that spoke to some members as insiders and others as outsiders.<sup>17</sup> Lines of inclusion and exclusion were also drawn in the ways natural history and history museums collected, represented, and preserved artifacts. While museums ostensibly strove for encyclopedic representation, this included displaying the material culture of people of color as “primitive” and ignoring that of the working class, the disabled, and others altogether.

That these “tools of reform” were in need of reform themselves became a clarion call in the twentieth century. Efforts to alter museum practices occurred in a first “revolution” that took form between 1880 and 1920, which modernized and professionalized museums, birthed “museology,” and asserted that museums are fundamentally educational.<sup>18</sup> The second “revolution” arose in the 1960s and questioned traditional definitions of museums and practices that perpetuated exclusion. Fueled by the Modern Civil Rights and environmental movements and the responses from museum-feeder fields like history, anthropology, material culture, and education, this “New Museology” sparked museums to attend as closely to their

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<sup>16</sup> Carol Supplee, “Museums on Wheels,” *Museum News*, October 1974; W.N. Berkeley, *The Small-Community Museum: Why It Is Entirely Feasible, Why It is Extremely Desirable* (Lynchburg, VA: The J.P. Bell Company, 1932), front matter.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Bennett, “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 263-281.

<sup>18</sup> Peter van Mensch, “Magpies on Mount Helicon,” in *Museum and Community*, ed. M. Schärer, ICOFOM Study Series 25 (Stavanger, Norway: ICOFOM, 1995), 133-8. Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 9, fn 1.

audiences as they did to their artifacts. Museums became reflexive about themselves and their visitors, who became the focus of intensive research and evaluation.<sup>19</sup> New models of education also came into vogue, replacing old visions of visitors as passive absorbers of information with views that they were active in their learning and even creatively subversive, wily in their abilities to ignore or re-interpret museum messages. Recognition of this diversity prompted changes within museum spaces, leading them to favor exhibit design that served many learning types: hands-on activities and immersive experiences became the order of the day and “interactivity” a favorite and enduring buzzword. At the same time, museums began to brand themselves as spaces for conversation, using metaphors like “workshop,” “laboratory,” and “forum” rather than “treasure house” and “temple.”

The growing awareness that museums are profoundly political also strongly motivated calls for reform. They had always been so, but the fact had long been defused by rhetoric that divorced them from the state and portrayed them as neutral players in the pursuit of the “common good.” Critics charged them with producing and reproducing oppression by consistently debasing or diminishing the social, cultural, and economic importance of women, people of color, LGBT persons, and the working class, or erasing them altogether. Research also made it clear that the typical museum visitor continued to be white, middle-class, and highly-educated, as was the typical staff member. Hoping to diversify audiences, new museologists sought to include more diverse experiences in collections and exhibitions; to allow

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<sup>19</sup> See Neil Harris, “Polling for Opinions.” *Museum News* (Sept – Oct 1990): 46-53, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 362-376.

different values and epistemologies to influence preservation standards; and to court non-traditional museum visitors with special programs.

### Community in Museums

It was during the first revolution of museum reform that institutions began to pointedly refer to their audiences as communities. This preoccupation proliferated during the second, when it took on even more explicitly democratizing meanings, and today is a solid fixture in museum discourse. Its persistent appeal, and varying degrees of usefulness for democratization, may be located in several characteristics. First, there is its capacity to suggest a self-evident good, which is evinced in the ways scholarly and popular discourse construct it in opposition to society; state or government; institutions like museums; capital; the elite; modernity; individualism; passivity; and conflict. To bless a project as “good,” a museum need only call it a community project. Second, community allows museums to redraw space and thus social relations. Community is usually seen as rooted in civil society, which constructs it as an extra-institutional means of social organization, i.e., organic, unmediated, lateral, everyday, and therefore more authentically democratic. Traditionally, museums asserted distance and discreteness from their surroundings, epitomized in the word “outreach.”<sup>20</sup> Museums maintain that distance when they address communities, but the address itself can be read as an acknowledgement that they are attentive to experiences that are different from their own. In this way, museums’ use of community suggests their orientation is outward and respectful of

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 209; Meyer P. Potamkin, “Is outreach a cop-out?,” *Museum News*, December 1972.

difference. Further, if museums claim membership in a community, such as in a neighborhood or region, it broadcasts that the museum understands itself to be part of and responsible to a community. Hence, the term “community museum” signals the wholesale absorption of a museum into the space of a community.

The third reason community persists in museum discourse is because it suggests stability. As sociologist Anthony Cohen writes, conjuring community is a defensive move: “A reasonable interpretation of the word’s use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in his book *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that people crave community in times of crisis, seeking sameness to reassure their own identities. Community appeals to museums because they are categorically nervous institutions. Despite the fact that (even during major national financial crises<sup>22</sup>) museum-building never seems to be stalling, museums suffer from a chronic identity crisis. Thumbing through decades of *Museum News* (1924-2007), the AAM’s publication for practitioners, reveals article after article about how to face budget woes, new technologies, diversifying audiences, and perceived crises in public confidence. Amidst this anxiety, it is not a coincidence that these institutions see community as a

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Abu Dhabi and Qatar are currently building large-scale national museums. See Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity,” *New York Times*, 26 November 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/27/arts/design/27museums.html?\\_r=2&WT.mc\\_id=AR-SM-E-FB-SM-LIN-ADA-112710-NYT-NA&WT.mc\\_ev=click](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/27/arts/design/27museums.html?_r=2&WT.mc_id=AR-SM-E-FB-SM-LIN-ADA-112710-NYT-NA&WT.mc_ev=click), accessed 26 March 2011. The table of contents of *Museum News* (September 1972) notes an architecture boom for museums despite “serious financial problems.”

way to demonstrate value, relevance, stability, and justify survival.<sup>23</sup> Defined by locality, it indicates a concrete population to which a museum may be relevant and of use. Defined by demographics, it lets a museum target its programming and materialize such communities in its galleries.

Finally, community appeals to museums for the ways it can obscure all of these uses. The inherent ambiguity of the concept allows it to function in many different ways, but always under a positive cover. Cohen credits this flexibility to its ability to act as a symbol, which as something that is substituted for or representative of something else, “[does] not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning.” Cohen explains that symbols work to express social categories,

... [and] those whose meanings are the most elusive ... tend to be those also hedged around by the most ambiguous symbolism. In these cases the content of the categories is so unclear that they exist largely or only in terms of their symbolic boundaries. Such categories as justice, goodness, patriotism ... are almost impossible to spell out with precision. The attempt to do so invariably generates argument, sometimes worse. But their *range* of meanings can be glossed over in a commonly accepted symbol – precisely because it allows its adherents to attach their own meanings to it. They share the symbol, but do not necessarily share its meanings. Community is just such a boundary-expressing symbol. As a symbol, it is held in common by its members, but its meaning varies with its members’ unique orientations to it. In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community’s boundary – and, therefore, of the community itself – depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, museums can utilize community for any number of reasons.

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<sup>23</sup> This climate is suggested by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine’s article, “Communities and Museums: Partners in Crisis,” *Museum News*, June 1993, and Lonnie G Bunch, “Museum in an Age of Uncertainty: Fighting the Good Fight,” *Museum News*, March/April 1995; and George MacDonald and Stephen Alford, “Towards The Virtual Museum: Crisis and Change for Millennium 3,” *History News* 49, 5 (1994): 8-12.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 15.

Yet, as much as museums use community to suggest goodness, control space, and assert stability, it is inherently an unsettling force. It risks the appearance of bias by courting and constructing certain communities over others. It also risks representing a community only in part—museums seeking to more fairly represent communities by bringing them into the exhibition process face only some members participating. Further, when used to invite audiences to speak, that openness brings difference and tension into museums, confirming that they ultimately lack control over audiences. In other words, invoking community is not a straightforward strategy to achieving museum reform, and to be mobilized in that direction, it would be useful to consider what museums mean when they use it.

### *What Community Can Mean*

The many meanings and functions of community derive from the development and circulation of community in the West, where it has had a “remarkable hold ... over both the intellectual and popular mind.”<sup>25</sup> To show how community can function in social media projects to varying democratic effects, I delineate these meanings according to the structure of discussion from Delanty’s comprehensive reader on community as a concept in Western intellectual thought. He argues that the study of community has moved from trying to identify a mass of people to trying to identify a feeling of belonging, and charts a roughly chronological progression of community’s evolution in relation to utopia; opposition to society and modernity; locality, including the city; political citizenship; multiculturalism; and communication.

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Hamilton, “Foreword,” in Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 7.

The first major articulations of community in Western thought laid the cornerstones for conceptualizing it as a self-evident good and as inherently democratic, as well as laid the cornerstones for conceptualizing ideal democracy as based on equality and on public, face-to-face talk. These also provided visions of community as utopia. The Greek *polis* and the Christian idea of “universal community” Delanty credits with providing the concept’s “ambivalent” core, its “double sense” that expresses the local and the universal, the specific and the general, exclusion and inclusion.<sup>26</sup> The *polis* provided “the basic ideal for all subsequent conceptions of community.”<sup>27</sup> The Greeks’ political community was the space in which citizens of a city-state participated in self-government by gathering in a shared locale—commonly, the *agora* or marketplace—to have face-to-face conversations about political relations. Meanwhile, Christian thought contributed the idea of the “human community,” a universal order of humanity that involved transcending society and communing “with the sacred.”<sup>28</sup> These ideas came to represent ideal forms of community and thus construed as alternatives to modern forms of social order. Following the Enlightenment and the beginning of the decline of the guilds and other institutions of the Middle Ages, community was increasingly seen as lost and yearned for, something to be recovered or realized through ideologies like liberalism, communism, socialism, fascism, and nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Modern critiques of community tackle the nostalgia, romanticism, and violence in these imaginings, being especially sensitive to how the concept has informed the development and embrace of totalitarian ideologies. See Delanty’s discussion of Robert Nisbet’s “total community.” *Ibid.*, 21.

These notions of community weave through museum history and suggest multiple ideas about democracy. The *polis* influenced how museums construct community at the scale of their local neighborhoods and in their current celebration of frequent and immediate communication. This thread is so integral to museums' conceptions of history that it will be picked up throughout the rest of this chapter and dissertation.

In concert, the idea of "universal community" has been embedded in museums since their beginning, where it continually drives questions about the public's access to these institutions. Recently this sentiment was illustrated in the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," a document issued in December 2002 and signed by the directors of the self-identified "Universal Museums" of the Art Institute of Chicago; the State Museums, Berlin; the J. Paul Getty Museum; the Louvre; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Prado; and twelve other art museums in the United States and Europe.<sup>30</sup> Written in response to debates that arose in the late twentieth century about the repatriation of artifacts (ranging from the Elgin Marbles to human remains) to originating cultures, the declaration aligns itself against modern "illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects," but not with the wholesale return of artifacts acquired in the imperial and colonial era. Their stance is based on the grounds of national communities and on a universal one:

... Over time, objects so acquired—whether by purchase, gift, or partage—have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them. ... The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums. ... Although each case

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<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," December 2002, [http://icom.museum/pdf/E\\_news2004/p4\\_2004-1.pdf](http://icom.museum/pdf/E_news2004/p4_2004-1.pdf).

[for repatriation] has to be judged individually, we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation.

These museums, fearing the dilution of their collections and their reputations, claim their survival on the “common good” they offer to the populations of their home nations and to universal humankind.

Expressing the elemental significance of universal community to museums, it even provides the basis for criticism directed at the declaration. In his response, George H.O. Abungu, the former director general of the National Museums of Kenya, assailed the declaration for seeking to establish a problematic tier of “Universal Museums,” which he characterized as a refusal to engage in needed discussions with “museums and communities affected by issues of repatriation.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, his argument against “Universal Museums” rests on averring that all museums *are* universal: “Surely all museums share a common mission and a shared vision” and “should have something special that makes [them] of universal value for humanity.”

Both examples show how museums slide between several conceptions of community simultaneously, which lets them address and at the same time obscure what they mean by community. The declaration writers embrace and elide locality. They implicitly assert that they are best positioned to provide equal access to these works, but they offer no defense as to why it is any easier for someone to see an artifact in London versus Athens versus Nairobi. Meanwhile Abungu’s appeal to universal community sits alongside his use of the word to refer to ethnic and national

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<sup>31</sup> George Abungu, “The Declaration: A Contested Issue,” *ICOM News*, 2004, [http://icom.museum/pdf/E\\_news2004/p4\\_2004-1.pdf](http://icom.museum/pdf/E_news2004/p4_2004-1.pdf), 5.

populations seeking redress, expressing how community is laden with ideas about equality and diversity.

Such utopic constructions undergird the tendency to conceive community as opposite to society and modernity, and to locate community as the ideal democratic social order of the past. This body of thought, emerging from classical anthropology and sociology, located tradition as the basis for community. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies offered the foundation for this view in his 1887 book, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tönnies used *Gemeinschaft*, typically translated as community, to refer to “real and organic” modes of life in family, rural village, and town, and *Gesellschaft* to mean the “imaginary and mechanical structure” of “society” that was increasingly apparent in cities.<sup>32</sup> He based *Gemeinschaft* on bonds formed between people via the biological associations of family and the shared customs of people who see each other frequently, presuming this proximity to support a sense of commonality, reciprocity, and a life in harmony. This vision of *Gemeinschaft* tends to kindle nostalgia for a “simple” past and, consequently, has inspired much critique since it romanticizes community by obscuring the reality of conflict in common life and neglecting flows of power.<sup>33</sup>

The idealization of *Gemeinschaft* was apparent with the development of site museums. Begun in Europe during the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, and exported to the United States, these small, typically rural, museums expressed longing

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<sup>32</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, trans. Charles P. Loomis (Devon, UK: David & Charles, 2002), 33.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, research suggests that gender constructions work to silence women at town hall meetings and neighbors’ awareness of each others’ foibles can impede any sense of harmony. See Bauman, *Community*, 10, and Michael Schudson, “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 14 (1997): 301-302; Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 31.

for the allegedly simpler, stable, and more “authentic” lifestyles of the past. As early exercises in cultural preservation, they typically celebrated a sentimental idea of “the folk” and encouraged visitors to identify with a cultural identity by participating in holistic and immersive experiences of “folklife.” The Nazis’ version of Germany’s *Heimatmuseum*, established to tout Aryan culture, expresses the danger of romanticization, as well as how community can function as a defensive measure.<sup>34</sup>

Scholars complicated and largely rejected the dyad of community/modern society as they came to perceive tradition as a process of continual invention.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the assertion of community as tradition and small town life lives on in museum practice. The community museum movement, which reinvented and revised the folk museum, arose throughout the world in the 1960s and 1970s and asserted tradition and locality as key to identity and community. This investment can also be read in museums’ reactions to the introduction, or intrusion, of digital technology, a view exemplified by Robert Archibald in *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition* (2004), in which he equates the creep of the Internet and other technologies into everyday life with the socially stultifying effects of suburbia and corporate business on Small Town America. Viewing materiality as “real” and unmediated, and online experiences as lacking these qualities of “authenticity,” Archibald locates community in “sense of place,” which he feels is best cultivated by face-to-face encounters in non-corporate settings and through actions of collective trust and reciprocity.<sup>36</sup> Social media also illustrate an attachment to *Gemeinschaft* in their design conventions, which include a reliance on “friendly-looking” fonts and

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<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> See Delanty, *Community*, 28-49.

<sup>36</sup> Archibald, *The New Town Square*, 217, 196.

features to suggest the warmth and simplicity associated with small town life. In another example, a conference paper presented at Museums and the Web 2010, entitled, “Small Towns and Big Cities: How Museums Foster Community On-line,” draws directly on an oppositional understanding of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, embracing the small-town romance of the former to argue that social media can reach out to people as holistic individuals.<sup>37</sup>

The relation of community to small towns illustrates its continuing debt to the *polis*, which suggested that locality and frequent and immediate contact foster ideal democracy. These senses of place and immediacy relate community to the quotidian and thus to sociocultural notions of the city, the working class, and the democratic mass of “the people.” Museums use such ideas to help redraw social space in the interest of implying greater accessibility, positioning themselves as part of neighborhoods, cities, and everyday life.

Museums define community most persistently as locality. Physical space allows them to concretely describe an audience to which they can offer service and from which they can draw sustenance.<sup>38</sup> John Cotton Dana was perhaps the first museum practitioner to do this explicitly, and, if community entered modern museum discourse at a specific moment, it was likely with his appointment in 1902 as director of the Newark Public Library.

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<sup>37</sup> Dana Allen-Griel and Matthew MacArthur, “Small Towns and Big Cities: How Museums Foster Community On-line,” in *Museums and the Web 2010: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2010), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2010/papers/allen-griel/allen-griel.html>, accessed 8 January 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Examples of this usage are apparent in Lovatt, “A People’s Show Means a People’s Show,”; Paul Martin, “‘I’ve Got One Just Like That!’ Collectors, Museums and Community,” *Museological Review* 1, no. 2 (1995): 77-86; and Angelina Russo and Jerry Watkins, “Digital Cultural Communication: Audience and Remediation,” in *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*, ed. Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 149-164.

Iconoclast and visionary, Dana was at the forefront of a movement that recognized the need for change in museum practice.<sup>39</sup> His “new museum,” which remains influential today, was professional in approach and educational at its core. He argued that museums should be “living” institutions that experiment and are relevant to the present, that are “work-shop[s]” for audiences instead of “store-house[s]” of objects.<sup>40</sup> He championed making museums more inviting and accessible to the masses: they should attend to different learning styles, engage amateur collectors, and make their buildings open for use by community organizations; they should advertise; their effects should be “measurable.”<sup>41</sup> Above all, the new museum was to be of “service” and of “interest and help [to] its community.”<sup>42</sup>

Dana defined community based on locality and the everyday. It was “any fairly prosperous town or city in this country...”—and its “tax-payers”—of the place in which a museum had laid its physical foundations.<sup>43</sup> Dana’s drive to get residents into his museum was not motivated by a sense of people’s common rights to resources so much as by a capitalist and nationalist impulse. Dana’s community was an engine of production, the museum a way to keep it running.<sup>44</sup> As places of “visual instruction,” students and adult visitors might be inspired and provoked to action—to labor. With the close of World War I, Dana recognized that Newark would soon be facing the competition of imported goods from other American cities as well as from abroad. He pushed Newark to look to the model of the British, who had created

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<sup>39</sup> See Dana, *The New Museum*, 62. His contemporaries, and competitors for shaping museum practice, included Henry Watson Kent of the Metropolitan, Benjamin Ives Gilman of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Alexander Dorner, director of the Landesmuseum (1923-36) in Hannover, Germany.

<sup>40</sup> Dana, “The New Museum,” 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> Dana, “The New Relations,” 16; Dana, *The New Museum*, 62-95.

<sup>42</sup> Dana, “The New Relations,” 18.

<sup>43</sup> Dana, *The New Museum*, 93; Dana, “The New Relations,” 14.

<sup>44</sup> Dana, *The New Museum*, 47.

museums for the purpose of educating and inspiring working-class artisans to innovate in the interest of their nation, and proposed that a museum should work in concert with vocational high schools and other burgeoning efforts in the city to advance the city's workmanship.<sup>45</sup> For Dana, then, putting community at the center of museums was meant to construct the inhabitants of a place as a community of collective labor and to encourage inhabitants to construct museums as spaces of the everyday. Museums would have the most impact if residents saw them with the commonness they did homes or stores.<sup>46</sup> Museum-going should not be an event, but threaded into the rhythm of daily life as a form of virtuous leisure.<sup>47</sup>

As a strategy to increase access and to construct museums as responsive to their neighbors, the conception of community as local, immediate, and everyday proliferated in the later twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>48</sup> *Museum News* includes numerous articles from the 1960s on that stress that museums should be useful to their local communities.<sup>49</sup> Writing about community history, historians Barbara Carson and Cary Carson state: "Communities are *places*, usually relatively small places. Sometimes their limits are as clearly defined as the walls of a house or the bounds of a town. Other times, community space is less seen than felt, its outer

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>48</sup> Examples may be found in I.T. Frary, *Museum Membership and Publicity* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1935); Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> A sampling includes Rose K. Banks, "The Museum and the Community," *Museum News*, April 1962; Russell Peithman, "The Place of a Children's Nature Museum in the Community," *Museum News*, December 1966; Keith Martin, "A New Museum Concept," January 1967; Lew Thomas, "The Small Store-Quality Service to a Community," *Museum News*, December 1967; and W.D. Frankforter, "The Community Festival as Practiced in Grand Rapids," *Museum News*, January 1970.

limits determined by the inhabitants' common way of life and common actions."<sup>50</sup>

Whether cohering in rural or urban areas, community was and continues to be associated with “smallness” and the stereotypical qualities of the small town, where museum staff are assumed to be more accessible and more “in touch” with audiences if they have frequent and face-to-face interactions with visitors.<sup>51</sup>

Questions of access and museums' responsibilities to their localities continued to inform museums' uses of community into the later twentieth century. But, whereas earlier conceptions understood community as a state of commonness (e.g., of culture, of neighborhood), later uses circulated with a sense of difference and of shifting power. The consideration of community within a field of power entered scholarly discourse in the 1920s and 1930s, when the famed Chicago School of urban sociologists began to extend the notion of “local community” to “the city” and the term came to serve as code for socially disadvantaged populations—people of color and the working class. This practice infiltrated the museum profession particularly in the later twentieth century when, in an era of white flight, urban museums were compelled to address the audiences of their immediate vicinity and community was used to refer to the people of color who formed the majority of “inner city” and “urban” populations.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara G. Carson and Cary Carson, “Things Unspoken: Learning Social History Through Artifacts,” in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, ed. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 192.

<sup>51</sup> See Ron Chew, “In Praise of the Small Museum,” *Museum News*, April 2002, and Anthony V. Garton, “Community Art Centers Are Alive and Well,” *Museum News*, September 1974.

<sup>52</sup> Examples of this usage include: Potamkin, “Is Outreach a Cop-out?,” N.A., “Museums as Instruments of Cultural Democracy,” *Museum News*, October 1972; Bonnie Pitman-Gelles, “Beyond Outreach: Museums and Community Organizations,” *Museum News*, August 1983; June Maidment Anderson, “Something Special: A Museum Folk Arts Program as Community Outreach,” *Museum*

An awareness of power in the discourse about community expanded the concept's use for democratizing goals. Through the mid-twentieth century, the concept came to deeply signify identity, which in the highly diverse United States injected community with a sense of difference and even discord. The concept's linkage to democracy and democratization became uncomfortably overt for museums at this point, as it became attached to calls for better representation of diversity; for fomenting a sense of rights; and for utilizing museums as places that could cultivate an appreciation for equality, diversity, and/or social justice in citizens. In the interest of these goals, calls for better communication arose—for museums to communicate better with audiences and for audiences to communicate with each other. These interests married community to communication. Specifically, community came to be conceptualized as face-to-face dialogue carried out within the public space of the museum in the manner of the *polis*.

Identity's relationship to community was not new, but the association became central as a result of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of the concept of "multiculturalism." Both sought to gather racialized bodies into communities, but with different political motives. Naming communities based on race and ethnicity is a political tactic; according to Pierre Bourdieu, the symbolic and political power "to make groups" out of "a collection of multiple persons, a purely additive series of merely juxtaposed individuals" is the power to divide society and jockey for resources.<sup>53</sup> The Modern Civil Rights Movement was an overtly political

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*News*, February 1986; Ellen Snyder-Greener and Barbara Caldwell, "Voices of History," *Museum News*, May/June 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 23.

struggle against an oppressive hegemony; it sought to define communities to pursue rights and resources. In contrast, “multiculturalism” originated in government as a veiled political strategy of appeasement. Defined by Delanty as “any major strategy aimed at managing cultural community,” multiculturalism understands “community ... as fairly cohesive ethnic groups.”<sup>54</sup> It recognizes difference, but relegates it to the realm of culture instead of politics.<sup>55</sup>

Thanks to both of these influences, as well as museums’ growing incorporation of marketing, an identity-centered notion of community came to the fore in the museum field. Museums began to divide their audiences up according to identity categories like race and, in the process, community shifted from a somewhat innocuous reference to a highly politicized one that involved the democratization of museums by demanding representation and a sense of diversity; recognizing people’s agency; and empowering them to participate and speak in museums and in societies in service of their rights.

These changes came as the demand for democratic reform of museums was at its highest. In the social conflagration of the times, criticism of museums came from staff, academics, artists, and activists. Professional meetings in the late 1960s and early 1970s concluded that museums should be “integrated” into society and thus had obligations to communities; protests staged at other meetings addressed museums’ complicity in structures of oppression; artists questioned that complicity directly in museum space.<sup>56</sup> In what Peter Davis called a “paradigm shift,” mainstream museums

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<sup>54</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-32.

<sup>56</sup> The November 1969 Neighborhood Museum Seminar concluded that museums must respond to communities (Spencer Crew, “African Americans, History and Museums: Preserving African

faced pressure to address centuries of sexism, racism, and classism that were apparent in staffing, collecting, and exhibition practices.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, as Elizabeth Crooke observed, multiculturalism in the form of wide-scale public policy “increased the pace of changes in museum practice,”<sup>58</sup> injecting an expectation for diversity among staff and audiences. Large museums, to various extents, began diversifying their collecting mandates, including alternative narratives in exhibits, and targeting non-traditional visitors with culturally sensitive programming. At the same time, many staff lobbied to make their institutions adopt ideas from the collaborative model of practice developed by the new “community museums.”<sup>59</sup>

This new generation of small-scale museums aimed to represent and serve particular, often small, communities; they invoked community as the epitome of a democratized museum by seeking to include audiences in all aspects of their work. These “neighborhood museums,” “community museums,” and “ecomuseums” varied in impetus, constituency, practice, and degree of participation from the population for which they were built. But, “community involvement” defined them. They all held that “the people are the curators.”<sup>60</sup>

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American History in the Public Arena,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, ed. Gaynor Kavanagh (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 85). The UNESCO-ICOM “round-table” meeting in Santiago in the 1970s focused on museums’ role in addressing the social and economic needs of Latin America (Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 54). The same year that a protest was staged at the 1970 AAM Annual Meeting, Hans Haacke mounted his *MoMA Poll* at MoMA, which asked visitors to answer the question, “*Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?*” *Rockefeller sat on MoMA’s board and was planning a presidential campaign at the time*. See also David Katzive, “Up Against the Waldorf-Astoria,” *Museum News*, September 1970; Dominick Tuminero Ashton Hawkins, “You’ve Come a Long Way ...,” *Museum News*, June 1972; and Frieling, *The Art of Participation*.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 54.

<sup>58</sup> Crooke, *Museums and Communities*, 93.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 75.

This alternative museum model emerged out of the concern that the mainstream museum model was a “master’s tool” with dubious capacity for change.<sup>61</sup> Community museology sought to rehabilitate museums by inverting the traditional hierarchy of power and integrating audiences into their content, structure, and practice; it intended “that museum action and heritage management should be driven by the ‘community’ itself and undertaken to meet its own expressed needs.”<sup>62</sup> Just as practitioners of the new “social history” were revising “History” to include the experiences of women, people of color, and non-elites, so these museums challenged top-down narratives by inviting people to participate in every aspect of museum work, from decision-making about missions to collecting and interpreting objects.

Community museums often defined their communities in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>63</sup> Such “ethnically-specific museums” speak of the multiple tensions that community as a strategy of democratization brings to museum practice.<sup>64</sup> They signify the inherent tension of equality and diversity that is at the heart of democracy by seeking to be accessible and appealing to all people regardless of race or ethnicity (to the “universal community”), while simultaneously asserting

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<sup>61</sup> The concept of “master’s tools” comes from Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *The Audre Lorde Compendium: Essays, Speeches, and Journals* (London: Pandora, 1996), 53-55.

<sup>62</sup> Phillip Gordon, “Community Museums: The Australian Experience,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (Oxon, UK; New York: Routledge, 2005), 357.

<sup>63</sup> During the late 1960s and early 1970s, museums dedicated to African-American experiences sprang up in Brooklyn, Detroit, Tucson, and elsewhere; art museums focused on Latino/a cultural production were founded in New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, and Austin. For accountings of this history, see Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 51; Crew, “African-Americans,” Fath Davis Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820-1990,” in *Museums and Communities*, 506-611; and Herlinda Zamora, “Identity and Community: A Look at Four Latino Museums,” in *Museums and Their Communities*, 324-329.

<sup>64</sup> The term “ethnically-specific museum” is borrowed from Fath Davis Ruffins, “The Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Radical History Review* 68 (Spring 1997): 79-100.

themselves as expressions of difference.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, such museums show how community can productively serve the democratization of museums since it directs a museum to deal actively with difference. Turning to community as a genuine strategy of democratization requires that museums be reflexive in their practices and responsive to audiences and is exemplified in the story of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum.<sup>66</sup> Founded by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967 as its experiment in the burgeoning community museum movement, then-Secretary of the Smithsonian S. Dillon Ripley envisioned it as both bringing the Smithsonian to the principally African-American residents of an area physically segregated from larger Washington, DC, as well as encouraging them to visit the complex's museums that lined the National Mall, where they were under-represented in visitorship. The institution underwent great change in the past forty years, evolving from a "community-based" entity that area residents made their own and helped to direct, to a "professionalized" museum with more formal structures of power and a scope of reach broadened beyond area residents. Symbolizing this distance, founding director John Kinard renamed the institution the Anacostia Museum in 1987 and moved it from its original, street-side location in a historic building to the middle of a park, where it was less accessible to passersby and pedestrians. Since then, the museum re-embraced neighborhood participation in its practice and in 2006 renamed itself the Anacostia Community Museum. Today, its website declares its mission: "to

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<sup>65</sup> Examples may found in Joy Ford Austin, "Their Face to the Rising Sun: Trends in the Development of Black Museums," *Museum News*, February 1982, and James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections," in *Routes*, 107-146.

<sup>66</sup> Portia James, "Building a Community-based Identity at Anacostia Museum," in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 339-356.

*challenge perceptions, broaden perspectives, generate new knowledge, and deepen understanding about the ever-changing concepts and realities of 'community' while maintaining its strong ties to Anacostia and the D.C. Metropolitan region.”*

That the Anacostia’s mission attends to the ambiguity of community in its mission exemplifies how the concept may be productively deployed towards museum reform. This conscientiousness to invoke community towards democratic practice uses it as an eternal reminder to negotiate with audiences and commits a museum to existing in a perpetually uncomfortable and reflexive space. The museum seeks community not as a defensive or stabilizing measure, but as a troubling one. Again, the Anacostia exemplifies this condition. The institution struggled with its definition of community from day one, with the constituencies of the Smithsonian administration, the area residents, and Kinard and his staff each operating with their own interpretation. The views of the institution as “an African-American museum” versus “a community-based museum that happened to be located in a black community” were never reconciled.<sup>67</sup> But, as Portia James, a long-time employee, observes, “perhaps any attempt to do so would have left an artificial construct with little real meaning or vitality. The challenge for the museum seemed not so much to disentangle the separate strands of its community-based mission from that of its African-American focus, but to effectively unite these two elements and to develop means for experimenting with emerging methods of community/museum interaction in an explicitly African-American and urban context.”<sup>68</sup> This crisis sparked the museum’s dynamism, and compelled it to cut through the fog of community and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

continue to ask questions about its purview, mission, and its interpretation of community.

By actively and continually attending to the ambiguity of community, the Anacostia Museum practiced another feature of community museology that seeks to democratize museum practice. In congruence with the contemporary theories of radical democracy and critical pedagogy that were taking hold in activist and educational reform quarters, community museology and New Museology addressed people as “active” agents instead of “passive” receptacles. Participation in museum practice through dialogue and action aimed to embolden people to be socially and politically conscious, which would ideally translate to action in the public sphere of larger society. As explained by Elizabeth Crooke, this “empowerment agenda” fosters projects that raise consciousness and reflexivity about conditions and structures that reinforce oppression, encouraging socially disenfranchised people to act on behalf of their own welfare.<sup>69</sup> Derived from socialist thought and the consciousness-raising problematques of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Friere, it promotes educational models that encourage people to come to their own conclusions.<sup>70</sup> Smithsonian employee Nancy J. Fuller provides an example of the agenda at work in her article about assisting Ak-Chin Indians to create an ecomuseum, which she describes as “an agent for managing change that links education, culture, and power” and that “establishes a role for the museum as a mediator in the process of cultural transition.”<sup>71</sup> The approach enlists museum professionals to train community members to represent their histories and cultures in museums of their own making, returning ownership of the

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<sup>69</sup> Crooke, *Museums and Communities*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 111-113.

<sup>71</sup> Fuller, “The Museum and Community Empowerment,” 327-65.

representation of cultural identity from outsiders to insiders. As “community learning centers,”<sup>72</sup> they are living institutions that respond to changing community needs, teach life-skills, and foster financial autonomy by attracting tourism.<sup>73</sup> As physical spaces in which a group gathers and sees itself as a group, such museums empower people on the levels of the individual and the collective.<sup>74</sup>

The empowerment agenda is also slanted towards encouraging direct engagement with formal politics, an objective exemplified by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (Tenement Museum) in New York City. The museum has linked itself directly to social services, offering English-as-a-Second-Language classes and offering programs that train children to apply the New York housing code to their residences and to take action to correct violations.<sup>75</sup> Ruth Abram, its founder, writes, “we are using the history of housing and housing reform, so integral to the Tenement Museum’s site and story, not only to teach this history, but also to train a new generation of public advocates, and to communicate the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.”<sup>76</sup>

Ideally, Abram says the Tenement Museum’s efforts to imbue people with a sense of the shared history of immigration would start a “national conversation” about the contentious issue of contemporary immigration, a hope that reflects how the importance of dialogue is central to community museums.<sup>77</sup> This championing of conversation as the embodiment of democracy and democratic museum practice may

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>73</sup> Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> See Poulot, “Identity as Self-Discovery,” 66-84.

<sup>75</sup> Ruth J. Abram, “Planting Cut Flowers,” *History News: The Magazine of the American Association for State and Local History*, Summer 2000. See also Abram, “Harnessing the Power of History.”

<sup>76</sup> Abram, “Harnessing the Power of History,” 130.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 132.

be, again, located in the *polis*. Museums look to frequent and immediate conversation as the basis of establishing democratic relations and mobilizing people as citizens. Jack Kuo Wei Tchen, historian and co-founder of the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas (MOCA), evokes these connections when he calls such institutions “dialogic museums.”<sup>78</sup> Such institutions regard audiences as partners rather than visitors who participate in and shape museum practice. Indeed, a dialogic museum “needs to be thought through with the entire organization in mind, for the archives, staff roles, the allocation of organizational resources, and so much more are all affected.”<sup>79</sup> This strategy places dialogue at its core to overhaul the traditional museum model of top-down and one-way administration and communication. Talk between museums and audiences, and between audience members, empowers people through voicing one’s thoughts and experiences and also by listening. As Tchen writes of MOCA’s “dialogue-driven” exhibition process, it is a strategy to raise “critical historical awareness” among its audiences—people of Chinese heritage living in New York, among New Yorkers generally, and interested others.<sup>80</sup> He argues this reflexivity raises understanding about relationships between individual and collective interpretations of history, as well as returns agency to people who have been neglected in mainstream history and silenced by the shame and insecurities often associated with experiencing prejudice.<sup>81</sup> Making private memories public, artifact collection, display, and programs are hoped to empower people who feel voiceless and to encourage empathy and an appreciation for difference. Further, such

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<sup>78</sup> MOCA now stands for Museum of Chinese in America.

<sup>79</sup> Tchen, “Creating a *Dialogic* Museum,” 314.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>81</sup> See Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001),

conversations are conceived as strands in a larger culture of civic discussion towards airing out problems and shaping more inclusive, equitable, and democratic societies. In serving as a safe space in which to share experiences and differences, museums open to their neighborhoods can be “expansive, convivial places in which social problems are pried open for critical examination.”<sup>82</sup>

The conflation of community, communication, and democratic aims that took place among community museums also manifested in mainstream museums, which in the closing decades of the twentieth century became interested in fostering and improving communication with audiences—that is, in effectively transmitting desired messages.<sup>83</sup> New Museology provoked museums to turn their focus “from collection to communication,”<sup>84</sup> and so, in large part, democratizing these institutions meant expanding their communicative strategies. The “prioritizing of narrative” in interpretive techniques aimed to make “mute” objects speak, “interactives” appeared in gallery space to force learning to be made visible, and visitors were given the chance to weave their voices into exhibits.<sup>85</sup> Institutions that formerly constructed their spaces as silent and serene refuges from the noisy chaos of outside, began to construct themselves as highly social spaces that valued visible and audible talk in

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<sup>82</sup> Tchen, “Creating a *Dialogic* Museum,” 320.

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, Roger Silverstone, “Heritage as Media: Some Implications for Research,” in *Heritage Interpretation, Volume 2: The Visitor Experience*, ed. D. Uzzell (London: Frances Pinter, 1989), 138-48; and Stephen Weil, “The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?,” in *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 43-56.

<sup>84</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Communities*, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Andrea Witcomb observes, “objects are understood to be mute unless they are interpreted. Not to interpret has come to be seen as elitist and anti-democratic.” See *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 86. Also see Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock, eds., *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, DC: Association of Science-Technology Centers Inc., 2007).

their galleries.<sup>86</sup> Increasingly, the success of programs, exhibitions—and now social media projects—pivots in part on producing conversation between museum and visitor and/or between visitors. In curator Jette Sandahl’s summation:

In my exhibitions I like it when the audience talks. Chatters. When they gossip and try to tell the attendant or the guide everything. When they interpret.

If they do not talk, the displays are not working.<sup>87</sup>

Today assumptions that public, frequent, and face-to-face dialogue means better communication, deeper audience engagement, more democratic process, and instant community inform museums’ adoption and implementation of social media.

Questions about audience participation in social media dominate the professional discourse; it is common to hear museum staff lament the failure of visitors to talk to each other or to talk at all through this media.<sup>88</sup>

### Community as Communication

The centrality that museums place on public participation and conversation as a keystone of community, democratic museum practice, and successful museum experiences is not unique to them. It reflects larger currents of how community most commonly manifests today. According to Delanty, “[community] has always been based on communication,” but that feature now occupies a singular importance in modern conceptions.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors*, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Jette Sandahl, “Proper Objects Among Other Things,” *Nordisk Museologi* 2 (1995): 103.

<sup>88</sup> I have heard this concern expressed countless times among my colleagues at the Holocaust Museum and from other museums. Blogs devoted to museum technology and visitor experience illustrate this discussion. See, for instance, Nina Simon, *Museum 2.0* (blog), <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/>, and Web Services & Digital Media team at Powerhouse Museum, *fresh + new(er)* (blog), <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/>.

<sup>89</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 188.

... contemporary community may be understood as a communication community based on new kinds of belonging. By this is meant a sense of belonging that is peculiar to the circumstance of modern life and which is expressed in unstable, fluid, very open and highly individualized groups. The communities of today are less bounded than those of the very recent past. The communicative ties and cultural structures in the contemporary societies of the global age – as opposed to in industrial and traditional societies – have opened up numerous possibilities for belonging, based on religion, nationalism, ethnicity, lifestyle and gender. It is in this world of plurality rather than of closure that the new kinds of community are emerging.

The persistence of community consists in its ability to communicate ways of belonging, especially in the context of an increasingly insecure world. In this sense, community as belonging is constructed in communicative processes rather than in institutional structures, spaces, or even in symbolic forms of meaning.<sup>90</sup>

As John Durham Peters observes in his history of the concept: “‘Communication’ is one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century. It has become central to reflections on democracy, love, and our changing times.” He credits this importance to people’s enduring desire to bridge our inevitable interior selves. The dream of communication is transcendence—the union of understanding between individuals—and it shapes Western societies’ remediation of technologies from writing to digital media. Where communication used to refer to “any kind of physical transfer or transmission,” technologies like the radio and telegraph—and now networked computing—were interpreted as “new [kinds] of quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space.” This perspective manifested itself in rhetoric and “[interpersonal] relations gradually became redescribed in the technical terms of transmission at a distance—making contact, tuning in or out, being on the same

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 187.

wavelength .... Communication in this sense makes problems of relationships into problems of proper tuning or noise reduction.”<sup>91</sup>

Powered by the “seemingly obvious dicta” that “[communication] is good, mutuality is good, more sharing is better,” Peters also explains how:

... [in] certain quarters dialogue has attained something of a holy status. It is held up as the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy. By virtue of its reciprocity and interaction, dialogue is taken as superior to the one-way communiqués of mass media and mass culture.<sup>92</sup>

Peters critiques this construction of communication in numerous ways, including by asserting that gesture and dissemination are rich and useful forms of communication, and that dissemination can be more democratic than dialogue. This uncritical celebration, Peters argues, is untenable as it obscures understanding the many valuable ways that people engage with each other and can connect despite differences:

The strenuous standard of dialogue, especially if it means reciprocal speech acts between live communicators who are present to each other in some way, can stigmatize a great deal of the things we do with words. Much of culture is not necessarily dyadic, mutual, or interactive. Dialogue is only one communicative script among many. The lament over the end of conversation and the call for refreshed dialogue alike miss the virtues inherent in nonreciprocal forms of action and culture.<sup>93</sup>

### *Critique of Community as Communication*

The reduction of community to communication, and particularly public, face-to-face communication, in museum practice, is thus troubling for its assumptions about how it achieves more democratic museums. While rooted in part to well-

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<sup>91</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

meaning aims to empower people through use of their voices—often to good effect—its uncritical application also tends to reduce valid museum experiences to those of active participation and conversation, and to simplify approaches to the democratization of museums. Determining the impact of museum experiences is already tremendously difficult.<sup>94</sup> Further, people like myself prefer to interact with museums in less dramatic ways and this does not preclude—at least, for me—rich experiences. Further, although museums seek to expand communication with audiences in many ways, they do not necessarily make museums more accessible to diverse populations, more transparent in their practices and decisions, or more fair in their treatment of subjects. Rather, these techniques produce ambiguous returns. For instance, Peter Davis’ research on ecomuseums showed that local residents participated in museum projects to vastly varying degrees, while Viv Szekerez acknowledged that museums still maintain ultimate decision-making authority in such arrangements.<sup>95</sup> Inviting visitors to participate in exhibits is also not necessarily a democratizing move. While it can bring more voices and opinions into museum space, it also opens ethical issues about putting visitors on display, and has resulted in the destruction of exhibits and violence being inflicted on artists.<sup>96</sup> Further, often times the information that audiences communicate to museums goes unattended; whether collected in visitor books or online, such feedback is often dismissed, not included in evaluation and thus prevented from being incorporated into museum

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<sup>94</sup> John H. Falk, “Museums as Institutions for Personal Learning,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer): 259-275.

<sup>95</sup> Davis, *Ecomuseums*, 231; Viv Szekeres, “Representing Diversity and Challenging Racism,” in *Museums and Their Communities* (London: Routledge, 2007), 234-43.

<sup>96</sup> Groys, “A Genealogy of Participatory Art,” 21.

practice.<sup>97</sup> The emphasis on public participation and dialogue in museum space has also helped simplify museums' conceptualizations of interactivity, which narrows museums understanding and appreciation of different kinds of visitor engagement.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the assumption that networked computing makes museum practices and resources more transparent and accessible—opening “back rooms” to visitors—is mixed since such projects can also put in place other layers of mediation.<sup>99</sup>

To attend to such critiques is not to dismiss that participation or dialogue has value for serving museums' democratic goals. The inclusion of visitor voices can inject diversity and complication into museum exhibits and programs; the ability to act and claim authority in museum space can be inspiring and empowering. Rather, this critique is offered in order to be mindful to the ways that museums must carefully mobilize participation and dialogue towards democratic goals. This is because they do not seem to be achieved simply through openness, but may be particularly well-supported in environments with some structure. Take for instance the Tenement Museum. Located in a neighborhood traditionally known for being the home of new immigrants, the museum's mission is to “promote tolerance and historical perspective through” telling the stories of immigrants who lived in the tenement building it occupies.<sup>100</sup> Towards these goals, the Tenement Museum has placed special emphasis on dialogue—its community outreach work has included hosting dialogues between immigrants from different nations to discuss their stories and find common

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<sup>97</sup> Comment books have only recently been turned to as research sources, and usually by outside academics Sharon MacDonald, “Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books,” *Museum and Society* 3, no. 3 (November 2005): 119-136, and Liesbet Nys, “The Public's Signatures: Visitors' Books in Nineteenth-Century Museums,” *Museum History Journal* 2, no. 2 (July 2009): 143-162.

<sup>98</sup> Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 128-164.

<sup>99</sup> Henning, “New Media,” 310.

<sup>100</sup> Tenement Museum, “About Us,” *Tenement Museum* (website), <http://www.tenement.org/about.html>.

bonds, and between sectors of the garment industry to discuss sweatshop labor.<sup>101</sup>

The Tenement Museum approaches its intentions in a highly scripted and directed manner. Rather than letting visitors roam the museum at will, the building and its restored apartments may be experienced only on guided tours for small groups, on which guides tell the stories of immigrants who lived in the tenement and encourage visitors to relate those stories to the contemporary day. Further, in response to the recognition that visitors were leaving tours with simplistic views of immigration, the museum developed a conversational program that follows tours. “Kitchen Conversations” are conducted around a kitchen table and deal pointedly with modern-day immigration. These are not open forums, but run by trained facilitators. Each begins by asking participants to read aloud ground rules for discussion:

1. Sharing and Hearing. Share your thoughts honestly but be aware that others need to be heard, as well. Allow others to finish speaking before you jump in.
2. Spirit of Inquiry. Seek to learn how other people view an issue rather than trying to persuade others to accept your view. Make an effort to suspend your own judgment as you listen to others.
3. Diversity and Individuality. Honor the diversity of opinions that is likely to exist around the table. When you speak, we invite you to use “I” statements to represent your own experiences and ideas; you are not responsible for representing the experiences of an entire group of people.<sup>102</sup>

The Tenement Museum’s founder, Ruth Abram, explains in an overview of the program that the conversations can be exceedingly uncomfortable for participants and facilitators alike: they are generally a hard sale; less than half a tour’s participants

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<sup>101</sup> The museum also initiated the formation of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience towards mobilizing museums and historic sites towards “civic engagement.” The group proclaims: “We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.” Abram, “Kitchen Conversations,” 63, 65.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 60.

join. Participants voice extreme views and sometimes exclaim prejudices. Facilitators take neutral tones and ask open-ended questions to encourage discussion. For instance, exasperated outbursts about immigrants not learning English are met with questions about whether or not anyone in the group has family members who immigrated and do not speak English; facilitators ask participants to consider why. The discussion unfolds as a process of probing into, and airing out, the source of opinions. Often they provide participants with new ways of thinking about the day-to-day realities of immigrant life, of common struggles, and ongoing tensions. Abram admits the difficulty in measuring the success of such dialogues, but notes that an overwhelming majority of participants state they would attend another. Participant feedback lauds the museum for making them think well beyond the time of their visit and helping them to articulate their views.

Similar results from other carefully crafted dialogue programs run by museums suggest dialogue can feed critical thinking and greater tolerance in museum visitors.<sup>103</sup> These projects contrast with the generally freely open ways that museums approach communication as a mode of more democratic practice and suggest how museums benefit from carefully considering the contexts in which they ask visitors to communicate. It is possible that visitors consider the option to participate as enough, especially perhaps when contributing to a public archive of experience. But, when museums encourage communication but lack structures to direct it towards critical thinking or to absorb it into practice, they commit the error of what Henri Lefebvre calls the fetishizing of speech and writing, “[conflating] revolution and transparency.”

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<sup>103</sup> Andrea Bandelli, “Talking Together: Supporting Citizens’ Debates,” in *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions*.

They conflate dialogue with democracy, confusing the increasing of opportunities for people to speak in museums with the achievement of more open conditions or deeper engagement. This privileging of dialogic communication stunts museums' conceptions of community, democracy, and the spectrum of visitor engagement. Under these circumstances, more subtle forms of engagement and people prone to silence or observation by personality, or in the moment, are deemed passive and inconsequential. The value of private worlds and chosen invisibility is disregarded.<sup>104</sup> Further, while these calls for communication mean museums are demanding more of their visitors, they are not necessarily explaining to them why their participation matters and what are its benefits.

### Conclusion

To nurture a more critical understanding of community, democracy, and the application of communication towards those goals, I suggest that the meanings and values of community that inform their work should be acknowledged, critiqued, and articulated at the outset of projects. (The specifics of that process will be laid out in the conclusion.) As community has become conflated with communication and as immediate communication has come to take pride of place in much of museum practice, I also suggest that museums complicate their understandings of communication in order to direct those opportunities more pointedly towards their goals.

As a first step, museums should delve into assumptions about the role of conversation in democracy. Communications scholar Michael Schudson historicizes

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<sup>104</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 26.

the nature of talk in democracy and democratic thought.<sup>105</sup> He observes that its idealization as the “soul of democratic life” is based on a conception of it as “spontaneous and free.”<sup>106</sup> But, he shows that conversation is not necessarily egalitarian and it is especially not when it is spontaneous. The value placed on spontaneity—and I would argue on its cousin immediacy—accrues from the development of the ideals of civil talk in the West, articulated in the many manuals of conversation produced since Cicero (and, interestingly enough, influential in the production of discourse in Italy’s early museums).<sup>107</sup> Such methods cultivate “sociable talk,” which is principally non-utilitarian and aesthetic; it involves “the pleasure of interacting with others in conversation itself” and rewards wit.<sup>108</sup> Such sociability is not egalitarian, for the “more that talk is among true equals [intimates], the more it fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all, lapses even into silence.”<sup>109</sup> Hence, it is not well-suited to the inherently public nature of “democratic talk,” which is oriented towards problem-solving. Being public, it involves performance and thus risks “personal composure.” Further, when democratic talk occurs between strangers, they will “miscommunicate because they do not share background knowledge and commitment to common norms.”<sup>110</sup>

To mitigate these circumstances, Schudson explains that talk aimed at addressing conditions and problems of a democratic society best happens under rules

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<sup>105</sup> Schudson, “Why Conversation,” 297.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>107</sup> Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 104.

<sup>108</sup> Schudson, “Why Conversation,” 300.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

established to “govern public reasonableness.”<sup>111</sup> The establishment of rules of civility to govern public discourse “can help protect the slow of speech, who are otherwise disenfranchised by the articulate and by the glib.”<sup>112</sup> For example, the 1787 Constitutional Convention involved rules that were agreed to by the participants that would afford greater chances for “equal respect and equal opportunity for participation,” and supplemented with ones “to encourage deliberate consideration of issues.”<sup>113</sup> The rules of discourse read by participants in Kitchen Conversations provide another example.

To instate rules of discourse delimits the field of expression. Certainly this excludes viewpoints, but it also puts in place supports for encouraging more people to speak. After all, “[democracy] is deeply uncomfortable,” and making transparent the conditions in which it is sought may help museums encourage participation, but also to be mindful that when they ask their audiences to publicly perform, they may owe them some type of protection.<sup>114</sup>

Complicating how museums approach communication is especially important today as it has become central to museum practice. In the next chapter, I explore how communication continues to be conflated with community and democracy and how this conflation influences how museums use social media for democratic goals. Doing so further underlines how museums need to critically consider how they invoke community and communication.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 304.



## Chapter 3: Click for Community: Museums and Social Media in the Early Twenty-first Century

### Introduction

“Can Museums Survive in a YouTube World?” The 2007 news article that accompanies this skeptical headline delineates the challenges these institutions currently face: “diminished government funding, dwindling audiences and a tenuous connection to the next generation of patrons ... But the real problem may well be the museum experience itself. And for many younger targets—particularly the under-30s who grew up with the instant gratification of the Web—it remains as didactic and passive as it has been since the 19th century.”<sup>1</sup> Although the article writer overstates her case and generalizes audiences, her observation that museums in the early twenty-first century remain anxious institutions is accurate: they face the same problems they did in the twentieth, including shifting sources of funding, financial crises, diverse populations, charges of elitism, challenges of access and representation, and relevance in a world revolutionized by new technologies. To address these issues, they continue to invoke community, to try to improve communication with audiences, and to democratize in various ways. And, rather than being replaced by social media, museums pursue these goals through them. In these efforts, they regularly address users as if they are part of communities.

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<sup>1</sup> N.A., “Can Museums Survive in a YouTube World?,” *PR Newswire (U.S.)* (website), August 9, 2007, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/can-museums-survive-in-a-youtube-world-58006462.html>.

This chapter delves into the various ideas that inform why and how museums use social media to construct community, which allows me to interrogate how they advance and limit democratizing goals. For, the popular imagination generally—and museums are no exception—constructs social media as inherently democratic, an assumption largely owed to the ways social media encourage and extend people’s opportunities to communicate. That readers can comment directly on *New York Times* online articles, vote on what news stories are the most interesting, submit stories to collaborative news sites, or in even more dramatic examples, allow people to effectively organize against companies and bring down governments suggest significant and meaningful shifts in the media landscape—but these instances do not mean social media are inherently democratic.<sup>2</sup> They may be used just as easily to reinforce the status quo, or for totalitarian goals.<sup>3</sup>

As such, museums’ social media uses need investigation because they suggest that museums translate their historical expectations and ideas about community into online space and that those ideas shape how they use social media towards democratizing goals. Currently museums see social media as constructing community in straightforward ways, conflating their facilitation of communication with instant engagement and more egalitarian conditions: as two Brooklyn Museum staff wrote of their first foray into “Web 2.0,” in which they uploaded a video to Blip.tv, “Community happened instantly, and our visitors were giving us direct feedback on

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<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), and Catharine Smith, “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution: Wael Ghonim Thanks the Social Network,” *Huffington Post* (blog), 11 February 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim\\_n\\_822078.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html), accessed 27 March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Poster discusses the totalitarian potential of the Internet in Mark Poster, “Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere,” in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, ed. David Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 212-228.

the video by posting comments.”<sup>4</sup> To trouble this view, it is useful to consider how social media strive to create community on the basis of simultaneity and immediacy, which rely on romanticized ideas about community and democracy as based on face-to-face communication. This influences museums to assume successful engagement through social media means people taking visible action, a viewpoint that overlooks the value of privacy and misunderstands people who do not take visible action as passive members in a community. This viewpoint is not a favor to the audience nor museums, as it narrows how museums understand visitor engagement and how they evaluate their social media projects. Provoked by my preference to have quietly observant and contemplative museum experiences, which are nevertheless rich and enduring, I aim to rehabilitate the value of such experiences and restore some consideration to the oft-maligned online “lurker.” My hope is that this effort may help museums evaluate social media projects in more expansive ways than they currently do.

Further, I argue that, as museums traditionally turn to community during crisis, so it manifests in their uses of social media as an antidote for managing the anxiety spurred by the immaterial and anonymous nature of networked digital media. Constructing community through social media mitigates the perceived anomie—“the lonely void”—of the web experience: it “[allows us to] become a ‘we’ rather than an aggregate of ‘I’.”<sup>5</sup> The communicative community of social media encourages people to materialize themselves, their networks, and their interactions by visually

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<sup>4</sup> Caruth and Bernstein, “Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum.”

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Barlow, *Blogging America: The New Public Sphere* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 71.

articulating user identities, publicly conversing and participating, and privileging “real time” information to feed a sense of immediacy, simultaneity, and proximity.

Museums materialize community through social media for self-serving interests and in service to their audiences. It serves as an antidote to anxiety about museums’ survival and relevance by materializing an audience around their brands and resources. Materializing an audience assures museums they have one; it also allows them ways to surveil and police it, or to encourage audience members to do the same.<sup>6</sup> This is not necessarily anti-democratic. As discussed in the last chapter, visibility may help establish rules of civil conduct for productive discussion about difficult issues. But, as social media encourage people to publicly display themselves and their opinions and risk attack in doing so, it is necessary for museums to think through what they are asking of audiences and how they support them as they take those risks.

At the same time, I argue that using community to materialize museum audiences shores up museums’ investment in materiality and their material boundaries. Consequently, I argue that ideas about community are preventing museums from embracing the messy and unbounded immateriality of this media to advance knowledge and support communities that do not cohere around their brands. In the end I urge museums to consider how they may serve their democratizing interests, as well as awareness of and relevance of their brands, by not harnessing social media to bolster their material presences, but by engaging in its destabilizing effects.

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<sup>6</sup> Don Slater, “Making Things Real: Ethics and Order on the Internet,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 5 (December 2002): 227-245.

To uncover how museums use social media to construct community and thus shape the ways they pursue and understand democratizing practices, I explain the evolution of the concept of community in the age of networked digital media, which provides a basis for understanding why and how museums use it to mitigate anxiety about anonymity and immateriality. I then explain how this works through current expressions of social media, using examples from museum practice. I conclude by assessing how these limit and advance various democratic goals.

### Community Online

That community today is such a pervasive feature of social media is intriguing since, not long ago, the capacity of networked digital media to support it fueled a significant popular and scholarly debate. The launch of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s brought networked digital media to the masses, and unleashed an abiding concern with the definition and relevance of community. Even as early research about networked computing showed that users felt “‘community’ seemed appropriate for the new social realms emerging through this on-line interaction, capturing a sense of interpersonal connection as well as internal organization,” the persistent suspicion that “computers are inherently inhospitable to social relationships” prompted inquiry into whether community could exist in the absence of physical interaction, and if so, what was its nature.<sup>7</sup> Occurring in concert with the belief that community in physical space was dissolving—a result of the impact of post-industrialism, increasing globalization, and transnationalism on patterns of habitation and work—the debate

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy K. Baym, “The Emergence of On-Line Community,” in *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 1998), 35.

was, as J. MacGregor Wise observed, “a debate over affect, whether one [could] match the intensity of real-life experience in a virtual realm.”<sup>8</sup> One side feared that computer-mediated communication would replace physical relations and breed alienation. The other saw “the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community.”<sup>9</sup> Some scholars even broached networked computing as being able to produce the “ideal” form of community or to represent a “universal community.”<sup>10</sup>

Over time, the debate was complicated by criticism that acknowledged the culturally- and historically-specific assumptions embedded in concepts of online community.<sup>11</sup> This criticism revealed that the imbricated connotations of community, explained in the last chapter, continued to inform constructions of community online. For instance, an early advocate of “virtual community,” Howard Rheingold reincarnated ideas of the *polis* and *Gemeinschaft* in his summation of his experiences of the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), a computer conferencing system that he

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<sup>8</sup> J. MacGregor Wise, “Community, Affect, and the Virtual: The Politics of Cyberspace,” in *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*, ed. Beth E. Kolko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 112. Wise takes pains to differentiate “affect” from “emotion,” which is how more commentators described the feelings expected from community online. See Steven G. Jones, “Information, Internet, and Community: Notes Toward an Understanding of Community in the Information Age,” in *Cybersociety 2.0*, 5; Baym, “The Emergence of On-Line Community,” 36.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, “Information, Internet, and Community,” 3. Howard Rheingold’s 1993 book, *The Virtual Community* encapsulates this side of the debate. It explored the potential of networked digital media for changing people’s lives, interpersonal relations, and challenging politicians’ monopoly on media, “perhaps thus [revitalizing] citizen-based democracy.” See *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), xxvii-xxix.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley Shumar and K. Ann Renninger, “Introduction: On Conceptualizing Community,” in *Building Virtual Communities: Learning and Change in Cyberspace*, ed. K. Ann Renninger and Wesley Shumar (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5. Many authors have described the whole of cyberspace as a community, including Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 142, and D. Jason Nolan and Joel Weiss, “Learning in Cyberspace: An Educational View of Virtual Community,” in *Building Virtual Communities*, 18-9. Al Gore, early and vocal champion of the Internet, spoke of it as uniting a “global community.” See “Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Vice President Al Gore,” speech (Los Angeles, California, January 11, 1994), <http://www.ibiblio.org/icky/speech2.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See Lee Komito, “The Net as a Foraging Society: Flexible Communities,” *The Information Society* 14 (1998): 97-106; Shumar and Renninger, “Introduction,” 4.

described as a “small town” where community cohered from frequent and long-term communication.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, anthropologist Lee Komito noted how concepts of online community were infused with expectations of morality, norms, and densely arranged relationships that owed themselves to older forms built around shared places, interests and a sense of collective good.<sup>13</sup> Further, the potency of the *polis* and universal community were apparent in how people often touted that networked computing would realize a new form of Jürgen Habermas’ celebrated, if criticized, “public sphere”—the democratic space of civil society in which citizens debated, and thus provided a check on, the practices of government.<sup>14</sup> Habermas’ public sphere came to life in the discussions of a reading public that proliferated in eighteenth-century literary *salons*, coffeehouses, literary journals, letters, and the genre of the romantic novel. In contrast, the public sphere enabled by networked digital media was not to be constrained by walls nor limited in membership by gender, race, ability, or class; it was to be accessible to a global community.

Aware that ideas and values attached to traditional senses of community were being carried into online social spaces, critiques of online community sought nuanced perspectives on the relationship between physical and online life. It was apparent that online communities were different than communities nurtured by shared physical space and relations in various ways: they were largely voluntary and transient—

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<sup>12</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 3, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Komito, “The Net as a Foraging Society,” 97.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Barlow, *Blogging America*; Peter Day and Douglas Schuler, “Prospects for a New Public Sphere,” in *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace*, edited by Douglas Schuler and Peter Day (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 353-375; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991). Critiques of the “bourgeois public sphere” are numerous and Nancy Fraser’s is particularly cogent: “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 109-142.

people could drift in and out without much effort or penalty; members earned reputations based on skill instead of kinship or other forms of social and cultural capital.<sup>15</sup> Further, while anonymity and fluidity often worked to license asocial behavior, they did not preclude the intriguing emergence of large-scale collaborative work and gift economies that displayed senses of reciprocity and altruism.<sup>16</sup>

Much research thus focused on how people negotiated senses of space, place, and identity through networked digital media to assert productive social relations.<sup>17</sup> It indicated how people reasserted a sense of materiality to cope with the unsettling effects of this media.<sup>18</sup> Even Rheingold, who celebrated the disembodied power of online users, credited the authenticity of his community to “[its grounding] in [his] everyday physical world.” He constructed virtual community partly on the basis of a sense of materiality attained from “spatial imagery and a sense of place,” through meeting in person, and by the way matters in the WELL would occupy him offline.<sup>19</sup> Increasingly, scholars recognized how the digital medium produced new senses of proximity, or as Mark Nunes described, “Distance disappears into immediacy, and presence becomes a state of simultaneity and transparency.”<sup>20</sup> Scholars described how different online communications systems created a sense of immediacy, simultaneity, or “co-presence” with varying structures and features that let users know when other

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<sup>15</sup> Komito, “The Net as a Foraging Society,” 102-103.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Kollock, “The Economies of Online Cooperation,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 220-238.

<sup>17</sup> Nolan and Weiss, “Learning in Cyberspace,” 318-9.

<sup>18</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in the importance Andrew Shapiro puts on physicality to support online community (“The Net That Binds: Using Cyberspace to Create Real Communities,” *The Nation*, June 21, 1999), as well as in Amitai Etzioni’s concern with the ability of the Net to support community and democracy since they require people to put forth their “true identity” (“Are Virtual and Democratic Communities Feasible?,” in *Democracy and New Media*, ed. Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 85-100).

<sup>19</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 2, 6, 10-11, 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Nunes, “What Space is Cyberspace? The Internet and Virtuality,” in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, ed. David Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 167.

users were concurrently logged-in.<sup>21</sup> Jenni Sunden described how members of a text-based MOO (Multi-User Domain, Object-Oriented) “embodied” themselves by “writing” themselves into being, including creating richly rendered, text-based environments and material culture.<sup>22</sup>

Investigations of the complexity of online interactions and spaces produced critiques that expressed the less liberating aspects of networked computing. The construction of online community as spaces of pure mind that operated independently of people’s bodies and entrenched structures of power and prejudice were quashed.<sup>23</sup> Research showed how people constructed gender, race, sexuality, and nationality online and reproduced hierarchies, discrimination, and violence.<sup>24</sup> In Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid’s summation, online communities are “*not* the agora ... they are not a place of open and free public discourse.”<sup>25</sup> Nunes pointed out that rather than being transformative, the online communities of MOOs could replicate a banal, Enlightenment ideal, “one which re-creates the world as we find it, rather than challenging it. It is a model of a closed community.”<sup>26</sup> Echoing that skepticism, Craig Calhoun posited that the personalization of the Web was not conducive to advancing

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<sup>21</sup> Judith S. Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, 1999, 29-58; Mizuko Ito, “Intimate Visual Co-Presence,” in Workshop on Pervasive Image Capture and Sharing, 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing (UbiComp ’05) (2005); Peter Kollock and Mark A. Smith, “Communities in Cyberspace,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, 4-8; Baym, “The Emergence of On-Line Community,” 39-49.

<sup>22</sup> Sundén, *Material Virtualities*.

<sup>23</sup> Rheingold’s and others’ projections of the liberating potential of the disembodied subject—free of body, free of history, free of responsibility—were critiqued as a white, heteronormative, male fantasy. See Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Examples may be found in Julian Dibbell, “A Rape in Cyberspace,” *The Village Voice*, December 23, 1993, <http://www.juliandibbell.com/articles/a-rape-in-cyberspace/>; Judith S. Donath, “Identity and Deception,” 29-58; and Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

<sup>25</sup> Beth E. Kolko and Elizabeth Reid, “Dissolution and Fragmentation: Problems in On-Line Communities,” in *Cybersociety 2.0*, 216.

<sup>26</sup> Nunes, “What Space is Cyberspace?,” 171.

democracy because it seemed to support bonds of homogeneity rather than heterogeneity.<sup>27</sup>

### Defining Social Media

That community today is at the center of the phenomenon of social media is a function of people coming to terms with the integration of networked digital media into their everyday lives, and of creating new expectations for it. A more in-depth explanation of what “social media” means as a term will lay the groundwork for understanding how the current technologies and culture of this media construct community.

While “social media” is a term that enjoys currency now, it obviously has earlier applications. The telegraph and telephone had and have “social” functions, and books, radio, film, and television are all media that are or have been experienced in social contexts.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, people have long used networked digital media for interpersonal communication, and technologies now associated with social media, like blogs, took form in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> The popularization of a term that stresses the function of networked digital media for socialization thus suggests a cultural turn in its adoption.

The concept, culture, and technologies of social media are evidence of remediation, a phenomenon which cyberculture scholars J. David Bolter and Diane

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<sup>27</sup> See Calhoun, “Community without Propinquity Revisited.” Others voice similar qualms. See Shapiro, “The Net That Binds,” and Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Jill Walker Rettberg mentions that reading books was a collective experience until people learned to read silently. See *Blogging* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 40.

<sup>29</sup> See Baym, “The Emergence of On-Line Community,” 34, and Engdahl, *Online Social Networking*, 16. On the history of blogs, see Julian Dibbell, “Portrait of the Blogger as a Young Man,” *Julian Dibbell* (website), [http://www.juliandibbell.com/articles/feed\\_blogger/](http://www.juliandibbell.com/articles/feed_blogger/); Rettberg, *Blogging*.

Gromala define as “the making of new media forms out of older ones.”<sup>30</sup> Remediation begins with the introduction of a new technology into society, which prompts attempts to explain its usefulness in terms of how it mimics and exceeds the capabilities and functions of previous technologies. Metaphors abound and aid in this process: “It’s like a newspaper, but its content is updated constantly.” This pattern occurred with the emergence of the web in the early 1990s, which prompted great fear, great fantasy, and general anxiety about change.<sup>31</sup> The remediation of networked computing has been a process of adapting to the unique characteristics of digital technology, usefully explained by Lev Manovich as: *numerically represented*—digital objects are made of numerical code; *modular*—images, sounds, etc. are made of discrete, and thus modifiable, elements; *automated*—certain operations are made automatic; *variable*—a digital object is never finished; and, *transcoded*—computers and culture interact and evolve together.<sup>32</sup>

Through that process of mutual interaction and evolution, extreme predictions of this media’s effects have, for the most part, subsided, and our language for living with it indicates its acceptance into everyday life—we now talk of “ubiquitous computing,” “augmented reality,” and “social media.” This last term (the current favorite tops a pile of other terms that gained various degrees of purchase over the past decade, including “social software,” “social computing,” and “groupware”) became popular as the associated term of “Web 2.0” waned. A misleading term that gained widespread traction in 2004, social networking expert danah boyd offers the

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<sup>30</sup> J. David Bolter and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>32</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 27-48.

most cogent definition: Web 2.0 referred to the “venture capital-backed nouveau [*sic*] tech boom” that arose after the dotcom bust at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>33</sup>

During that time, technologies developed that were:

... all about letting people interact with people and data in a fluid way. It’s about recognizing that the web can be more than a broadcast channel; collections of user-generated content can have value. No matter what, it is indeed about the *new* but the new has nothing to do with technology; it has to do with attitude.<sup>34</sup>

In accord with this new “attitude,” “social media” reflects how people embraced and experimented with the performative, participatory, collaborative, and communicative options networked digital media makes possible.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while social media is typically used to refer to tools that enable ubiquitous and mass, as well as personalized, communication like blogs, wikis, and social network sites, as boyd suggests, it is more usefully understood as a cultural movement with social, political, and economic impacts that are a product of people adapting to networked digital media, and vice versa.

Further, the phenomenon of social media entwines with that of the generally convergent nature of the contemporary media environment. “Convergence” is often used to indicate the ability of cell phones, MP3 players, computers, and other devices to perform similar functions, but it more usefully refers to a larger cultural shift in the relationships between people and media. As Henry Jenkins argues, “In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every

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<sup>33</sup> “Web 2.0” was coined by a vice president at O’Reilly Media around 2003 and was popularized in 2004 when O’Reilly’s CEO launched the Web 2.0 Conferences. See Tim O’Reilly, “What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software,” *O’Reilly* (website), September 30, 2005, <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>. The term is unfortunate for misleadingly suggesting change in the actual infrastructure of the web.

<sup>34</sup> danah boyd discusses the term “social software,” an earlier term that expressed the same things “social media” now does, in “The Significance of Social Software,” 17.

<sup>35</sup> Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 17.

consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms.”<sup>36</sup> Convergence intertwines vertical and horizontal ways of communicating and mixes together the messages of traditional producers like corporations with those of individuals.<sup>37</sup> This breakdown in the distinction between producers and consumers is fomented through the promotion of a participatory culture (social media) that encourages the audience to speak and act—interfaces make it easy for a user to add her thoughts to a website, to share it with friends, or to use it as an element in another creative project. This participatory culture also weds convergence to the idea of “collective intelligence,” which seeks to maximize and exploit the capacity of networked digital media to support distributed individuals contributing to collective information-gathering and problem-solving. These contexts infuse social media with ideas about the democratization of the creation, publication, and dissemination of information and knowledge.

### *Museums Go Social*

Trying to adapt to this new environment, everyone and everything from book writers to political candidates, small businesses to global corporations, and public libraries to universities use this media to reach out to audiences.<sup>38</sup> Although goals vary, these efforts trade heavily on the rhetoric of community and media democratization in order to project a sense of goodwill, immediacy, informality, empowerment, and exchange.

Museums have joined this movement for reasons both practical and philosophical. The ease of setting up profiles on external social media sites appeal to

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<sup>36</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>38</sup> Engdahl, *Online Social Networking*, 148.

institutions lacking funds to bolster their staffs and advertising budgets; the use of such sites is a sign of being “with it.” Social media, conceived as inherently interactive and occurring within a group, also jibes comfortably with museums’ shift towards encouraging social learning and embracing a view of themselves as social spaces. And for those interested in appearing, or truly desirous of being, more democratic, social media have potential for serving that goal in many ways. Online audiences for museum websites generally dwarf the numbers who can enter museum doors; creating presences on social media sites that are used millions of times a day and by millions of people arguably broaden and potentially diversify traditional museum audiences. As the Brooklyn Museum asked, when Facebook has 500 million users worldwide, “why should we expect [audiences] to come to us?”<sup>39</sup> Museums may also attract new audiences by using social media to mitigate intimidating facades and gallery spaces by utilizing their casual culture to show a more “human” face.<sup>40</sup> By creating new channels of communication and new spaces in which to showcase their resources, museums may also use social media to increase openness and transparency in their practices, such as by inviting visitors to contribute to decision-making processes or giving them behind-the-scenes views.<sup>41</sup> Some social media, like

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, “500 Million Stories,” *The Facebook Blog*, 21 July 2010, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=409753352130>; Caruth and Bernstein “Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum.”

<sup>40</sup> Shelley Bernstein, “Where Do We Go From Here? Continuing with Web 2.0 at the Brooklyn Museum,” in *Museums and the Web 2008: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2008), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2008/papers/bernstein/bernstein.html>. It is common practice for museums to identify the authors on their social media sites to give audiences a point of identification. This is a common public relations strategy aimed at building trust and empathy. See Michael L. Kent, “Critical Analysis of Blogging in Public Relations,” *Public Relations Review* 34 (2008): 35.

<sup>41</sup> See Bliss Jensen and Lynda Kelly, “Exploring Social Media for Front-End Evaluation,” *Exhibitionist* (Fall 2009): 19-25, and Richard McCoy, “Collaborating in the Public’s Domain,” *CeROArt: Conservation, exposition, Restauration d’Object d’Art* 3 (2009), <http://ceroart.revues.org/index1159.html>.

wikis and “folksonomic” tagging, can be used to suggest the multiple and various epistemologies at work in museums and meaning-making; such technologies can represent diverse viewpoints in non-hierarchical manners, portray knowledge as a process, and present museums more as contributors rather than arbiters of knowledge. Such methods of tapping into collective intelligence enrich and further diversify the information museums offer as resources, as well as allow them to better acknowledge the agency of their audiences.

Museums have been engaging in social media to various degrees since they launched their first public-facing websites between 1994 and 1998.<sup>42</sup> Although many of these early websites acted like electronic brochures and focused on drawing people to the physical space of museums, they also sometimes showed enthusiastic experimentation with what the web could offer unto itself, such as online exhibits, public forums, teacher resources, and encouraging feedback for site improvement.<sup>43</sup> These acts were also tied early on to the concept of community, such as when the Mystic Seaport’s site “[sought] to build online ‘communities’ that focus on the museum’s collections.”<sup>44</sup>

Since the explosion of social media soon after the turn of the twenty-first century, they embraced the various technologies that have come to be absorbed under that label, including blogs, social network sites, and tagging. The first social media platform museums experimented with were blogs, which by the early twenty-first

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<sup>42</sup> These followed the invention of the first graphical web browser (Mosaic) in 1993 and the subsequent popularization of this technology. N.A., “Perfect Site: Museums on the World Wide Web,” *Museum News*, 34-40.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; Also see MacDonald and Alsford, “Towards The Virtual Museum,” and David Bearman and Jennifer Trant, “Interactivity Comes of Age: Museums and the World Wide Web,” *Museum International* 204, no. 4 (1999): 20-24.

<sup>44</sup> N.A., “Perfect Site,” 39.

century had matured into communicative platforms characterized by frequent posts that appeared in reverse chronological order. They were also considered to be highly conversational, so much so that scholars of blogs argue that they cannot be understood without considering the comments of readers.<sup>45</sup> Museums of all sizes and genres,<sup>46</sup> from university museums like the Henry Art Gallery (the “Hankblog”) to science centers like COSI Columbus (“Chez Sez: Thoughts from David Chesebrough, President and CEO of COSI Columbus”), turned to blogging to put out news and events; provide behind-the-scenes reports on exhibits; share collections; get feedback; and for professional development. This popularity may be explained by their flexibility and because they are a safe way to dip museum toes into the sea of social media since they essentially are private enclaves. Blogs offered museums control over design and the audience, as comments could be prevented or moderated before being published.<sup>47</sup> Museums that blogged could thus participate in what was often called the “blogging community” or “blogosphere” with little risk.

Museums later branched into microblogging, primarily through Twitter, the platform that gained massive mainstream attention in 2009.<sup>48</sup> Dispensing short entries in the general form of a blog (e.g. entries listed in reverse chronology, RSS-enabled), Twitter lets museums broadcast messages, answer questions, and do “damage

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<sup>45</sup> Museums began blogging roughly in 2004. The practice grew exponentially after 2006. See Jim Spadaccini, *Museums 2.0: A Survey of Museum Blogs & Community Sites* (Ideum, March 6, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.; Jim Spadaccini and Sebastian Chan, “Radical Trust: The State of the Museum Blogosphere,” in *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2007), [http://conference.archimuse.com/biblio/radical\\_trust\\_the\\_state\\_of\\_the\\_museum\\_blogosphere](http://conference.archimuse.com/biblio/radical_trust_the_state_of_the_museum_blogosphere).

<sup>47</sup> Blogs were attractive because they could be hosted on external, customizable blogging services, like Blogger or Wordpress, or built in-house and hosted on internal servers.

<sup>48</sup> This shift may be dated to Twitter founder Evan Williams’ appearance on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” on April 17, 2009 and to the attention the platform received from the mass media during Iran’s “Green Revolution.”

control” (the platform evolved as a place for the public to air complaints against companies and for the latter to respond). A few museums also use it to stage hybrid programs, such as offering tours during which people present in the museum “tweet” messages that online participants can follow and to which they can respond.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, museums ventured onto external social network sites a few years ago, following the mainstream adoption of social networking and the expansion of Facebook to allow institutions to create profile pages.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the first museum to join Facebook, the Brooklyn Museum entered this space for the transparency and humanness it gave the organization, as well as because it allowed outside developers to create applications for the site. It created ArtShare to increase access and awareness of its collections: Facebook members can pick artworks from a selection of pieces and display them on their profiles. It also allows artists to use the application to get more attention for their work.

Concurrently, museums joined media-sharing sites, which are platforms for sharing music, video, photography, etc. Many began to use the photo-sharing site Flickr and the most popular video-sharing site in the world, YouTube, to share promotional or behind-the-scenes photos and videos. In January 2008, the Library of Congress worked with Flickr to launch the beta project, the Flickr Commons, which

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<sup>49</sup> I helped conduct one of the first, if not the first, tour of this type, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in June 2009 (SFMOMA had invited people through Twitter to a special on-site tour shortly before, but it was unclear if they sent messages during the tour). The Guggenheim staged one a few months later. Museums also “live-tweet” during events and programs to give Twitter followers a window into them.

<sup>50</sup> Following News Corporation’s purchase of MySpace in July 2005 for \$580 million and the subsequent media storm, social network sites exploded as a cultural phenomenon. Facebook launched organizational pages in November 2007. Veronika Belenkaya, “Brooklyn Museum art clicks with Facebook.com users,” *Daily News Express*, November 21, 2007, sec. Brooklyn, [http://www.nydailynews.com/ny\\_local/brooklyn/2007/11/14/2007-11-14\\_brooklyn\\_museum\\_art\\_clicks\\_with\\_facebook-3.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/brooklyn/2007/11/14/2007-11-14_brooklyn_museum_art_clicks_with_facebook-3.html), accessed 7 June 2008.

sought to tap into Flickr's active community of photography connoisseurs to see if they would "tag" historic photos from the library's collections. Rather than producing rigid taxonomies, tagging creates "folksonomies" by letting people describe digital objects based on their individual criteria and whims. This was a bold move since it opened collections to intellectual input from the public, and it consequently produced knowledge about photographs previously unknown to the library.<sup>51</sup> Other museums and joint projects experiment with tagging to similar effect, and a minority incorporates the opportunity directly into their websites.<sup>52</sup>

A final way museums use social media is to create "hybrid" experiences, which seek to give online visitors access to museums, to give new experiences to on-site visitors, and to encourage long-term relationships with visitors that involve recurrent visitation to their buildings and online spaces. In the words of Barbara J. Soren and Nathalie Lemelin, they aim to produce "a community of learners" that makes itself visible through "a cycle of online and on-site repeat visitations, and increased participation in the museum's programs."<sup>53</sup> Recently, museums use social network sites that involve "geo-location" to encourage this practice of hybrid visiting.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Springer et al., "For the Common Good."

<sup>52</sup> Examples may be found with Steve Museum, a tagging project conducted by several art museums in North America. The Brooklyn Museum and the Indianapolis Museum of Art both allow visitors to tag their collections through their websites.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara J. Soren and Nathalie Lemelin, "'Cyberpals!/Les cybercopains!': A Look at Online Museum Visitor Experiences," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 47, no. 1 (2004): 67. For instance, in 2001, the Seattle Art Museum's website hosted discussion boards in relation to its exhibit, *Treasures from a Lost Civilization: Ancient Chinese Art from Sichuan*. Visitors were given cards that read, "Now that you've seen the exhibition, solve the mysteries online!" Online they could join discussions, in which experts on the subject matter who had been enlisted by the museum were also participating.

<sup>54</sup> Many museums are experimenting with social network sites like Foursquare, which reward members for "checking in" at locations; check-ins earn participants various badges and titles—a person with the most check-ins at a location is deemed by Foursquare its "mayor." Businesses reward mayors, as has

This plethora of activity indicates how museums embraced social media over the past several years, but it is important to note that they exist within a continually tense history of these institutions' relationship to networked digital media, which constructs the technology as both a threat to and a natural extension of museum practice. Modern digital computing was introduced into museum work in the 1960s,<sup>55</sup> and it launched various debates about its proper place in practice that continue today. As Ross Parry explains, this history is one in which museums see digital media as both “incompatible” and “compatible” with practice. Excellent histories devoted to this subject exist and the details are not needed here.<sup>56</sup> What is important to know is that some practitioners saw digital media as a threat to the traditional purview of museums and devaluing tangible objects, paper records, exhibit furniture, and buildings; many objected to it also for diminishing museums as spaces of a particular type of leisure (quiet, contemplative) and type of knowledge (objective, original, visceral, material). These perceptions fueled thinking about digital media in museum work along the lines of multiple binaries—education/entertainment; object/information; and, real/virtual—that devalued the digital realm and tolerated it only in its service to valorizing tangible objects.<sup>57</sup> However, other museum practitioners embraced computing for its immateriality and flexibility, as it presented ways to streamline and standardize collection information, new opportunities for

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the Brooklyn Museum, which gives free membership to its online membership program, 1stfans, to the mayor of the museum at its monthly evening program, *Target First Saturday*.

<sup>55</sup> The technology was invented during World War II. Its first seed among museums was perhaps planted in 1963 when the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History appointed a scientific staff committee to explore the potential of data processing for museums. Parry, *Recoding the Museum*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> See Parry, *Recoding the Museum*, and Katherine Jones-Garmil, “Laying the Foundation: Three Decades of Computer Technology in the Museum,” in *The Wired Museum*.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Wilcomb Washburn, “Collecting Information, Not Objects,” *Museum News*, February 1984.

marketing, and could expand access and audiences, build partnerships, expose new interpretations of objects, and create new avenues for revenue.<sup>58</sup>

Today a real/virtual perception of digital media is still in play,<sup>59</sup> but it is much diminished and museums more commonly see networked digital media as supporting different, but equally valid, paths of engagement with museum collections and resources.<sup>60</sup> In this context, they experiment with social media to serve goals of access, audience growth and diversification, to market themselves, to offer new ways to engage with museums and their resources, to communicate with audiences, and even to collaborate with them. While they signal new opportunity, they also prompt continuing questions about shared authority with audiences, effects on their reputations as repositories of expert knowledge, fear of losing control of their assets and messages, and considerations of what they are willing to risk to take advantage of this media's promise for knowledge-building and serving their audiences.<sup>61</sup> One way they navigate the unsettling nature of these issues is by invoking community, which gives them a tangible sense of their audiences and lets them create social spaces in which they can regulate and renegotiate audience relations.

### Community in Social Media

Following a decade in which the ability of networked digital media to even support community seemed to be in constant question, community now saturates the

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<sup>58</sup> See Bearman and Trant, "Interactivity Comes of Age," McKenzie, "Building a Virtual Museum Community"; Parry, *Recoding the Museum*; and Thomas and Mintz, *The Virtual and the Real*.

<sup>59</sup> See Archibald, *The New Town Square*, and Russo and Watkins, "Digital Cultural Communication."

<sup>60</sup> This is especially true at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where its priority to combat Holocaust denial motivated it to put significant funds towards developing web content to reach audiences in countries and cultures with high degrees of Holocaust denial.

<sup>61</sup> See MacArthur, "Can Museums Allow Online Users to Become Participants?"; and Proctor, "Digital: Museum as Platform."

landscape of social media, appearing in marketing language and even as tabs in global navigation. The centrality of community to social media reflects a significant rhetorical and cultural shift, which signifies the acceptance of communication as a valid means of supporting community. This evolution also reflects how democracy has become even more conflated with notions of communication and community. This occurs since social media creates accessible spaces for dialogue and public action (e.g., opportunities to vote and review things), and because they combine the “power of the grassroots media,” which “diversifies,” with the “power of broadcast media,” which “amplifies.” Jenkins explains how this dynamic environment has great potential for social change:

That’s why we should be concerned with the flow between the two: expanding the potentials [*sic*] for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. Throw away the powers of broadcasting and one has only cultural fragmentation. The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it [*sic*], amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media.<sup>62</sup>

Social media offer museums ways to benefit from the amplification of their messages and the diversification of messages that come to them from their audiences. How well they make use of both opportunities is wrapped up in how they construct community through social media, as those constructions shape how they implement and evaluate those technologies. These effects of community are evident in how social media construct community through conventions of design, language, and features.

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<sup>62</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 268.

### How Social Media Make Community

“Social visibility” is a key feature of social media.<sup>63</sup> By making people, their networks, their actions, and their communications visible, social media construct and represent community. Online, visibility is attained through materializing social interaction. Before the introduction of the graphical-user interface, people did this through text.<sup>64</sup> These practices try to replicate information that people rely on in the physical realm for understanding how to act and behave in various situations. Much has been written about the role of vision in public to influence social behavior and relations.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, beyond allowing people to “see” each other in networked digital media space, this materialization is integrally about giving people a sense of social order.

The “necessity of materiality for social order is not to be doubted,” writes Don Slater.<sup>66</sup> His ethnography of traders of “sexpics” over IRC (Internet Relay Chat) revealed several “mechanisms of materialization” used to foster a sense of ethics while trading. Being digital files, these images were infinitely replicable. Yet, traders made them “thing-like” in order to make them operate as property within a system of economic exchange; making the files seem material created scarcity where there was none. This occurred through the software made for trading, which “gave specific material forms to the act of trading, to the objects traded and to the traders,” as well as by “hardwiring” materiality into the programs—they stored peoples’ IRC

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<sup>63</sup> Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Sundén, *Material Virtualities*.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993), and Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>66</sup> Slater, “Making Things Real,” 227.

nicknames and IP addresses to ensure one person could not trade simultaneously under multiple nicknames.<sup>67</sup> Participants went to these lengths because they perceived the immaterial environment of networked computing “in terms of both opportunity and danger.” It allowed opportunities for deception and cheating, but at the cost of “extreme social instability,” which would make it difficult to “[sustain] the kinds of normative sociality in terms of which these opportunities have any meaning or value, let alone can be easily pursued.”<sup>68</sup> Traders thus materialized themselves and their acts and objects of trade to construct a sense of ethics, which governed their social space of trade and allowed them to invest emotionally and socially in each other, establishing a sense of “ethical sociality” that could be sustained over time.

Social media leans on community to similar effect. The word itself suggests a social contract—an ideal social contract invested in deep connections fed by frequent interaction, norms of behavior, moral obligations to each other, and a sense of the common good. These ideas are self-evident in the “community guidelines” that are a common feature of social media sites, which delineate accepted and unacceptable behavior and discourse. It is also evinced by “community courts,” such as those on Facebook and Ebay, which arbitrate issues between members. Community in social media is thus laden with ideas about regulation as much as it is about liberation and transformation. Further, in the ways it is materialized, it is possible to show it is laden with particular ideas about democracy.

Social media use conventions of language, design, and features to make the people and communities using them visible to each other, and thus to construct and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 236-237.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 231.

represent community as central to their purpose. These conventions are strongly based on communication. Language about community is infused through social media in various ways. Sometimes social media sites are described as “community sites.” Or, they include “Community” as a tab in website navigation, under which is grouped things like user guidelines, options to register, craft profiles, form networks, collaborate, and communicate with associates and strangers.<sup>69</sup> Also common are sites that assert community through introductory language that orients new users to the expectations of the site. These stress dialogue, commonality, and collectivity, as well as use a tone that is friendly, welcoming, informal, and connotes a sense of leisure and everydayness. Tropicana’s BlogHer site, “The Juice,” introduces the site as ““the good stuff” of our community. Every week we’ll start a new discussion around our weekly video, and look at what we can bring into our lives, and what we can drop.”<sup>70</sup> Totokaelo, a small clothing boutique in Seattle, launched its online shop as: “more than a boutique: it’s a forum for honest feedback and advice”:

We encourage and facilitate the free exchange of information through the creation of a private online community of like-minded individuals. ... Through Totokaelo, you have access to women who share an interest in the same designers. If you’re wondering how a particular item fits, looking for new music, or need a hotel recommendation for an upcoming trip, you can turn to a community with similar tastes to your own.<sup>71</sup>

The video-sharing site Vimeo addresses unregistered users with this introduction:

“Welcome, you’re new, aren’t you? Vimeo is a respectful community of creative people who are passionate about sharing the videos they make.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Dell’s “IdeaStorm” (<http://www.ideastorm.com/>), Etsy (<http://www.etsy.com/>), and Last.fm (<http://www.last.fm/>) exhibit these conventions.

<sup>70</sup> Tropicana, *The Juice* (website), <http://www.blogger.com/groups/juice>.

<sup>71</sup> Totokaelo, “About,” *Totokaelo* (website), <http://totokaelo.com/articles/about>.

<sup>72</sup> Vimeo, *Vimeo* (website), <http://vimeo.com/>.

Likewise, in the museum field, community pervades the language that museums use to present their social media efforts online. In every case, it is deeply associated with communication and with new technologies. Although not the norm, some include community as a global navigational tab on their websites. The Brooklyn Museum and the International Museum of Women use these labels as umbrellas over everything from comment boards and site registration to podcasts and RSS feeds (Figure 3.1).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> International Museum of Women, “Community,” *International Museum of Women* (website), <http://www.imow.org/community/index>, accessed 17 November 2010. The National WWII Museum in New Orleans includes a “WWII Community” navigational tab, which allows one to “Discuss various topics on WWII,” “Find out how to research your WWII Veteran,” “Create your own personal page,” “Blog Central,” and to “View the latest podcast” from the museum. See “WWII Community,” *National World War II Museum* (website), <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/wwii-community/>, accessed 15 March 2011. Also see Greenmuseum, *Greenmuseum* (website), <http://www.greenmuseum.org/>. “RSS” is an acronym that is broken down in various ways, including “Really Simple Syndication” and “Rich Site Summary.” Either way, it refers to technologies for the syndication of digital content.

# Brooklyn Museum

## Community

- Posse
- Comment
- Twitter
- Foursquare
- Blogs
- Photos
- Videos
- Network
- 1stfans
- Podcasts
- RSS Feeds



Photograph courtesy [pocketmonsterd](#)

The Brooklyn Museum believes in community and in the importance of the visitor experience. In this area you'll find a number of ways to connect with us: blogs, photo and video submissions, podcasts, and more. We look forward to hearing from you.

Figure 3.1 Screenshot of Brooklyn Museum's "Community" webpage, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.com/community/>, captured 4 April 2010.

They also introduce these sections with welcoming and inviting tones. For instance, the latter uses language to attach community to communication, network-building, and collaboration: “Welcome to the I.M.O.W. Community, where you can connect with interesting people and powerful ideas from around the world. Start by [registering](#). Participate by commenting in our [forum](#). Connect by inviting your [friends](#). Create and [submit your work](#) to I.M.O.W.’s latest online exhibition [Economica](#).” Other examples include the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose features a box on its homepage that says “Join our Community,” under which appear the icons for Facebook, Yelp, Plus 3, and other social media sites; the Mattress Factory Art Museum in Pittsburgh notes under its “Connect” tab that it “encourages

you to continue the discussion about art within your own social networks and Internet communities,” and then lists its blog, Twitter and Facebook accounts, video confessionals from visitors, etc.<sup>74</sup> In such ways, museums present social media as spaces that form communities through some manner of communication, whether it be the exchange of words or performing some action. Further, in including technologies like podcasts and RSS feeds—which are new modes of broadcast and syndication and generally lack direct ways to provide feedback—under the blanket of community, museums sometimes reduce community altogether to acts of communication.

In addition to language, social media use design to materialize senses of community. Sites and applications typically make use of thick, rounded fonts that reinforce their friendly tones. The backgrounds of Vimeo’s homepage and “Join Vimeo” page are screen-wide illustrations of an idyllic world, complete with shining sun, lush green grass, abundant water, hot air balloon, grazing cows, a frolicking Pegasus, and lots of people with various skin tones making movies (Figure 3.2). Vimeo’s visualization of

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<sup>74</sup> The Tech Museum of Innovation, *The Tech Museum of Innovation* (website), <http://www.thetech.org/>; The Mattress Factory Art Museum, *The Mattress Factory Art Museum* (website), <http://www.mattress.org/index.cfm?event=ShowFeature&id=4>.



Figure 3.2 Screenshot of top-half and bottom-half of Vimeo homepage, <http://vimeo.com/>, captured 11 November 2009.

its community sets a tone for behavior predicated on the ideal social relations of an ideal small town: a drive-in theater gives the scene an air of nostalgia for a small town, while the vision of a peaceable kingdom of creative people living in harmony with animals and nature conveys a sense of *Gemeinschaft*. Speaking also of community as exclusive, Vimeo's is bounded—water cascades off its earth in a gleaming blue curtain into nothingness.

Museums tend to incorporate the “friendly” conventions of social media design in more subtle ways. The overall design of the Indianapolis Museum of Art’s *Art Babble* strives to set a casual and fun tone for engagement with this new website (launched in 2010) meant to encourage and promote art, artists, and discussion about art through high-quality video (Figure 3.3). Its name alone suggests a casual,

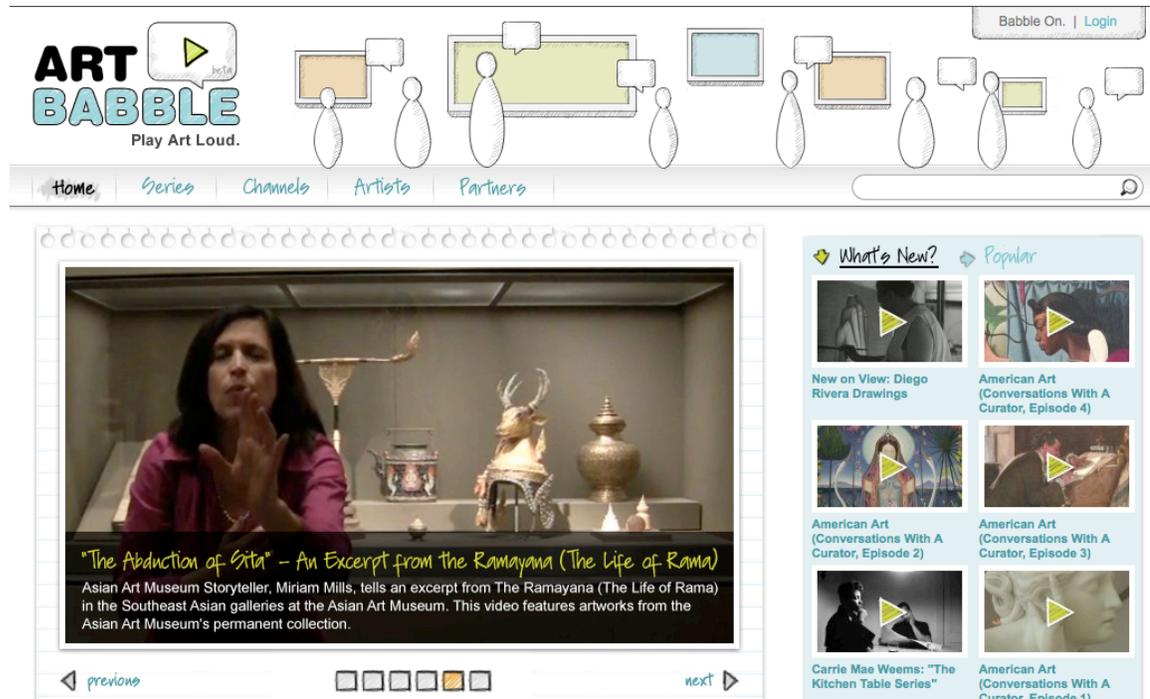


Figure 3.3 Screenshot of Art Babble homepage, <http://www.artbabble.org/>, captured 27 March 2011. communicative atmosphere; its tagline—“Play Art Loud”—takes a slangy approach to making art “cool.” Its logo is rendered in bubble letters, and the font in its global navigation bar looks hand-scribbled. Approachability is also conveyed in its pastel color palette, and in the rounded figures that populate its banner image. The centrality of communication to the site is expressed in the empty speech bubbles that appear by the figures’ heads. The Brooklyn Museum provides another example on the launching page for its “Community” section. Consistent with its general website design, the page is modern and clean, but, it is dominated by a photo of a group of youthful,

multi-ethnic urban hipsters posing playfully in the museum's lobby. Their sense of fun and "cool" is meant to describe both the community and the museum (see Figure 3.1).

It is not uncommon for social media sites to create pictorial representations of community, although Vimeo is an exception in its explicitness.<sup>75</sup> More generally, social media promotes the imagining of community by making people, their networks, their activities, and their conversations visible to each other. Community is expressed by visibly articulating individuals and networks through profiles; through communication; and through "real time." Indicating how potent are the notions of the *polis* and small towns to community, these tactics present community in social media as predicated on public, frequent, immediate, and proximal communication.

A subset of social media, social network sites illustrate this investment in materializing users and networks because they are characterized by "[enabling] users to articulate and make visible their social networks."<sup>76</sup> Launched in 1997 and mainstreamed in 2005, these sites specifically aim to represent (and sometimes build) "social networks"—the webs of relationships in which people live.<sup>77</sup> danah boyd and Nicole Ellison define them as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list

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<sup>75</sup> Other examples of sites that use pictorial representations to suggest community are Meebo (<http://www.meebo.com/>) and Blippy (<http://blippy.com/>). While neither explicitly reference community, the message is there indirectly. For instance, Meebo's tagline is "Together is better."

<sup>76</sup> danah boyd and Nicole Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2007): article 11, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>.

<sup>77</sup> boyd and Ellison distinguish between social network sites and social networking sites based on the reasoning that the latter is more aimed at "networking" in the sense of meeting new people. In comparison, research about social network sites suggests they are used to principally stay in touch with people they already know. Ibid.

of connections and those made by others within the system” (Figure 3.4).<sup>78</sup> Though they



Figure 3.4 Screenshot of author's Facebook profile page, captured 13 March 2011.

differ somewhat in architecture and features, social network sites depend on the building blocks of people’s profiles. To join a site, a person must register and create a profile by filling out various forms asking for personal information about her identity and interests. She may upload a profile photograph, and can adjust, to some degree, who sees her profile. She is then prompted to make public her relations to other people on the site, as well as to her workplace, organizations, tastes, etc. As boyd puts it, such profiles “[amount] to an accessorized digital body.”<sup>79</sup> In these ways, people materialize their bodies and identities online, as well as position themselves within

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> danah boyd, “Friends, Friendsters, and Top 8: Writing Community into Being on Social Network Sites,” *First Monday* 11, no. 12 (December 4, 2006), [http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11\\_12/boyd/index.htm](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_12/boyd/index.htm).

social networks and specific geographic locations.<sup>80</sup> These identity-building moves relieve anxiety about the anonymous and placeless nature of networked digital media. Facing the “invisible audiences” that populate social network sites, people’s willingness to articulate networks may be in part to make those audiences visible—by more clearly grasping who is watching their performance of identity, they may extract from the abstract a sense of order.<sup>81</sup> Further evidence of this desire for order may be found in the common practice of trying to connect to as many people as possible—regardless of actual connection. This practice indicates how social network sites “appeal to our instinct for collecting,”<sup>82</sup> which is an instinct aimed generally at cultivating a sense of the world and social order. Collecting connections extends this behavior online.<sup>83</sup>

While hundreds, if not thousands, of museums now use social network sites (primarily Facebook) to encourage the materialization of audiences, they also incorporate identity-building into in-house social media projects. Current examples include *Art Babble*, my case studies of *Discover Nikkei* and *Science Buzz*, and perhaps the earliest example of *Rhizome*, which today is a non-profit and website affiliated with the New Museum (New York) that supports artists working with

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<sup>80</sup> Social media’s investment in materializing people and networks is especially apparent in the contemporary preoccupation with geo-location. The emergence of social network sites like Foursquare (<http://foursquare.com/>) and Gowalla (<http://gowalla.com/>), as well as Facebook’s introduction of “Places” in 2010, prompt and reward people for announcing their location in physical space, which maps online social relations back within physical space.

<sup>81</sup> See danah boyd, “Friends,” and, “Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites.”

<sup>82</sup> Rettberg,  *Blogging*, 73.

<sup>83</sup> Slater also noted this tendency in his research, where the efforts to collect complete series of sexpics worked on the same principle “as trainspotting or stamp collecting: [turning] the open-endedness of the world into a bounded, measurable and controllable set of things.” Slater, “Making Things Real,” 242.

networked digital media.<sup>84</sup> A robust website (that lists “Community” in its global navigation), the site allows artists to create profiles, upload artwork to a shared database, participate in online forums, post events, and submit artwork to commission competitions and vote on entries. The Brooklyn Museum, yet again, provides another example with its “posse,” which is made up of users who register to contribute descriptive “tags” about the museum’s collection; when they create accounts, they visually identify themselves by choosing a work from the museum’s collection.

Across social media sites, people are allowed to make profiles, just not always with the sophistication afforded by social network sites. The principal way social media try to express identity and community is by encouraging public acts of communication, whether by engaging in conversation or taking an action. Users endlessly confront solicitations to share “What’s on your mind?” (Facebook), to record “What’s happening” (Twitter), or to tell Stumble Upon what one wants to discover.<sup>85</sup> To be described as social media, a technology must, at the very least, allow users to contribute to a site *in text*.<sup>86</sup> Other options to make oneself visible include: creating a profile; uploading photos, videos, audio; rating or voting on content; “tagging” it; downloading it; sharing it; or marking it as “favorite” or “liked.” Whether people are conversing or participating, all of these opportunities communicate their membership in a public fashion.

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<sup>84</sup> Rhizome began as a small e-mail list in 1996 and affiliated with the New Museum in 2003. New Museum, “About,” *Rhizome* (website), <http://rhizome.org/about/>.

<sup>85</sup> These questions frame the fields in which users can take actions. Sites sometimes change prompts; Facebook formerly asked people to “share something.”

<sup>86</sup> Users are also typically allowed to private message other users or chat with them, but a social media site *always* provides a mechanism to publicly comment in text (even if it has been turned off).

Furthermore, social media emphasize *frequent* communication for building a sense of community. Thought to nurture the creation of a dense network of people familiar and concerned with each other and with a collective good, frequent communication is often cited as the defining characteristic of online community. For instance, David Weinberger calls Wikipedia a “product of a community, not just of disconnected individuals.”<sup>87</sup> His sense of the community of the collaborative online encyclopedia derives from the way it expresses communication between a group: each entry includes a page that archives every edit made to it and any related discussion by its editors.<sup>88</sup> Weinberger reads this process as a “conversation” that takes place recurrently in the pursuit of collectively building knowledge: “it requires active engagement.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Clay Shirky defines community on the web on the basis of frequency and density of communications between senders and receivers:

Though both [an audience and community] are held together in some way by communication, an audience is typified by a one-way relationship between sender and receiver, and by the disconnection of its members from one another – a one-to-many pattern. In a community, by contrast, people typically send and receive messages, and the members of a community are connected to one another, not just to some central outlet – a many-to-many pattern.<sup>90</sup>

Amounting to a hive of interconnections, “‘community’ is used as a term of art to refer to groups whose members actively communicate with another.” In such a construction, people who choose not to publicly converse or participate may be seen as located outside the membership of online community. The common use in online

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<sup>87</sup> David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 138.

<sup>88</sup> Weinberger also credits the sense of community to the development of “social structures as needed.” *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

<sup>90</sup> Clay Shirky, “Communities, Audiences, and Scale,” *Clay Shirky’s Writings About the Internet: Networks, Economics, and Culture*, 6 April 2002, [http://www.shirky.com/writings/community\\_scale.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/community_scale.html).

parlance of the term “lurker” to refer to people who choose to remain invisible suggests how online lurkers are often viewed negatively. Even though it may reflect the behavior of the majority of online users and be motivated by innocuous reasons, with its traditional negative connotations of idleness, stalking, and deviance, lurking is sometimes viewed as suspicious or unsavory, leading them to be seen as “[noncontributors],” or even people who are “shirking social responsibility.”<sup>91</sup>

The idea that frequent interaction sustains community online ties the prevailing conception of community in social media to the concepts of the *polis*, *Gemeinschaft*, and the city—communities based partly on proximity.<sup>92</sup> Social media sites project a sense of proximity by striving to create tangible senses of simultaneity and immediacy by highlighting that the conversation and activity on their sites are taking place in “real time,” or have happened recently. Their homepages regularly feature their “most recent activity,” sometimes marked down to the second.

As noted earlier, Benedict Anderson has written convincingly of the significance of immediacy and simultaneity to constructing the “imagined community” of modern nations (as well as the construction of subjects willing to sacrifice their lives for it). The development of “temporal coincidence ... measured by clock and calendar” was integral to this phenomenon, which Anderson credits to the dissemination of “print-capitalism.”<sup>93</sup> The technologies of the novel and

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<sup>91</sup> Shumar and Renniger, “Introduction,” 6. For a discussion of “lurking” as a term, see Blair Nonnecke and Jenny Preece, “Silent Participants: Getting to Know Lurkers Better,” in *From Usenet to CoWebs – Interacting with Social Information Spaces*, ed. Christoph Lueg and Danyel Fisher (London: Springer, 2003), 110-132

<sup>92</sup> Fred Stutzman relates social media to cities in “The Vibrancy of Online Social Space,” in *Mobilizing Generation 2.0: A Practical Guide to Using Web2.0 Technologies to Recruit, Organize and Engage Youth*, ed. Ben Rigby (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 95-96.

<sup>93</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 24.

newspaper in eighteenth century Europe spread a sense of “homogenous, empty time” that allowed subjects to imagine relationships between each other based on common behavior:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000 odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.<sup>94</sup>

Dates on newspaper issues tick off units of time and the sight of other people reading exact replicas of one’s own newspaper create a vision of an “extraordinary mass ceremony” in which “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”<sup>95</sup>

Projecting simultaneity, immediacy, and proximity has been a key feature of social media since its most early forms. Chat programs assured participants that another person was similarly engaged with a computer by identifying associates who were logged in at the same time.<sup>96</sup> This stress on simultaneity also appeared in blogs, where present tense, observes Aaron Barlow, “is [their] most immediately visible aspect.”<sup>97</sup> In fact, blogs not regularly or recently updated are usually assumed to be “dead.” Today, social media sites like Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter “continually reassure that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” through even

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>96</sup> Slater, “Making Things Real.”

<sup>97</sup> Barlow, *Blogging America*, 65. “Most recent activity” is so privileged in social media sites that Technorati, a popular blog search engine, does not track links older than six months.

more powerful means than print media.<sup>98</sup> As a user looks at any of those interfaces, they see information about people who are simultaneously logged-in and what they are doing. This sense of immediacy and proximity is also reinforced by knowing others are looking at the same or similar screens through the same or similar devices.<sup>99</sup> Facebook and Twitter treat users to a constant stream of updated messages that suggest continuous time: posts appeared “33 minutes ago via iPhone.”<sup>100</sup> Facebook also lets a user see who in her network is simultaneously online. YouTube and Flickr give pride of place on their homepages to the “most recent” uploads: the center of Flickr’s home page proudly displays the number of “uploads in the last minute” and the number of “things geotagged this month.” YouTube’s homepage features “Videos Being Watched Now” to reassure a user of the existence of fellow watchers, while video pages record the number of “views” and suggest the size of the otherwise invisible audience. Similarly, Vimeo’s homepage portrays what is happening on the site “right now” (see Figure 3.2).<sup>101</sup> This emphasis on real-time activity (and recently real-time search) in the emergent media landscape represents the newest way we “imagine” communities into being. Even when we face computer screens alone, in the privacy of a dwelling, social media tells us we are not alone.

By using external social media sites, museums regularly rely on “real time” to convey a sense of simultaneity and immediacy among audiences. Towards similar ends, their in-house social media projects, which tend to lack enough users to adequately relay a sense of “real time” through constantly updated information,

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<sup>98</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35-36.

<sup>99</sup> These sites also bolster this sense by identifying modes of entry, such as “via the Web,” or “via Tweetdeck.”

<sup>100</sup> After a day or so, Twitter messages are stamped with the exact date and time of posting.

<sup>101</sup> All websites mentioned here were accessed in March 2011.

emphasize presence and action by highlighting recent activity. A user who quickly peruses the homepages of *Art Babble*, *Discover Nikkei*, and *Science Buzz* sees, respectively, “What’s New?,” “Latest Articles,” and “Latest Comments from the Buzz Blog,” or are prompted to “Read the latest discussions.” *Rhizome* promotes “Active Discussions” on its homepage, enticing people to browse and participate.

### *Invoking Community with Care*

Detailed in these ways, it is apparent that social media construct community with biases about how ideal participants act and assume the production of more communication equals better communication. Being attached to ideas about the democratization of media, both of these assumptions are troubling for how they reduce the achievement of democratic conditions to people who communicate frequently in public. As they stress the importance of frequent communication to attain full membership in a community, social media construct ideal citizens as “active”—that is, visible—communicants and participants. People who visit a website and do not comment, tag, or share are “lurkers,” a term laden with suspicion and distrust. These ideas malign invisibility, observation, and delayed response, and forget the value of privacy, observation, and contemplation. They forget that the majority of social media users do not make themselves visible, or at least not always on a regular basis. In following a “power law” of participation, which shows that a minority of users generate content or participate publicly, social media users exist in a spectrum of participation.<sup>102</sup> For museums, then, constructing their ideal online

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<sup>102</sup> For discussions on degrees of online participation, see Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 124-125. Sebastian Chan discusses these issues in a museum setting in a couple of blog posts: “Levels of Participation/Community,” *fresh + new(er)* (blog), April 19, 2007,

visitors as public actors neglects to consider the value of activities along that spectrum of engagement.

The way social media construct community as based on frequent communication also does not correlate instantly to more democratic social conditions, for it is clear that more communication does not equal better communication. Further, and social media technologies, while highly accessible, do not make the circumstances for participation or dialogue more egalitarian. Rather, they exhibit the same difficulties of online communication apparent in the last decade, when, as Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid noticed, “flame wars” were set off because online exchanges became polarized so quickly; the “often minute analysis of words that occurs on Usenet and in mailing lists causes the author of those words to become inextricably tied to defending what he or she said.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, anonymity seems to have fed a culture of ruthless antagonism on YouTube.<sup>104</sup> Rather than stoking social change, social media are often used simply for broadcast purposes and to take advantage of the “viral marketing” potential of these new technologies in order to create word-of-mouth buzz and brand loyalty.<sup>105</sup> Further, social media’s relentless calls to be active—to talk, to share, to make, to connect—aligns with the advancement of neoliberalism, the subjects of which are expected to be active citizens

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<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/index.php/2007/04/19/levels-of-participation-community/>, and “More on Levels of Participation / Forrester’s “Social Technographics,” *fresh + new(er)*, April 23, 2007, <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/index.php/2007/04/23/more-on-levels-of-participation-forresters-social-technographics/>.

<sup>103</sup> Kolko and Reid, “Dissolution and Fragmentation,” 220.

<sup>104</sup> See Patricia G. Lange, “Commenting on Comments: Investigating Responses to Antagonism on YouTube,” paper presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology Conference, March 31, 2007, Tampa, Florida.

<sup>105</sup> Chris Anderson, “The Long Tail,” *Wired*, October 2004.

that relieve society of the burden of their care.<sup>106</sup> In this landscape of visible action, people who cannot render themselves visible are dismissed as invisible.<sup>107</sup> Finally, as Lev Manovich notes, the celebration of user-generated content that is made possible by cheaper devices and social media are driven to some extent by the consumer electronics industry and social media companies, which collect multitudinous and fine-tuned data about the identity and activities of their users in order to sell it for marketing purposes. He wonders, aptly, “does this mean that people’s identities and imagination are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than in the twentieth century? In other words, is the replacement of the mass consumption of commercial culture by users’ mass production of cultural objects a progressive development?”<sup>108</sup>

In such circumstances, museums should carefully consider how they invoke community through social media to serve democratizing goals because it is apparent that they can as easily serve the self-interest of museums as they can serve audiences. First, this is because invoking community using social media’s conventions provokes museums to overvalue visibly active participation. This attitude devalues privacy and overlooks the legitimacy of lurkers as learners, for people who choose not to make themselves visible online do so for many reasons, including preference, lack of desire, lack of confidence, etc; further, lurking as a role of observing also exists along a spectrum of activity—someone may lurk one day, and be visibly active the next. By

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<sup>106</sup> Andrew Barry, “On Interactivity,” in *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (London: Athlone, 2001), 127-152.

<sup>107</sup> danah boyd, “Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,” in *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning - Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>108</sup> Lev Manovich, “Art after Web 2.0,” in *The Art of Participation*.

approaching the ideas of community and immediate communication more critically, museums might better respect the preference of people who choose not to speak or participate. Museums today generally define interactivity in relation to electronic and digital technologies, but there are other definitions—Bonnie Pitman-Gelles took a more expansive approach to considering what interactive displays achieve: “They appeal to a variety of senses and generally require the adult or child to handle materials, play roles, day dream, operate equipment and participate in play or work.”<sup>109</sup> The inclusion of day-dreaming as an active museum experience acknowledges that engagement is possible even if it is an interior experience. A similarly nuanced view brought to assessing the behavior of lurkers would allow museums to recognize lurking as a potentially active sign of engagement. Lurkers might be “covert learners” who seek observation and “the experience of continued affiliation.”<sup>110</sup> Or, museums could see lurking as temporary, such as how information scientists Jennifer Preece and Ben Shneiderman see it as a phase in a “reader-to-leader” framework, which understands online behavior within a dynamic spectrum of invisible and visible responses that participants cycle through. This view acknowledges that observation is a significant stage of learning.<sup>111</sup> Other scholars note the potential signified by lurking by recognizing that long-time observers of online communities can quickly move to a position of power in them.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bonnie Pitman-Gelles, *Museums, Magic and Children: Youth Education in Museums* (Washington, DC: Association of Science-Technology Centers Inc., 1981), 35. Witcomb discusses the reduction of interactivity to electronic technologies in *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 128-164.

<sup>110</sup> Nolan and Weiss, “Learning in Cyberspace,” 298.

<sup>111</sup> Jean Lave and E. Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>112</sup> Jennifer Preece and Ben Shneiderman, “The Reader-to-Leader Framework: Motivating Technology-Mediated Social Participation.,” *Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, no. 1 (March 2009): 13-32; Nolan and Weiss, “Learning in Cyberspace,” 313.

Understanding lurking within a spectrum of interaction and learning, then, behooves museums to consider how they might serve their invisible audiences better. For, the emphasis on public communication seems to influence museums to concentrate on instituting features in social media that are public, when private features like archiving content might be more helpful to lurkers.

Regarding lurkers as significant actors in communities could also benefit museums by offering ways to revise how they approach evaluation of their social media practices. Michael Warner's theory of publics provides an avenue towards how to craft evaluative strategies that rely less on measuring acts of public communication: "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*."<sup>113</sup> Publics, which are composed of strangers, are "constituted through mere attention," which means lurkers are fundamental aspects of publics.<sup>114</sup> Museums are in the business of producing texts. Ideally these speak to "everyone," but in reality they speak to those who understand them (e.g., people who speak Spanish, people with art history training, etc.) As such, the more texts they produce, the more people to whom they can potentially speak. These considerations do not allow museums to capture lurking behavior in their evaluations of social media, but they do shift their focus away from what audiences visibly do and prompt them to consider what museums bring to social media to spark engagement. This perspective considers the number, variety, and quality of texts they produced that

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<sup>113</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 65; orig. emphasis.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

invite attention from audiences. How many posts do they put on Facebook? How many times do they comment or answer questions? How many photos have they uploaded to Flickr? How many transcripts have they provided for videos on YouTube? How many staffmembers participate in their social media efforts? By changing their perspective to what they are contributing to social media spaces, museums begin to address a side of social media engagement that is essential for using it for democratic interests—what are they sharing? What are they risking to create a more democratic online public sphere? What are they doing to render themselves more open and responsive?

A second reason museums should critically approach how they invoke community is because it signals a continued investment in defining themselves on the basis of their singular materiality and thus may limit how they approach networked digital media and social media to serve their audiences. As both Michele White and Lianne McTavish observe, museums often re-establish their “auras” and authority through networked digital media by leaning on metaphors of physicality (e.g., webpages are deemed “galleries”).<sup>115</sup> Making community visible online also signifies a desire to reassert the materiality of museums as it seeks to cohere a community around a physical institution. By materializing an audience, museums create a way to surveil them and reassert social order; by making its audience visible through community, a museum also demonstrates its continuing relevance as a physical site. Such efforts signify a desire to counter the anxiety about that the immateriality and

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<sup>115</sup> See White, “The Virtual Museum,” and McTavish, “Visiting the Virtual Museum.”

detritorializing potential that digital media pose a challenge to their traditional practice.

It should be said that, on the one hand, this materialization of audiences can serve certain democratizing goals because, in asserting a sense of order, it may create conditions for more civility in online discourse. As museums seek to engage visitors, especially around important social issues, they need to consider how they support public participation. Social media spaces tend to be open and lack rules of civil discourse or mechanisms to assert them; audiences thus may not feel safe or supported enough to participate. This is not the fault of museums—on external social media sites they must use interfaces over which they have little control. For instance, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum we introduced “Wall Guidelines” on the museum’s Facebook profile to help encourage civil discourse and to be transparent about what comments we would delete, but as Facebook continues to change profile pages’ functions and format, the platform makes it difficult to prominently display those guidelines. Although museums cannot always address such problems, it does behoove them to consider what they ask their audiences to do in public and that what they ask is not necessarily easy. As explained at the end of chapter two, public participation and communication often make for uncomfortable experiences. This is not to say making people uncomfortable should be read as an unsuccessful experience, but to encourage museums to think about how they can create safe spaces for dialogue through social media.

At the same time, while the materialization of audiences may help to create more civil conditions in social media, museums should consider how the ways they

invoke community through social media often convey a continuing investment in materiality. Museums generally seek to materialize an audience around a museum's brand and resources. In the process, they may not embrace the potential of networked digital media to make them more accessible, available, and open to audiences. To consider how museums might use social media to loosen their boundaries and deterritorialize their hold on knowledge, I consider one last manifestation of community that is evident in social media.

### Collective Intelligence

While social media strive to construct community through markers of materiality, which advance a sense of stability, the concept also circulates in social media in one sense that is quite destabilizing. This is the idea of “collective intelligence,” which has been summed up by one of its most poetic advocates, Pierre Lévy, as, “No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.”<sup>116</sup> Seeing “knowledge” as “the new infrastructure” of society, Lévy defines collective intelligence as “a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills. ... The basis and goal of collective intelligence is the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals rather than the cult of fetishized or hypostatized communities.” Through participating in networks of information-sharing and knowledge-building, ethnic, national, and religious identities would be productively disrupted and difference would be valued as people bond in

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<sup>116</sup> Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, c1997), 26-27.

“deterritorialized intelligent communities,”<sup>117</sup> collectives of diverse individuals that would pursue a collective goal through loose configurations of exchange. Experts would participate with amateurs, stalwarts with transients. In this absence of hierarchies, people would be valued as individuals, “singular, multiple, nomadic individuals undergoing a process of permanent metamorphosis (or apprenticeship),” and an appreciation of diversity would forestall reified constructions of their identities.<sup>118</sup>

Lévy admits he describes a social democratic utopia. To even lay the groundwork for such a system would require the total elimination of digital divides of access to networked digital media. Yet, his ideas still hold power as they have taken form in projects like the open-source computer operating system Linux, or in Wikipedia, which are built and maintained by distributed individuals with various levels of commitment and participation who are mobilized by networked digital media’s ability to “[amplify] or [extend] our essential social skills.”<sup>119</sup> These collaborative projects intrigue because they challenge formal systems of labor and economics, evincing online “gift economies” that exhibit a “great amount of sharing and cooperation” without the same expectations of pay or property that the same behavior might demand offline.<sup>120</sup> These projects suggest how networked digital media supports the deterritorialization of knowledge. In a more open and democratic framework of knowledge-building, information flows through networks more freely,

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>119</sup> Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 14.

<sup>120</sup> Kollock, “Economies of Online Cooperation,” 221.

is accessible to more people, and may be enriched by the participation of the many instead of the few.

Many museums so far have experimented with various practices of collective intelligence, also referred to as “peer production,” “crowd-sourcing,” and the “wisdom of crowds.”<sup>121</sup> Projects of this type often aim to share authority with audiences, such as by allowing people to participate in selecting artifacts for exhibits. For instance, in celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> year of Minnesota statehood, the Minnesota Historical Society mounted *MN150*, which asked Minnesotans to submit candidates for “What person, place, thing, or event originating in Minnesota do you think has transformed our state, our country, or the world?” A committee of society staff, “community members and subject experts” selected the titular 150 from a pool of 2700 international submissions on the basis of the argument of the submitter and its appropriateness for an exhibit; they are hung in the gallery with a label that features a photograph of the submitter and her statement.<sup>122</sup> Steve: The Museum Social Tagging Project, launched in 2005, is a collaborative project between several North American art museums that investigates how allowing the public to “tag” their collections might improve their metadata. The museums had become aware that, as experts trained in fields with specific vocabularies, like art history, had supplied the metadata for their online collection databases, the lay public might have trouble using them. Seeking to make searching their collections more user-friendly, they launched Steve to see if

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<sup>121</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>122</sup> Minnesota Historical Society, “About *MN150*,” *Minnesota Historical Society* (website), <http://www.mnhs.org/exhibits/mn150/about.htm>. Exhibits like these are not new: the Walsall Museum and Art Gallery launched “People’s Shows” in the United Kingdom in 1990 to invite local collectors to display and curate their collections in museum space. Social media just amplify these in new ways and allow these projects to expand beyond local neighborhoods. For a history, see Lovatt, “A People’s Show Means a People’s Show.”

tagging could enrich object records with new descriptive terms and make objects easier to find by the general public. The preliminary research suggests that public tagging generated many new terms to describe objects than previously existed in records, although how useful these terms are to users as a whole is still being investigated.<sup>123</sup>

Projects like these disrupt the singular authority of museums and make the boundaries and knowledge practices of museums more porous. They suggest how museums can enlist social media towards increasing access and other democratizing goals by relaxing their boundaries and encouraging the flow of information between museums and audiences, creating conditions that benefit both.

### Conclusion

Using methods of language, design, profiles, communication, and real-time or recent activity, museums promote and materialize community through social media. These conventions link community and democracy, suggesting that social media are democratic because they encourage exchange and openness. But, the communication and conditions for social relations that social media generate do not equate with instantly egalitarian relations.

It is clear that every time a museum invokes community in its work, it conjures up various ideas and values about the concept. Even if not articulated, they inevitably shape the museum's implementation and evaluation of its social media

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<sup>123</sup> Jennifer Trant, et al., "The Eye of the Beholder: Steve.Museum and Social Tagging of Museum Collections," in *International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting (ICHIM07): Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics. 2007), <http://www.archimuse.com/ichim07/papers/trant/trant.html>.

work—such as stressing public communication when giving audiences things they can do on their own and out of the public eye may also be beneficial. When community is left undefined, it produces a fog over practice and potentially limits understanding of how best to use social media to achieve democratic goals. For, it appears that community can encourage museums to attend to difference and be responsive to audiences, as well as to discern common goals; further, it appears that communication as acts of dialogue, interaction, and listening can empower people, foster critical thinking, and engender empathy. But they must be wielded critically. Mining the assumptions at work when museums invoke community through social media may reveal interest in making their collections or staff more accessible to the public; interest in diversifying audiences or collections; interest in being more open and transparent to audiences. All of these are different goals and not all need to be accomplished to further democratize museums. But, discerning which of these ideas operate within the ambiguous context of community hanging over a project can help staff decide where to put their energy and resources, and lay a plan for evaluation.

To start to do this, I investigated three case studies for this dissertation that involve museums using social media to create and represent community for various goals. While each case study—the Getty Center’s *A Different Lens*, the Japanese American National Museum’s *Discover Nikkei*, and the Science Museum of Minnesota’s online component of *Science Buzz*—invokes community in some way, none provide a clear definition of the concept. I investigated each project in depth by interacting with the project itself, by interviewing its project manager, and by conducting surveys with external audiences related to the project. To discern how

community was at work in each project and how it shaped practice, I considered: How does the project use community and what do those uses suggest about its definitions of the concept? What was/is the project's context of creation and execution? What are the project's stated goals? Are their unstated goals, and if so, what are they? How was/is the project evaluated? How does the project benefit the museum or audience? Does the project revise relations between the museum and its audience? By asking these questions, the following three chapters illustrate the various ideas and values at work when a museum invokes community, and considers how it opens and closes practice towards various democratizing goals.

## Chapter 4: Climbing Down from the Hill: The Getty Center's Blog, *A Different Lens*

### Introduction

About a year before the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Getty Center in Los Angeles, a committee of staff from various units began planning how to mark the occasion.<sup>1</sup> Much had happened in the passing decade that was worth celebrating: the Center had become a major international tourist draw as well as local destination that had hosted approximately fourteen million visitors; its website served millions more; it had acquired inarguable masterpieces and presented well-received special exhibitions; its support of arts education, research, and conservation had been diverse, generous, and global. Yet, the committee seemed to anticipate the criticism to be voiced by *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight in his appraisal of the “Getty at 10”: “even though many (and maybe most) visitors are locals, the Brentwood complex hasn’t deeply embedded itself into the cultural fabric of Los Angeles.”<sup>2</sup>

Vicki Porter, the Getty Trust’s former web manager for audience development and strategy, and tenth anniversary committee member, recalled: “one of the initial thoughts that kept coming back, over and over again, was that since we’re on top of a

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<sup>1</sup> A note on semantics: technically, the Getty Center is “more” than a museum, since it includes a grant-making arm and research institutes as well as an art museum. However, the museum is the public centerpiece of the Center, evident in its history (the whole project started as a museum) and the popular rhetoric that surrounds it. Since modern art museums typically do more than simply display art (many have libraries, offer fellowships, and house centers and institutes), this chapter treats the entire Center as a museum.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Knight, “Critic’s Notebook: Getty at 10 Something’s Still Missing,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2007, C1.

hill here and we're perceived as remote and sometimes elitist, by some people, we wanted to climb down from the hill. That was often used in our meetings: 'How can we climb down from the hill?'"<sup>3</sup> Beyond the requisite parties, plans were laid for special exhibitions, including two held "In the Community" (a.k.a., downtown Los Angeles); performances; lectures; and, a "Gallery Course" on the permanent collection.<sup>4</sup> And, there would be a blog. Porter "proposed that climbing off the hill in terms of the web would be, not us publishing a lot of [scholarly] papers," as others proffered. Instead:

I said, "Why can't we turn that around?" and say, "We want to talk with the people who have come to the Getty, who our audience is, and we want to listen to *them* rather than have them listen to us. [laughing] We're very good at one-way conversations, and I wanted to figure out if we could do at least a two-way conversation with the visitors and I thought, well, there's a lot of interest in blogging and social media here at the Getty. ... And we had some experience with that but not enough to really generalize anything about it. So, we decided to do this blog and the concept behind it was that I would scan the, basically, the web, for material about the Getty—people either using Flickr to show their photographs of their visits, other blogs from people who write about the Getty. We would ignore professional kinds of things, none of the media, no journalists or newspapers or things like that. We would strictly go for the public and, you know, we'd look at YouTube, anything that would have self-generating content about the Getty. And then I would, sort of, try to then make ... a blog post about something that somebody had written, or photographed, whatever, and we would simply kind of try to describe it enough but then point people back over to what I was talking about. So, rather than try to just absorb all the visitors to our sites and keep them there, which [laughing] is normally what we try to do, we wanted to bounce them back into the community. ... I guess, the whole point of it was to try to listen to the community, and absorb what they were saying about us and to try to then point back to the community. To make a sort of circle, if you will.

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<sup>3</sup> Vicki Porter, Interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, 31 March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> One special exhibition was held at the Getty Gallery at the Los Angeles Central Library, another at the California Science Center in Exposition Park. Getty Center, "The Getty Center: Reflecting on Ten Years," *The Getty* (website), <http://www.getty.edu/about/10years.html?cid=egetty074>, accessed 17 July 2010.

Porter launched *A Different Lens: A Roundup of Your Views About the Getty* in January 2008.<sup>5</sup> Like the other anniversary activities, the blog was saturated in the rhetoric of community. Banners on light posts throughout Los Angeles informed residents of their ownership of the institution, proclaiming it: “Your Getty Center.” The website built for the anniversary stated that in the decade the Getty had been open, “More than an architectural icon, the Center has become a part of our community, a cultural destination where Angelenos and visitors from around the world can enjoy and learn about art.” For its part, the “About” page of the blog explained:

The Center is home to the programs of the J. Paul Getty Trust, an international cultural and philanthropic organization. It is also truly “Your Getty Center”—a place that welcomes over one million on-site visitors each year from L.A. and around the world, and 10 times as many online. This blog, now closed, sampled a range of perspectives from this community.

As the Getty invoked community through blogging as a democratizing strategy, this chapter delves into how community worked towards that end. To do this, I interviewed (and audio-recorded) Porter for about two and a half hours on-site at the Getty, as well as sent follow-up questions via e-mail. I also performed a close reading of the blog’s interface, contents, and promotion, during which I surveyed the thirty-four total entries and the twelve comments they garnered, in order to understand Porter’s formula for posts and the range of topics addressed. Finally, as this was an inactive project at the time of study, I could not conduct a survey of its audience, so I conducted one of the people who had their experiences featured on the blog in order to get their impressions of the project.

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<sup>5</sup> The Getty Center, *A Different Lens: A Roundup of Your Views About the Getty* (blog), <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/>, accessed 8 August 2009.

Ultimately, peering into the fog of community surrounding this project reveals both genuine and disingenuous approaches to democratize a museum through social media. First, I determine community operated on the blog's face as a self-evident good, as the blog did not end up helping the Getty "climb down from the hill," and instead resulted in reinforcing the status quo. This is shown to be the result of administrative and legal constraints, perspectives on blogs, and the lack of institutional support and resources to institute it as an actually transformative project. Conducted as a pilot project and in a conservative context, the blog was not taken seriously as a democratizing effort other than by its manager. Community was invoked rather emptily and worked to shore up a sense of an audience around the Getty and to shore up a sense of the materiality of the Getty itself.

At the same time, I show how genuinely democratizing ideas about community were also at work behind-the-scenes, as Porter has an entrenched interest in using social media for making art museums more accessible. Further, what the blog did accomplish was to indicate that an audience interested in talking about art and the Getty *with* the Getty does exist. Thus, I propose that the institution may be missing an opportunity to "climb down from the hill" and have a two-way conversation with its audience that is of benefit to both parties. For, had community been articulated in this project and had the institution been ready for real change, I suggest that it might have steered the use of social media more effectively to meet Porter's goals and to make a case for why the Getty should take blogging more seriously as way to reach out to audiences. This case study thus illustrates how defining community in museum social media projects can help them use their resources more effectively. I offer these

thoughts after sketching the general and specific context that hatched the blog, the details of the blog, and how it materialized community.

### *Art Museums and Power*

The unevenness of *A Different Lens* as a democratizing project is a condition of the history of the Getty, of art museums, and of their relationships to diverse audiences—all of which are fraught with tension. It reflects age-old debates about the relationship of “Art” to everyday life, of art museums to the neighborhoods and cities in which they reside, and of their relevance and justification for maintenance. Since the establishment of the Louvre as a public art museum in 1793, art museums were constructed initially by national governments and later by wealthy individuals for various purposes.<sup>6</sup> Carol Duncan explains these aims as three: aesthetic, educational, and ideological.<sup>7</sup> The first holds that the value of art is intrinsic—in contrast to the questionable practices of capitalism, art, as the expression of creative genius, is pure. Consequently, it constructs art museums as havens from society, quiet settings for the firsthand contemplation of art and the cultivation of “good” taste. The educational model also regards art as having a civilizing effect on people’s behavior, as a universal good that can inspire visitors to refinement and productivity in service of nation.<sup>8</sup> But, it views the aesthetic model as elitist, and therefore aims to make art museums populist institutions that educate visitors on how to appreciate art. Duncan asserts that both the aesthetic and educational models construct a middle-class

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<sup>6</sup> See Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 21-46, and Neil Harris, “The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement,” *American Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1962): 545-566.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Seth Koven, “The Whitechapel Picture Exhibitions and the Politics of Seeing,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 22-48.

identity through rituals of museum-visiting, assessing them as different tactics that both serve the ideological model of art museums, which aims to represent and maintain power on behalf of a hegemonic elite: “In other words, art museums reinforce the existing power structure, not in some way peripheral to some other more central function, but because that is what they are for.”<sup>9</sup>

Art museums, and mainstream museums generally, support such systems in many ways. Their “publicness” legitimates states and citizens by symbolizing equality and the inevitability of the states’ rule.<sup>10</sup> The weight of their monumental architecture signifies “truth,” while the materiality of their collections fixes interpretations of them as “known, certain, authoritative.”<sup>11</sup> Conventions of display that developed in the late eighteenth century positioned objects to express order based on “natural” reason and depicted Western states as inheritors of the traditions of Classical Greece and Rome (read: the pinnacle of civilization). Meanwhile, as these same states raided the civilizations of “others” in the pursuit of empire, they accessioned the material heritage of non-Western cultures into natural history museums, marginalizing and dehumanizing those groups. Finally, as Tony Bennett has described, the space of museums could be used to regulate the behavior of visitors by allowing them to surveil each other. Large entryways, open stairways, and balconies helped to frame the vision of visitors, making people part of the spectacle of museum-going and allowing them to see “the public” of which they were a part.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mark O’Neill, “The Good Enough Visitor,” in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 21-46.

<sup>11</sup> Gaby Porter, “Seeing Through Solidity: A Feminist Perspective on Museums,” in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 107.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Not surprisingly, the public that visited art museums was thus not their purported ideal of “everyone.”<sup>13</sup> In the early nineteenth century, regular visitors were white and upper-class; later that century they were still white, although diversity was evident in terms of class (at least in those of occupation).<sup>14</sup> A century later, Pierre Bourdieu showed art museums in 1970s France still appealed mostly to white, upper- and middle-class individuals who had attained high levels of formal education, while visitor research over the past few decades continues to show that race and ethnicity affect visiting patterns.<sup>15</sup> And, even though audiences today are more racially and ethnically diverse, art museums continue to principally attract the highly educated, while still seeming intimidating and off-limits to non-museum-goers.

Art museums continually seek to change these patterns. In the name of community, they set up galleries within working-class or non-white areas. They diversify collections and staff, and stage blockbuster exhibitions, increasingly featuring popular culture, to attract non-traditional audiences.<sup>16</sup> Trying to refashion relationships with audiences, they extend hours into the evening and host local bands and cocktail bars. They also incorporated interactive opportunities into gallery spaces

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew McClellan explores this tension in “A Brief History of the Art Museum Public.”

<sup>14</sup> Nys, “The Public’s Signatures.”

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). For more current examples, see John H. Falk, “Visitors: Who Does, Who Doesn’t, and Why,” *Museum News*, April 1998; Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy & Analysis, *Increasing Museum Visitation by Under Represented Audiences: An Exploratory Study of Art Museum Practices* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, May 2001); and, Vera L. Zolberg, “‘An Elite Experience for Everyone’: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy,” in *Museum Culture*, 49-65.

<sup>16</sup> The Guggenheim Museum in New York showed *The Art of the Motorcycle* from June 26 to September 20, 1998. More recently, MoMA curated *Tim Burton* (November 22, 2009-April 26, 2010), which traveled to TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto and opens at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on May 29, 2011.

and sometimes invited audience members and people from source communities into the exhibition process.<sup>17</sup>

The “Poor Little Rich Getty”

Since its inception, the Getty Center has invoked community to appeal to the people of Los Angeles. At the same time, it has struggled with another goal: to appeal to the international art world. After thirteen years of planning and construction on a large expanse of the Santa Monica Mountains, the 24-acre arts and cultural campus built for the J. Paul Getty Trust, the richest arts institution in the world, opened to the public on December 16, 1997.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a fitting reaction to the culmination of the so-called “Commission of the Century,” hyperbole dominated the international clamor that greeted it: it was deemed icon, temple, fortress, Acropolis, pharaonic. Architect Richard Meier, known for stark studies in planes of white, had erected a “city on a hill.”<sup>19</sup> The arrangement of pavilions clad in squares of honey-tinted Italian travertine and white enameled aluminum contained the Trust’s grant-making arm, institutes for conservation and research in the arts and humanities, and, not least, its public centerpiece, the J. Paul Getty Museum.<sup>20</sup> Surrounding a garden designed by artist Robert Irwin, its beauty and imperial views of southern California made it an

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<sup>17</sup> For specific examples, see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Audiences - A Curatorial Dilemma.”

<sup>18</sup> At his death in 1976, oil tycoon J. Paul Getty left four million shares of Getty Oil Co. to his eponymous museum; when the estate was settled in 1982, the \$700 million promised to the Trust had swelled to \$1.2 billion. By 2008, the valuation had risen to \$6 billion, but subsequently fell to \$4.5 billion during the global economic recession. See N.A., “Building the Perfect Beast,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 7 December 1997, 26-30, and Mike Boehm, “Getty Trust to Slash Budget as Investments Tumble,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-et-getty16-2009mar16,0,973987.story>.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Shining City on a Hill,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 7 December 1997, 22-24.

<sup>20</sup> When the Getty Center opened, it included three other institutes, including the Getty Education Institute, the Getty Information Institute, and the Getty Leadership Institute.

instant international tourist sight; indeed, it helped usher in the trend of “destination architecture,” where a museum’s container is held in as high esteem—sometimes higher—than its collection.<sup>21</sup> People on the street and international taste-makers perceived the Getty alike as Los Angeles’s debut on a global stage, putting it on par with the likes of New York, London, and Paris.<sup>22</sup>

Since its origins in the private institution that oil tycoon J. Paul Getty opened in 1953, the Getty has struggled with its place in Los Angeles and the clarity of its message to the public.<sup>23</sup> On December 13, 1997, the Getty Center was dedicated, as had been its patron’s intention, “to the service of art around the world and for all time, but, above all, as a gift to the people of Los Angeles.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, many wondered what benefit it would provide the infamously sprawling metropolis, with its racially and ethnically diverse population and its extreme divisions of class. As the architecture critic of the *Los Angeles Times* put it, “from its regal perch atop a lush Brentwood hill, the Getty’s relationship to this city is not so clear. As a villa-like complex of massive travertine blocks and curving tan aluminum panels, it is undeniably aloof,

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<sup>21</sup> The Getty opened a few scant months after Frank Gehry’s famed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and has been followed by several high-profile architectural commissions for museums.

<sup>22</sup> Echoing the perspective of his peers, the architectural critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, Nicolai Ouroussoff, wrote “the Getty Marks the beginning of a permanent shift in Los Angeles’ cultural landscape.” Ouroussoff, “Shining City on a Hill.” For other examples, see Terri Hardy, “Covering All Angles: ‘Preview’ a Coveted Assignment,” *Los Angeles Daily News* [Valley edition], 10 December 1997, N11 and Reed Johnson, “Opening Shifts L.A.’s Image on World Stage,” *Los Angeles Daily News* [Valley], 23 November 1997, N1. Many southern California residents felt the same: “Public Forum: Getty will make L.A. a world-class art center,” *Los Angeles Daily News* [Valley edition], 13 December 1997, N24, and Rick Orlov and Reed Johnson, “Cashing in on L.A.,” *Los Angeles Daily News* [Valley edition], 2 December 1997, N1.

<sup>23</sup> In 1953, the J. Paul Getty Museum was organized, for the purpose of “the diffusion of artistic and general knowledge,” as a private institution at the tycoon’s ranch house in Malibu and was opened for public admission in 1954. The J. Paul Getty Museum, *Handbook of the Collections*, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 2001), 5, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Muchnic et al., “Getty Center Dedicated as Gift to City,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 December 1997, A1, A37. He decided he wanted to leave the collection as a gift to the people of Los Angeles in 1968, at which point the Museum was moved to an adjacent property and into a structure modeled after the first century Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, Italy. The J. Paul Getty Museum, *Handbook*, 8, 9, 11.

with complex aspirations: As symbol, it marks the final arrival of high culture to Los Angeles; as Olympian monument, its goals are obviously more international than local.”<sup>25</sup> Getty’s gift seemed out of touch—the marriage of modernist architecture, founded on notions of social equity, with the Classicist ideals of museums, which cast them as separate from everyday life, made the whole project seem overly intellectual and aloof. After all, the trustees had chosen to build on hilltop property in Brentwood, one of the city’s toniest neighborhoods, rather than renovate either of two historic, street-level sites.<sup>26</sup> Only two buslines would serve the public entrance.<sup>27</sup> Hence, even in the face of the Getty’s support for arts education in local schools and its lauded online “community network,” L.A. Culture Net,<sup>28</sup> it was easy for urban theorist Mike Davis to “[dismiss] the Getty’s community outreach efforts as ‘chump change compared to these \$20 million French masterpieces they keep buying,’”<sup>29</sup> or for Noah, an 18-year-old resident of the predominantly African American and Latino neighborhood of Watts, to agree with his friends that, “‘It’s up there, y’know, for the folks on the hill. It’s for white people, man, not for us people here in the city.’”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Shining City on a Hill.” For similar reactions, see David Dillon, “Getty Center a \$1-billion Mixed Bag,” *The Toronto Star* [Final ed.], 20 December 1997, and N.A., “The Grand Getty; New Museum on a Hill Elevating L.A.’s Image,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, Valley edition, 23 November 1997, V2.

<sup>26</sup> Both the Veterans Administration Medical Center on the Westside and the Ambassador Hotel, near to downtown and in what had become a largely Latino neighborhood, were considered. Ouroussoff, “Shining City on a Hill,” 23.

<sup>27</sup> In 1997, Santa Monica’s Big Blue Bus began to receive a subsidy from the Getty Trust to expand the service of its line 14 to the Getty’s public entrance on Sepulveda Boulevard. After visitorship declined from a high of 650 riders in 1997 to 250 in 2002, the Trust decided to discontinue the subsidy despite negotiations begun by Big Blue Bus. See Amanda Bronstad, “Getty Cuts Blue Bus Subsidy in Response to Low Ridership,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, 19 August 2002.

<sup>28</sup> The now-defunct Getty Information Institute’s project, L.A. Culture Net, was launched in April 1997, as “a community project.” Jane Lusaka, “Faces of the Future: The Getty’s L.A. Culture Net,” *Museum New*, February 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Reed Johnson, “Opening Shifts L.A.’s Image on World Stage.”

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Glancey, “Wealth to make the Earth Quake,” *The Guardian*, Features, 1.

Meanwhile, the Getty is also a favorite target of criticism from the international art world, for which the litmus test of an art museum's quality is its permanent collection. As Getty the man had often been judged a Philistine, his personal collection of Greek and Roman antiquities, eighteenth century French furniture and decorative arts, and European paintings was often judged to be, at best, spectacularly uneven.<sup>31</sup> His bequest to the Getty Trust for "the diffusion of artistic and general knowledge" was largely regarded by the old lions of the art world, fearful that the Getty would distort the art market, as an embarrassment of *nouveau riche* wealth. By the time the Center opened, some rehabilitation had occurred; the museum had somewhat overcome its early reputation for dubious acquisitions, expanded the museum's collecting mandate and acquired reputable, even world-class, collections of drawings, illuminated manuscripts, European and American photographs, and sixteenth to nineteenth century European sculpture.<sup>32</sup> Still, the "poor little rich Getty that everyone [loves] to mock," did not help its case with scandals in the mid-2000s that concerned financial corruption and illegal art trading.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, the Getty remains a study in contradictions: trying to attract the people of Los Angeles, as well as attract people to Los Angeles, while broadcasting both aesthetic and educational values. This was still the case when Porter launched *A Different Lens*.

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<sup>31</sup> See John Bentley Mays, "A Glut of Getty," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 13 December 1997, Art, C1, and William D. Montalbano, "Finally, Some Respect," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 7 December 1997, 57-60, 80.

<sup>32</sup> The J. Paul Getty Trust, Trust Indenture, October 20, 2004. The J. Paul Getty Museum, *Handbook*. See Montalbano and Knight.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "The New Getty, Dream and Symbol," *New York Times*, 16 December 1997, section E, page 1. Former Getty CEO Barry Munitz and the board of trustees were found to have misused institutional funds by the California attorney general's office in 2006. Meanwhile, former antiquities curator Marion True was accused of obtaining artifacts illegally.

## Why a Blog?

While a novel undertaking to the Getty, blogs were by 2008 a general phenomenon. Starting one was part of a profession-wide trend that began in late 2004, museums following the lead of other non-profit educational institutions like libraries and zoos.<sup>34</sup> Mirroring a larger pattern, the growth of museum blogs was exponential.<sup>35</sup> It was also diverse: museums of every stripe had a blog, from the world famous to small historic sites, from crime museums to science museums.<sup>36</sup> They also demonstrated great variety in purpose: some were little more than mirrors of institutional websites; some pointed readers at web content related to a museum's mission; others supported a collection, special exhibit, or initiative; or gave a personal and/or behind-the-scenes take on a museum.<sup>37</sup> This proliferation and variety may be

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<sup>34</sup> Bethke, "Constructing Connections," 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Technorati's "State of the Blogosphere" report from 2008 notes the site has indexed 133 million blogs records since 2002; <http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/>, accessed 11 September 2009. The first informal survey of blogs related to museum work was performed by the museum exhibit design firm Ideum. It returned 26 blogs originating from museums and people writing about museums—a blip on the radar of the approximately 29 million blogs that existed at the time. The survey found that 13 museums of a wide variety were producing blogs, with the Walker Art Center writing six. See Spadaccini, *Museums 2.0*. The first formal survey, from early 2007, showed that blogs concerning museums had more than doubled in number and were continuing to grow. See Spadaccini and Chan, "Radical Trust." Today, this growth has dramatically eased. On September 11, 2009, the "Museums Blogs" aggregator site started by Ideum records 374 blogs, while on July 12, 2010, it had grown by less than 9% to 407 (Museum Blogs, *Museum Blogs* (blog), <http://www.museumblogs.org/>, accessed 11 September 2009 and 12 July 2010. These numbers are not likely correct because it counts blogs run by institutions and by individuals writing about museums. It is also likely incorrect because 1) the site is self-selecting, and 2) many of the blogs are dead.

<sup>36</sup> Among museums that keep blogs are or have kept blogs are the Brooklyn Museum of Art ([bloggers@brooklynmuseum](mailto:bloggers@brooklynmuseum), <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/>), the Port Moody Station Museum (*Port Moody Station Museum Blog*, <http://portmoodystationmuseum.blogspot.com/>), the North Carolina State University Insect Museum (*Insect Museum*, <http://blogs.lib.ncsu.edu/roller/insects/>), the Justice & Police Museum (*From the Loft*, <http://blogs.hht.net.au/justice/>), Columbus' Center of Science and Industry (*Chez Sez*, <http://chezsez.wordpress.com/>), the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (*Tenement Museum Blog*, <http://tenement-museum.blogspot.com/2009/09/farewell-liana.html>), and Walker Art Center (*Off Center*, <http://blogs.walkerart.org/offcenter/>). All blogs were accessed 12 September 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Museum exhibit designer and consultant Nina Simon suggested a typology of museum blogs as follows: Institutional Info blogs share much content with institutional Web websites, dispensing information and news updates about a museum; Aggregate Content blogs are filter blogs for content related to a museum, such as art or food; Community Content blogs allow the production of content to

understood as a result of the ease of setting up a blog, as well as due to how blogs are culturally constructed.

Jill Walker Rettberg has explained that blogs are both medium and genre—they are recognizable by typical features as well as by a particular style of writing. Having evolved from two kinds of personal sites common in the 1990s—one functioned as navigational aids by collecting interesting links, the other amounted to publishing a personal journal or diary—blogs are used for various ends, but today are identified by shared features and style.<sup>38</sup> They display date- and time-stamped entries in reverse chronological order, and feature an “About” page, comments below posts, tags to describe posts, blogrolls that list other blogs the author reads or wants to be associated with, and a RSS or XML feed for subscription and syndication. As a genre of writing, they are typically written by an individual, expected to be updated frequently with relatively brief posts, and to convey personality through the use of first-person voice and a casual tone.

Early adopters of the online journaling and filtering from which blogs evolved celebrated the democratization of publishing and its presumed ability to give

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come from users as well as museum staff. (Unsurprisingly, these tend to be rare.) Specialized Content blogs tend to focus on an exhibition or special interest project. Personal Voice blogs offer individual viewpoints on museums from members of the staff. Nina Simon, “Institutional Blogs: Different Voices, Different Value,” *Museum 2.0*, 7 March 2007, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2007/03/institutional-blogs-different-voices.html>, accessed 12 September 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Rettberg, *Blogging*, 24-29. The etymology of the word “blog” retains its record-keeping tendency—it is a portmanteau of “web” and “log,” the chronological record of information that sailors keep at sea for navigation. Although the word “weblog” was in use in the early 1990s, it referred to the log of visitor information to a site that was visible to its administrator. It is generally accepted that the term “weblog” was first used in 1997 by Jorn Barger to refer to a personal website, his *Robot Wisdom Weblog*, while Peter Merholz blended the two in 1999. See *Ibid.*, 17; Dibbell, “Portrait of the Blogger as a Young Man; and Bethke, “Constructing Connections,” 4. Blogs exhibit much diversity within three major types: 1) the most common is the *personal* or *diary-style* blog that chronicles personal and/or professional life experiences; 2) *filter* blogs record and often annotate web content, operating like curated clearinghouses of information about a particular topic; and, 3) *topic-driven* blogs share ideas and information around a particular subject. Rettberg, *Blogging*, 11-15.

transparent, honest views of human life.<sup>39</sup> These ideas influenced companies and non-profits to embrace blogs as public relations and marketing tools that could help them build trust and credibility by giving them a “human voice” and a way to talk directly to consumers, without the mediation of a spokesperson or advertisement.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, in a business context that is open to the idea of “market as conversation,” and where consumer expectations and behavior appear to be changing, blogs are seen as a way to complete a circle of community by “listening” to audiences.<sup>41</sup>

Operating amidst these culturally powerful ideas, blogs allow both people and organizations to create and perform identity at the intersection of dialogue and dissemination, confusing ever more the boundaries of private and public life.<sup>42</sup> Blogs produce identity through the creation, publication, and archiving of texts. In Viviane Serfaty’s summation, “Anyone who engages in self-representational writing on the Internet is not producing private material, but is engaging instead in ‘public acts deliberately intended for public consumption’.”<sup>43</sup> Bloggers feel empowered to discuss their personal lives since computer screens shield them from public view, and because the enormity of the web gives them a sense of anonymity; they are “mirror” and “veil” for bloggers, who can publish what they want to share, and filter out what they do not.

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<sup>39</sup> Julian Dibbell, “Portrait,” and Rettberg, *Blogging*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Rettberg, *Blogging*, 141.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*, 127-128; Chris Locke, Doc Searls, David Weinberger, and Rick Levine, “Cluetrain Manifesto,” 1999, <http://www.cluetrain.com/>; Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers, *What’s Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2010); and Kent, “Critical Analysis of Blogging in Public Relations,” 35.

<sup>42</sup> See Rettberg, *Blogging*, 36, and Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic, “The Psychology of Blogging: You, Me, and Everyone in Between,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52 (2008): 60-68.

<sup>43</sup> Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 12.

In this melding of public and personal/private, blogs are characterized as “a social genre,” through which bloggers “write into the world with a clear expectation of having readers,” even if they are few.<sup>44</sup> They are also conceived of as social because they unfold through time and space as do conversations. Scholars studying blogs stress that they are best understood as events and not objects, since their conventions of frequent updates and pervasive hyperlinking tie them into conversations across the web, making it hard to know where they start and stop.<sup>45</sup>

Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic elaborate:

Unlike personal Web presentations, structured around “the essence of me,” blogs are structured around “the process of me.” Unlike chatting, pointed toward “hear me out at this moment,” blogging is pointed toward “hear me out throughout time.” Blogging, thus, is a twofold communicative event. On one hand, it is the event of “writing oneself” through continuous recording of past and present experience, just as in the case of traditional dairies. . . . On the other hand, blogging is the event of “rewriting oneself” through interaction with the audience. Unlike writing a traditional diary, blogging *is* a process of linking two or more individuals.<sup>46</sup>

That blogging is largely viewed as a “social form of writing” is fundamental to why this activity is saturated with the rhetoric of community.<sup>47</sup> Aaron Barlow writes, “*Community*, that is what lies at the heart of the blog.”<sup>48</sup> Although blogs initially attracted criticism for undermining communities, they were also celebrated for supporting existing ones and creating others. Further, the accessibility and ease with which someone may start a blog or comment on one fed the sense that the blogosphere at-large was a community that reinvigorated and further democratized

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<sup>44</sup> Rettberg, *Blogging*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Gurak and Antonijevic, “The Psychology of Blogging,” and Barlow, *Blogging America*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Gurak and Antonijevic, “The Psychology of Blogging,” 64-65.

<sup>47</sup> Rettberg, *Blogging*, 32-40.

<sup>48</sup> Barlow, *Blogging America*, 37; orig. emph. Also see page 50.

Habermas' notion of the public sphere.<sup>49</sup> According to *Daily Kos* founder Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, the blogging movement is both “leaderless” and “leaderfull [sic]”.<sup>50</sup> Blogs theoretically allow everyone to have their say, and despite digital divide issues, have proven to be a powerful way for people not employed in the mass media to make their viewpoints known and affect change.<sup>51</sup>

Blogs evoke community by enacting reading and writing as collective instead of solitary activities.<sup>52</sup> They materialize communities as self-discursive entities by making them visible to each other and in a more dynamic fashion than was possible with printed text, such as through comments, blog rolls, and friend lists that make people and connections visible. Scholars and bloggers emphasize another common feature that serve a sense of community: “[blogs] are founded upon the link, building connections between related issues” and individuals.<sup>53</sup> Embedded within posts, comments, and blog rolls, hyperlinks create the distributed network of the blogosphere, visually articulating connections and audience through the front-end interface and in the back-end metrics, which can record data on readership.<sup>54</sup> Links render posts and comments as flows within a larger process of communication that is

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<sup>49</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, quoted in Barlow, *Blogging America*, 83.

<sup>51</sup> For examples, see Kahn and Kellner, “Oppositional Politics and the Internet.”

<sup>52</sup> Before the fifteenth century, reading was a public act of orality. The conceptualization of reading and writing as solitary acts arguably occurred only after people began reading silently to themselves. Rettberg, *Blogging*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1. The importance of links to blogs is further conveyed by how they are used to measure influence on the web. The blog search engine Technorati judges popularity in the blogosphere by the number of times a blog is linked to, while Google's PageRank similarly determines the reliability of search results by factoring in how frequently a website or blog is linked to. The privileging of links is also responsible for creating a monopoly on influence by certain blogs. See Rettberg, *Blogging*, 63-64, and Jan Schmidt, “Blogging Practices: An Analytical Framework,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 4 (2007): article 13, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/schmidt.html>.

<sup>54</sup> TrackBacks are enabled by appending code to links that gives them information about readers' locations and alerts them to when their blogs are linked to by others. Rettberg, *Blogging*, 66-67.

neither controlled nor owned by individual authors. They infuse the blogosphere with a culture of reciprocity—“If you comment on my blog, I’ll comment on yours.”<sup>55</sup>

In an industry strapped for resources, it is easy to see why museums embraced blogs. They could be set up with relative ease and low expense, and blogging platforms made it possible for anyone with basic computer and web skills, from directors to interns, to create, contribute, and publish content.<sup>56</sup> They were thus simple ways for museums to tap into the social capital of blogs as highly personal, conversational, and democratic, as well as were attractive for being interactive and potentially supporting constructivist learning.<sup>57</sup> Finally, blogs also appealed because of the controls they offered on audience input. Such capacities allow museums, like individuals, to construct and perform their public identities through blogs, publishing what they want to present and filtering out what they do not.

### *A Different Lens*

Despite offering these controls and although the Getty had dabbled in blogs before, the prospect of a blog that was meant to be open to the public and representative of the institution stirred up some anxiety.<sup>58</sup> Porter described the Getty’s management as aware of the growing importance of networked digital media in museums, but generally disengaged from it. *A Different Lens* was thus born in a

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<sup>55</sup> This activity stemmed from a sense of quid pro quo, but was also nurtured to establish credibility on Google. A culture of reciprocity strongly informs web culture. See Kollock, “The Economies of Online Cooperation.”

<sup>56</sup> Thanks to the proliferation of web-based blogging tools in the past decade (the first tool, Pitas, was released in 1999 and was followed the same year by Blogger) enabled this facility, setting up blogs is as easy or difficult as a person can want.

<sup>57</sup> See Bethke, “Construction Connections,” 12, 17.

<sup>58</sup> *Looking at Animals: A Getty Exhibition Blog* (<http://www.getty.edu/blog/oudry/default/>) had been set up for the special exhibition, *Oudry’s Painted Menagerie* (May 1 to September 2, 2007), and a closed blog had been set up for participants in the now-defunct Getty Leadership Institute.

climate common to the use of social media in museums: their perceived “newness” and novelty makes them rather “magical” and trendy, which means they are often initially ignored by museums’ administrations. Thus marginalized, staffmembers often experiment with social media in “pilot projects,” which because they are temporary allow them some room for subversion. Porter’s experience reflected this scenario: “And so, those of us, who are, we believe strongly that social media can really move us in a way that nothing really can, we do these guerilla things, like, ... it was big thing for us to do this blog because we’d never get the Getty to agree to a permanent blog. But, if we said, ‘Well, this is an experiment, it’s for one year only and we won’t be blogging anymore and you don’t have to commit to anything....” What attention was paid by the administration focused on a stumbling block that is also common to the use of social media by museums: “I mean at the beginning of the project there was great concern, ‘Oh, but what if people write things we don’t agree with—it’ll be out of our control.’” Porter calmed fears by selecting the popular blogging platform, WordPress, which allows creators to moderate comments before they are published and filters spam from comments.

Legal constraints also shaped the blog from the outset. Although *A Different Lens* operated largely under the radar of Getty management, Porter undertook the blog only after “our legal department ... really scrutinized *everything* about it.” Coached by an in-house lawyer who was learned about the legal issues of the digital medium, she created a set of criteria for image content that could be included in the blog: photographs should not include children; if taken of people without their

knowledge, they should be distant enough to make faces unrecognizable; and they could only include artwork to which the Getty had rights to reproduce on the web.<sup>59</sup>

Imagined as a less formal alternative to the Getty's official front door on the web, [getty.edu](http://getty.edu), *A Different Lens* is recognizable as what museum consultant Nina Simon calls an "Institutional Info" blog: it basically shares snatches of the same content as its institutional website—information about events, collections, and various goings-on—but dispenses it in a less official voice.<sup>60</sup> Where the blog differentiates itself is in its unusual approach. Most museums use social media to channel people to their websites, where information and messages are carefully curated for public consumption. Porter's idea was to curate user-generated content—in other words, to find content produced by visitors for which she would provide framing text—in order to construct an online picture of the Getty.

The blog is simply constructed. Below a banner featuring the blog's title, the Getty's logo, and a picturesque view of one of the Getty Center's fountains, a simple navigation bar offers these tabs: "Home | About This Blog | Open Forum | Contact Us" (Figure 4.1). Dated entries appear listed vertically on the left. The righthand menu features unobtrusive options to navigate by category (Porter tagged entries with five descriptors, listed here in order of use: Visitors' Views (26), Art (25), Getty Center architecture (11), Photography (11), and Conservation (3)); to visit [getty.edu](http://getty.edu) or its event calendar, or to sign-up for e-newsletters. A small box states in tiny font that the blog is about "Your take on the Getty in L.A."

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<sup>59</sup> The recent installation throughout the Center's grounds of the Stark Collection of modern sculpture, for which the Getty lacked universal reproduction rights, meant many photographs had to be excluded.

<sup>60</sup> Simon, "Institutional Blogs."

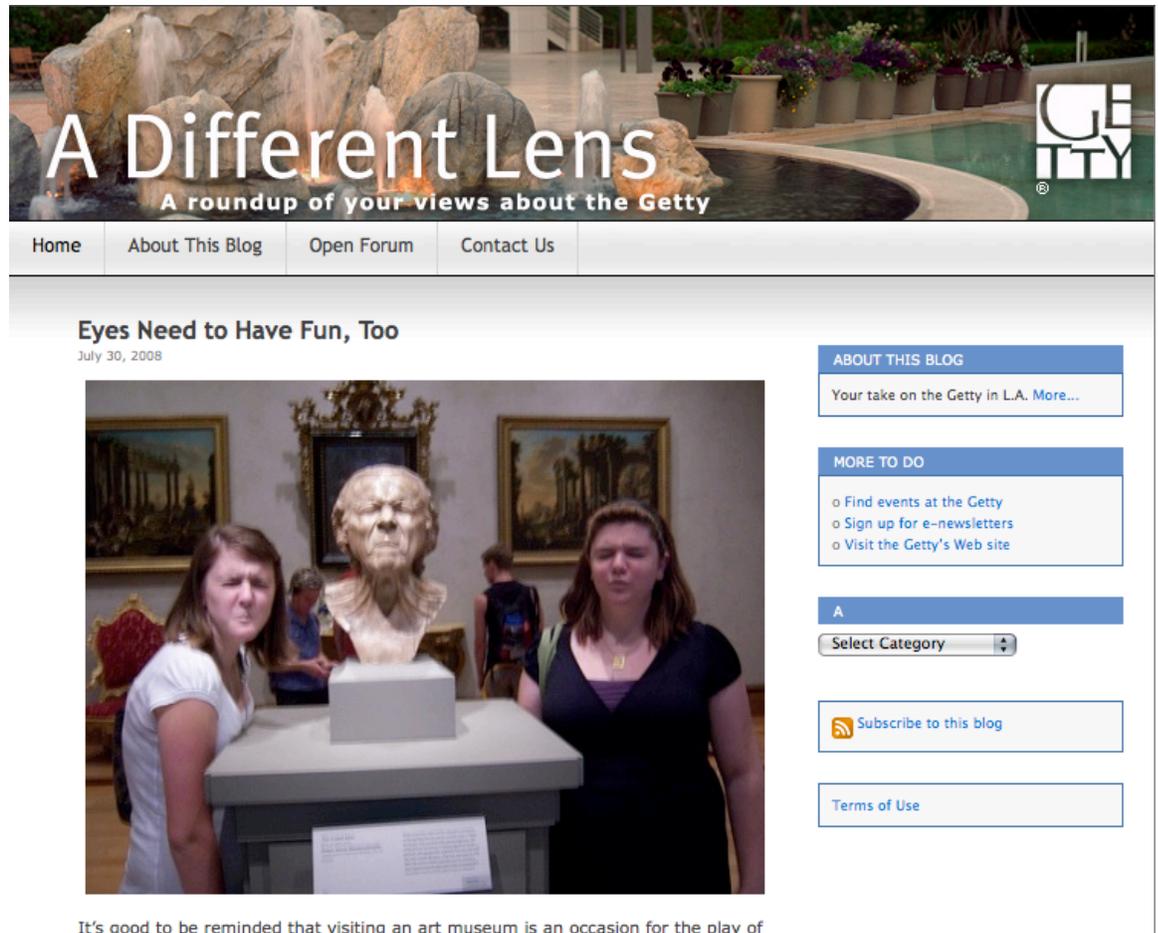


Figure 4.1 Screenshot of *A Different Lens*, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/07/30/eyes-need-to-have-fun-too/>, captured 27 February 2011.

Porter’s method for finding user-generated content about the Getty was to employ search engines and tracking tools to comb the web for mention of the Getty Center.<sup>61</sup> When she found something she wished to highlight, she contacted the creator and remembers always receiving a favorable reply:

... one thing I found, if I used somebody’s blog or quoted from it or used a photo from Flickr, I would always beforehand write to them and explain what I was doing and ask them, “Is this okay?” And invariably I would get back a very enthusiastic reply, saying “Oh, I’m *so* honored to be of service to the Getty.” You know, I would get people saying, “I would do anything for you, you know, just tell me. I would come up to take photographs, I love the Getty.”

<sup>61</sup> Among other things, she used including the blog search engine Technorati and Google Alerts, which runs a persistent query on search terms and aggregates returned information.

Porter’s formula for each blog post was to introduce the user-generated content, to make a reference to the Getty, and to include hyperlinks both to the original post and to any relevant links on getty.edu. For instance, the post, “What Traffic?” (Figure 4.2), included a photograph of a crowd gathered at a night event and reads:

Friday night traffic in Los Angeles can rattle even the most diehard Angelino. [This transplanted San Franciscan](#) [hyperlink to blog post] knows an escape route: Climb high up above it all, and revel in the company of others enjoying the beginning of their weekends, art, music, and drinks. And look down in pity at all those trapped on the 405.

She’s talking about the Getty’s [Fridays off the 405](#) [hyperlink to getty.edu].<sup>62</sup>

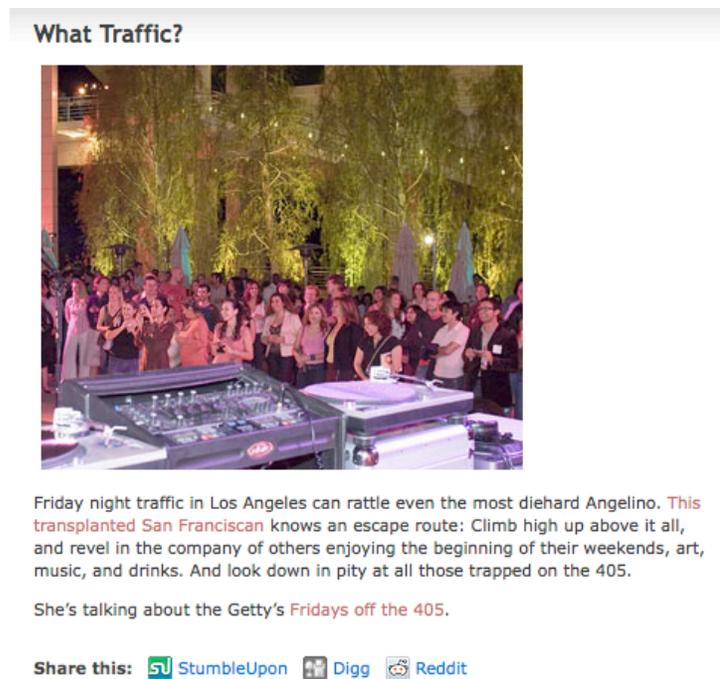


Figure 4.2 Screenshot of *A Different Lens*, “What Traffic?,” <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/06/26/what-traffic/>, captured 27 March 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Vicki Porter, “What Traffic?,” *A Different Lens*, 26 June 2008, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/06/26/what-traffic/>, accessed 17 March 2011. Where hyperlinks appeared originally in online text, I reflect these with underlining.

Using the conventions of blogs and social media generally, the posts materialize a sense of the Getty's audience through text, photographs, and links.

The text of the posts conveys a wide variety of activities and events that occur on-site, but the majority convey that the Getty is a place of leisure. Labor is present—three posts focus on a conference or its attendees;<sup>63</sup> two on exhibition installation; one on a mother reviewing the Getty for its “kid-friendliness”; two highlight the yearly visit of a herd of goats, which eat brush from the surrounding grounds for fire prevention; and three feature the work of professional photographers and artists. But, even these blur with the dominant theme of the Getty as a bucolic place of casual and fun leisure. A reporter on her way to a conference on-site is “wowed by the architecture;” the post about the parent features a photograph of her laughing with her son; another photo shows two panelists at a conservation conference sharing a light moment; and the goats give a sense of the pastoral.<sup>64</sup> The majority of posts feature visitors' encounters with the Getty and its collection as expressions of curiosity, resonance, fun, and rest. For instance, among the experiences Porter highlighted were: a woman who noticed “strange fish creatures” in an early seventeenth century Dutch painting; a man who stood in front of Van Gogh's *Iris*es for almost an hour and pondered the creation of beauty during depression; the experience of a family visiting for a birthday celebration, during which two young women mimicked the pinched facial expression of a sculptural bust; and, the marked penchant of visitors to nap in

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<sup>63</sup> One post highlights a blog entry by an attendee at a conference co-sponsored by the Getty Conservation Institute, which was held in Bamako, Mali. Vicki Porter, “Mud and Winds in Bamako,” *A Different Lens*, 31 January 2008, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/mud-and-winds-in-bamako/>.

<sup>64</sup> Vicki Porter, “What Goes On Up Here,” *A Different Lens*, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/what-goes-on-up-here/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

the garden. The theme of leisure is exemplified by the post “Epiphany in Cacophony,” which reads:

There was a time when art museums saw themselves as virtual temples of quiet contemplation. After all, for the eyes and mind to be able to respond deeply to works of art, they need a certain amount of peace and quiet.

Nowadays, however, art museums can be more like bustling town squares, where all manner of high energy, high decibel activities might take place. A [recent visitor to the Getty recounts](#) [hyperlink to original blog post] how the cacophony of crowds, dancers, and music actually led him to an unexpected insight into the art he came to view.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, the majority of photographs highlighted in the blog signify the Getty as a place of leisure and quite breathtaking beauty. This is evident in the posts that feature an artwork, but it is especially on display in the posts that focus on the work of photographers who, whether amateur or professional, have found a photogenic subject in the Getty’s architecture, natural elements, or even its three-dimensional stainless steel maps. Further, when the focus of photography is on people, they are depicted in crowds at events, or passing time playfully or laconically on the grounds or with the collection.

Finally, as was the original intention of *A Different Lens*, the blog also uses links to user-generated content to connote its audience and to suggest it is not entirely egocentric:

In the [Clarity Daily](#) [hyperlink to external blog post] blog, a visitor writes about how she came across a rare and curious panel painting from the Getty Museum—and why she finds it so extraordinary.

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<sup>65</sup> Vicki Porter, “Epiphany in Cacophony,” *A Different Lens*, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/08/13/epiphany-in-cacophony/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

Painted around 1400, [The Adoration of the Magi with Saint Anthony Abbot](#) [hyperlink to image on getty.edu] displays unusual details like a Christ child playing with gold, a dramatic red sky with gold stars, and a little pig.<sup>66</sup>

As noted earlier, the inclusion of external links is novel for a museum since, rather than encouraging people to stay focused on the offerings of a museum, they point outwards, where the museum has little ability to control the message. They convey that the museum is a part of a larger conversation, rather than its focus, platform, or even hub. As such, they signify the loosening of museums' authority and territory, and thus that, as sources of knowledge, they are points in a network rather than pinnacles in a hierarchy. These links also represent the Getty as a good faith player in the blogosphere, where a culture of reciprocity influences bloggers to link to each other's blogs. Links are valued by bloggers because Google, the dominant search engine, interprets them like reputable references: if a website is linked to by many other sites, Google considers this a sign of reliability and may bump up that site in search returns.<sup>67</sup> Building links to one's blog is thus a way for bloggers to gain audiences and reputations in the blogosphere. Porter's decision to use the blog to highlight outside content was in part meant to help the Getty participate in this culture of reciprocity, which may feed a sense of community.

Porter conducted this work through the anniversary year. Her hope was to post the views of visitors to the blog three times a week.<sup>68</sup> In the end, she published only 34 times, averaging two or three posts per month. The constraints placed on her

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<sup>66</sup> Vicki Porter, "Looking at a Rare Medieval Panel painting," *A Different Lens*, January 17, 2008, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/01/17/looking-at-a-rare-medieval-panel-painting/>.

<sup>67</sup> Google, "Technology Overview," *Google* [website], <http://www.google.com/corporate/tech.html>, accessed 17 April 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Before gaining approval for the blog, Porter had performed searches for a month to see if she would be able to draw on enough content to post regularly to a blog and found "quite a lot of interesting stuff," allowing the plan to move forward.

selection process at its outset affected this rate of output, but another factor was Porter herself. She had trouble finding content she felt was varied or substantial enough to feature. She perceived “a limit to what people were saying: it sort of followed a pattern. It was, ‘Oh, it’s so beautiful there.’ ‘Oh, the views are great.’ ‘The collection’s not very good, the buildings are better than the collection’ [laughing]. ‘The food’s great.’ You know, it lacked a certain level of profundity.” Even when comments did not give a laundry list of Los Angeles tourist destinations (“they would just say, ‘Oh, we went to the Getty yesterday and then we went to the Sunset Strip and then to Santa Monica’”), they were confined to the same observations:

... the ones that went on and on were all about the architecture, you know, or the gardens, or the sunset ... And so, when they do talk about art, it’s *always*, if it’s about the permanent collection then it’s guaranteed going to be about Van Gogh’s *Iris*. And, not only that, they’ll say the same things. They’ll say that, when they saw it, they cried. And, you know, and so it’s like, “*Okay*, if you’re being moved enough, profoundly, to cry in front of a work of art, what is it, you know, can you just blog about it?” [laughing] But they wouldn’t! They never did.

Even had she found them, it is unclear how many she might have used them.

Porter did not feel empowered generally to include outside views that spoke to profound issues.<sup>69</sup> She came across negative comments about the Getty’s decision to raise the price of parking (admission is free), and these made their way to the boardroom, but not into the blog.<sup>70</sup> Further, although she found intellectually weighty discussions about art, art museums, and class—one in particular discussed the Getty’s wealth in relation to its exhibition of August Sander’s twentieth-century photographs

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<sup>69</sup> One post embeds a video from YouTube and one features messages about the Getty published on Twitter.

<sup>70</sup> Porter provided this information at the request of the head of communications.

of Germans, which he separated into a “hierarchy of occupations”<sup>71</sup>—these were also mostly excluded. Although she is a degreed art historian, Porter did not always have the subject matter expertise to contribute to such discussions in a meaningful way; she realized that a blog intended to create dialogue around art would require strong “buy-in” from those who knew the collection best—the curators.

### *A Different Lens Lends a Familiar Perspective*

As a result of these contexts and constraints, *A Different Lens* materializes an audience varied in demographics, motivations for visiting, and interests. But, whether members visit for work and for play, their experiences are shown to be overwhelmingly positive. Difference and diversity appear as part of the community, but are used in common celebration of the institution. At the same time, the community does not really appear at the center of the blog. The visitors’ views offered here do as much—more, really—to materialize the Getty. The text, photographs, and links materialize the Getty as a haven of human-made and natural beauty, with a little something for everyone. As noted above, the dominant theme in the posts is leisure; at the Getty, people experience curiosity, surprise, play, and enjoyment of various types of beauty. Further, although some of the posts hint at contentious issues, they never make their way directly into the blog (this is discussed below). Those issues are kept segregated to their home blogs—while the blog includes hyperlinks to user-generated content, it did not import that content wholesale, but framed it from the viewpoint of the institution. The exception was the

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<sup>71</sup> The post concerned the exhibit, *August Sander: People of the Twentieth Century* (May 6 – September 14, 2008). Getty Center, “August Sander: People of the Twentieth Century,” *Getty* (website), <http://getty.edu/art/exhibitions/sander/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

inclusion of photographs, which due to legal restraints were mostly of the Getty rather than its audience.<sup>72</sup> And, even though the blog was meant to point outwards, a survey of the hyperlinks included in the posts shows it almost as often pointed at webpages hosted by the Getty: of the thirty-four posts, eighteen include more external links than internal ones, nine include the same amount of links to the Getty's website as they do to external sources, and seven include more internal links than external ones. Ultimately visitors' views are curated here to represent the Getty in a highly celebratory light. As a result, while the purpose of the blog was to "climb down from the hill," it reinforced a sense of the Getty as a physical destination set above the cacophony of Los Angeles. Like the post titled "Oasis," which highlights a photo of a Getty fountain, the blog materializes the Getty on the web as a serene and spectacular place of leisure separate from its home city.<sup>73</sup>

The blog was supposed to manifest community in the interest of making the Getty more populist; the intent and implications of the blog were to signify the Getty as interested in the experiences of its visitors, as accessible, open, and generous, and as interested in having a conversation with its audiences. But, ultimately the audience-oriented, conversational, and potentially democratizing aspects of the blog were effectively shut down by curating and segregating the content, as well as by segregating the blog itself—it was advertised only on the webpage for the Getty's tenth anniversary, which was housed under "The Trust" tab on [getty.edu](http://getty.edu), and had no presence on the homepage nor at the Getty's physical site. As a result, the community

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<sup>72</sup> The blog includes seventy-six images, fifty of which came from outside sources. Of these, sixty-three focus on the Getty, eleven on visitors, and one on a different locale; one I deemed to focus equally on both the Getty and visitors.

<sup>73</sup> Vicki Porter, "Oasis," *A Different Lens*, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/08/04/oasis/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

materialized here appears as an entity enlisted primarily for the celebration of the Getty, rather than an audience to be served by the institution.

### Lost Opportunity

How did this happen? The blog had potential to climb down from the Getty's lofty perch. Further, Porter's overtures to visitors were generally met with a warm welcome from members of its audiences.<sup>74</sup> Also, it was broached by a highly motivated, creative, and iconoclastic employee who is not only truly interested in mining the potential of social media to make art and art museums more accessible to more people, but also has experience pushing conservative institutions to take risks.<sup>75</sup>

This lack of impact was certainly due to a lack of interest and dedicated support from the Getty's administration, as well as the constraints of money, personnel, and copyright. It was also due to how it was conducted on the fringe, where community operated in the abstract as both a self-evident good and as a way of describing an audience, instead of being defined to direct the blog in a more pointed way to serving its populist intentions. Working without definitions of community that could have provided some guideposts, it was unclear how finding or nurturing the

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<sup>74</sup> Four of my survey participants who had photographs featured reported not having been notified beforehand and one was quite perturbed about it. Although his Flickr name was cited on the blog, he would have preferred being identified by his name; he felt "let down. I thought of all places a museum would credit the photographer." Another photographer was happy to have a photo used, but wrote, "Not happy they didn't pay me a penny. As they probably could afford a penny, and maybe more."

<sup>75</sup> While working as a curator, Porter curated an exhibit that attracted atypical visitors to an art museum as she had installed a sacred manuscript into a simulation of its original context: "And so we actually made a chapel [laughing], this was in a museum, a chapel where people could pray in front of this thing, and, oh, did I get flack for that from my boss, who was the curator of the department. But, the director said, 'Fine,' and so we did it. And, we got a lot of people coming in that normally wouldn't come to the museum because they were seeking a religious experience. And what I wanted was to make it possible for them to have a religious experience. That's what these objects were about in the first place, and without that, it's going to be sort of bloodless, it's not going to ever be... You know, without that, you're going to talk about, 'Oh, well, people prayed in front of this,' but unless you actually see people praying in front of works of art you'll never get it, you know?"

sought community might benefit the institution or audiences. But, it is also clear that certain ideas about community were shaping the project, and these are apparent in how Porter conducted its evaluation and in the definitions of community she offered me.

Left to her own devices and creativity, Porter conducted *A Different Lens* without criteria for evaluation. This is not unorthodox in museum settings; outside of science museums evaluation is not a well-established aspect of the professional culture. Nevertheless, Porter herself is deeply interested in evaluation and tried various on-the-fly approaches, which included looking to grow the blog's readership as well as trying to discern patterns in the topics and sentiment of visitors' remarks. She was also constrained in her methods by the limited access to visitor statistics provided by WordPress.<sup>76</sup> Eventually, she performed her own summative evaluation (the Getty's staff evaluator did not feel familiar enough with the project to do it) following advice from Maxwell Anderson, the director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art and a leader on innovation, technology, and business models in museums.<sup>77</sup> She tried to determine the ROI (return on investment) of the blog—"a taboo subject, but I really think we should do it, as a museum culture is, you should know how much something costs, um, if you have a visitor in your museum, you should know how much that costs. ... I did sort of break it down by, 'Okay, how many visits to the blog do we have and how much did each visit cost?'" Multiplying estimates of her salary, the editor's, and the lawyer's by an estimate of hours spent working on the

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<sup>76</sup> Running the blog on WordPress meant it was detached from the Getty's customized website metrics. Additionally, visitation numbers reported by WordPress were inaccurate since it only returned numbers on visits to the actual site and did not include views through the blog's subscription feed.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson offers his perspective on evaluation in "Metrics of Success."

blog, she divided the total by the approximate number of visits to the blog and found that “this was a very expensive type of thing.” Yet, that knowledge was not itself negative since Porter saw the true benefit in collecting data that could then be used to shape programming: “So, the blog was our first official all-Getty thing, and I don’t want people to say, ‘Well, it didn’t get a lot of people and therefore it didn’t work.’ Although I would say it was expensive to do. . . . But, if we can use that intelligence about the audience, then it won’t be expensive at all.” Following the blog’s conclusion, there was no wrap-up meeting to discuss her learnings; she was aware that while she had listened and learned from the blog, the Getty had not:

And so, I think, what would need to happen, is some kind of recording procedure put in place about what you’re going to do with this information once you have it. Is anyone going to act on it? Is anything going to change, as a result of it? Because, otherwise, it’s just sort of, you’re recording, but if you’re not affecting change, it’s not really doing the institution any good. You know, social media, that is, in terms of what the institution gets out of it, the institution can, if they want, kind of tailor what they’re producing to be more in sync with what people want.

Porter demonstrates an unusually expansive perspective on evaluation of social media—it should not be evaluated based on visible acts of participation, but on the basis of how it can help an institution serve its audience better.

Why that loop of feedback failed to close with *A Different Lens* I argue is partly due to the fog of community. The concept can be seen here to have functioned very loosely, but also to have informed the project’s implementation. Community appears in the blog as general audience, as actual people—visitors to the Getty, Angelenos, people interested in art, people interested in photography. For Porter, it also appeared to mean “the people,” communication, and reciprocity. While all were at play, they were not articulated to help direct the project towards its various goals.

For instance, while Porter told me she initiated the blog in order to try to start “a two-way conversation with the visitors,” in actuality she did not expect the blog to be very conversational. While using a blog connotes conversation to some, Porter’s view is that they are quite egocentric and “not that conversational, it’s usually someone is opining about something and people might add a few things in comments.” She did not expect many comments to begin with. And, even if she had received them, the blog was not set up with a structure in place to seriously carry out those conversations. Operating with ambiguous ideas about community—which gave license to the project, but no direction—the project was implemented without structures to carry through on its supposed intention or to have its lessons absorbed by any one other than Porter. Defining community at the beginning of the project to reveal the definitions of community that Porter had in mind as she executed the project might have helped orient the blog more towards the goals she also had in mind.

Porter framed the blog as a project in getting in touch with the Getty’s “community.” While the blog states there is an a priori community, Porter undertook it because she was not sure there was one: “we don’t know anything if there is a community or not of people who come up here, so, and whether they form bonds with each other because they’ve been here, or what. So, we wanted to see if there was any sort of dialogue going on with people, conversations on the web about the Getty.” As such, the blog was intended for visitor research, to listen to the audience to find out, “what do [visitors] say when they’re here? Do they just take it all in, in silence? Or do they come out of it with burning topics on their minds, are they satisfied they can get

the information they want?” She aimed to use the knowledge gained to shape the institution’s capacity to better serve its audiences, especially through social media.

When asked if she had found the community she sought, Porter replied: “I don’t know if you could even call it a community. If a community is something that, it’s not just a bunch of people, but it has some other characteristics, like it communicates with each other, this community doesn’t. I can only say that there were two communities we did find, and they were both pre-existing.” (These she identified as Improv Everywhere, a public art project that enlists people to meet at public spaces and perform a collective activity, and a group of photographers called the “L.A. Shooters,” which maintains connections through a website and by meeting at locations to “shoot.”<sup>78</sup>) The blog was shaped by a search for community as communication, and it would ideally communicate about art: “I had been hoping that people would talk about the art. I mean, that’s why we’re here. And they didn’t. They didn’t talk about the art.”

With the blog’s goals and her ideas about community articulated in these ways, Porter might have shaped the blog in a different way. Rather than frame the blog with the language that a community already existed for the Getty, the blog could have put the question to its online visitors and seen if a community or communities identified themselves. This would have opened points of contact for starting meaningful conversation about art and the Getty. Admittedly, this strategy would have taken more promotion from the Getty, but as a pilot project it did not require it. Instead of benignly highlighting people’s experiences, Porter’s work at finding Getty visitors on the web could have been geared towards asking them questions about their

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<sup>78</sup> L.A. Shooters, *L.A. Shooters* (website), <http://lshooters.org/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

experiences, about why they visited, if they had outstanding questions, and what the Getty might do to have improved their visits. With the permission of visitors, these interviews could have been put on the blog towards seeing if their experiences held points of resonance with others: did other people have the same question about an artwork? Did other visitors experience the same problem in the café? Conversation of this type could serve to make the Getty more responsive and engaged with its visitors, especially since both my survey and the blog itself suggested there is a thirst for this opportunity.

### Community Found

Of the over fifty people contacted for the survey, seventeen accessed it and fourteen answered the majority of the questions. The group was relatively diverse in demographics, although they shared commonalities in being practiced and frequent social media users. Participants mirrored the typical art museum visitor profile, being mostly white, highly-educated, and relatively well-off: eight identified themselves as “white” or “Caucasian,” two as “Hispanic,” one as “Asian,” one as “mixed.” Eleven had completed college, with more than half of those also completing graduate school. Most were financially middle-class, making over \$40,000/year. Their occupations varied, although leaned towards the creative and educational.<sup>79</sup> In a reversal of the demographics of the typical art museum visitor, eight were men and five were women. Seven lived in California, most in Los Angeles; others hailed from Texas, Minnesota, Virginia, and Connecticut. Most were frequent museum-goers and had

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<sup>79</sup> Participants gave their occupation as: editor, actor, photographer, artist, communications manager, advertising, visual arts director, engineer, web developer, librarian, learning and development, and housewife.

visited the Getty Center at least three times. They all also enjoyed high-speed connections at home and at work, which undoubtedly facilitated their strong use of social media sites: they averaged membership on 8.1 social media sites, with the majority of them posting photographs or entries to their blogs once to several times a week.

As a cautionary note to museums that deploy community lightly, few of the survey participants felt *A Different Lens* represented a community or felt a part of it. While most reported positive associations with being featured in the blog,<sup>80</sup> only two responded they saw it as a community, and one qualified that opinion based on its inclusion within a larger community, explaining, “I try to participate in the arts community in Los Angeles as much as I can.” Five responded “a little bit” or “not really/particularly,” with explanations including citing blogs as “one-way communication devices for the most part,” or noting “It takes repeated personal interaction (online or face to face) for me to feel like a part of a community.” Of the four that replied “No,” one mentioned the blog was a “marketing vehicle” and was now dead, while another noted: “The Getty’s blog seems like a ‘soft PR’ device. I don’t think it functions as a community, because it’s not a place for real discourse about the organization and its programs. It does provide a range of perspectives, but they are uniformly enthusiastic.”

Yet, the majority seemed to also be genuinely interested in talking about art—just not always on the Getty’s terms. The responses of my survey participants, many of whom seemed to be art and photography lovers and aficionados, expressed desire

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<sup>80</sup> People reported thinking it was “great,” feeling “honored,” “flattered,” that it was “pretty cool” or “neat,” and that it was nice to have their work acknowledged.

for more conversation about art, as well as a need for places where that can happen: one mentioned that he saw his own blog about art and culture “[providing] a useful service in these days of diminishing arts coverage.” Another viewed the blog as only a first step towards what the institution could accomplish online, articulated here in response to the question “How did you feel about having your work selected for the Getty’s blog?”:

Like Mae West said, “I don’t care what you say about me, as long as you spell my name right.” Many of my posts have been linked to by other websites, bloggers, and listservs. It was nice of them to acknowledge the conversations that are happening outside their fortress. It shows a brief, good faith effort to integrate into the community, so I give them props for that. Compared to other links to other posts, it didn’t generate that much new traffic. Ed Winkleman’s link to the same post generated much more in the way of readers. I also feel that their link is part of the blog-o-sphere’s reciprocal etiquette: my posts have linked to many of their shows and exhibits, and have generated traffic and visitors to their website and physical locations. I’ve gotten a bigger thrill when Getty staff have left comments on my posts directly.

This comment speaks to an opportunity for the Getty. If Porter did not encounter the quality of discussions about art that she had hoped, she did identify that there are communities of interest that the Getty could cultivate for conversation and longer-term engagement towards shaping practices that are meaningful and responsive to audiences. Such a path would be more oriented at—as well as by—the audience, and it would allow the Getty to invite difference and conflict into its bubble, as well as give it a mechanism to deal with that contention productively. In this way, a blog could help the Getty be part of Los Angeles and be more genuinely oriented to a community that could ultimately serve its brand. I will illustrate with an example.

While *A Different Lens* ended up offering a celebratory portrait of the Getty, it also included some cracks in that veneer. One of these is apparent in the blog post,

“We love to surprise our visitors,” which focuses on a blog post that is highly critical of the Getty; indeed, it launches a discussion about the representation of marginalized people in art museums. That discussion itself is glossed over in the Getty’s blog, although it implies criticism by including the title of the external post in the entry:

Recent visitor Wendy Carrillo is surprised to discover [photographs of cholas](#) [hyperlink to the exhibit homepage] amid the treasures at the Getty Center: “I turned around and saw one of my sisters running towards me, ‘they have pictures of East LA!’

Whaaaaaat?!”

She describes it all in her blog post [The Glorification of the Chola](#) [external hyperlink].<sup>81</sup>

Carrillo’s blog post reviews *The Goat’s Dance: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide* (December 18, 2007 – April 13, 2008). It speaks to the danger of stereotyping that comes with the artistic representation of the “other” in spaces dominated by white, middle-class culture. She writes about seeing the show and feeling vulnerable as a Latina, noting her desire to protect the women in the photographs from “the curious looks of casual observers. Prevent the objectification of class and social status.”

Further, “As it happened to be, maybe by pure coincidence, we were the only Latinas in the room. I couldn’t help but feel like people were looking at us wondering why we weren’t wearing bandanas.”<sup>82</sup> Relating her firsthand experience of growing up in East Los Angeles during the 1980s, she appreciates the inclusion of a marginalized group in the middle-class space of the Getty, but critiques a wall label that offers a romanticized depiction of chola culture, as well as laments that the show gives no

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<sup>81</sup> Vicki Porter, “We Love to Surprise Our Visitors,” *A Different Lens*, February 29, 2008, <http://gettylens.wordpress.com/2008/02/29/we-love-to-surprise-our-visitors/>, accessed 17 March 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Wendy Carrillo, “The Glorification of the Chola,” *Beyond the Bridge*, January 2008, <http://wendycarrillo.blogspot.com/2008/01/glorification-of-chola.html>, accessed 17 March 2011.

sense of the evolution of cholas and East L.A. Many of the comments to Carrillo's post hold similar views, including Pachuco 3000's blistering remark that "Iturbide's Catholicism and her upper class gaze oozed all over the place. Perfect for WASPs to relate with. 'See even Mexicans see Mexicans as poor, exotic, hedonistic and prone to violence.'"<sup>83</sup>

Carrillo's post is an expression of the deep discussions and divides that exist about art, art museums, and their audiences, whether they are local or international. It speaks to a contentious and anxiety-ridden dialogue that museums continue to have difficulty engaging in, but in which lies the seeds of a productive and deliberative dialogue that may not be the "soul of democracy," but is certainly important to it.

The inclusion of the post in the blog signifies the explosion of dialogue about art and museums that exists outside the tidy frame of the Getty's *A Different Lens*. For all the blog's effort to contain that dialogue, this conversation is present and ongoing whether the Getty chooses to engage it or not. Carrillo's blog post may be read as a plea for public conversation. To restate Serfaty, "Anyone who engages in self-representational writing on the Internet is not producing private material, but is engaging instead in 'public acts deliberately intended for public consumption'." The Getty might have responded to that plea—published in January 2008, it was a few months before the exhibit in question ended. The Getty might have hosted a discussion in the gallery about Iturbide's exhibit using Carrillo's post as an entry point. It might have discussed the photographic gaze, how the show was hung, and what might be done differently to counter the power viewers hold over photographic subjects. It might even have broached how the Getty could attract more Latino/a

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<sup>83</sup> Pachuco 3000, comment on Carrillo, "The Glorification of the Chola."

visitors, who constitute 48% of the people in Los Angeles County.<sup>84</sup> Or, the Getty could have hosted this discussion in East Los Angeles—and literally came down from the hill.

### Conclusion

To do any of these things would have signaled a loosening of the Getty's understandings of its material and conceptual boundaries. Michele White has observed how early "virtual museums" tried to reconstitute the "aura" of physical museums by replicating their architecture through textual metaphors.<sup>85</sup> So *A Different Lens* ended up shoring up those borders—just using new tactics.

In the end, *A Different Lens* invoked community hollowly and used it as a device to present a favorable picture of itself. At the same time, definitions of community that were audience-oriented informed the initiation of the blog, a focus that did illustrate that there is, first, an untapped reserve of goodwill for the Getty, and two, that there is an opportunity to nurture a more open and connected relationship to its audiences and that would help make the Getty more relevant to the city to which it was supposed to be a gift.

At the same time, while the blog shored up the borders of the Getty, the blog alluded to what lies beyond those borders; the inclusion of external links that preserved the original, uncurated expression of the visitor acknowledged the extreme stress on the Getty's boundaries, and suggests how it might fruitfully engage with communities interested in art towards more inclusive and dialogic practices. This

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<sup>84</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts – Los Angeles County, California," *U.S. Census Bureau* (website), <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06037.html>, accessed 27 February 2011.

<sup>85</sup> White, "The Virtual Museum," 58-190.

suggests the benefit of letting a blog be a permeable border between institution and audience, and of starting projects aimed at community-building with a clear sense of what the institution means by community so that it can articulate its goals, its strategy for accomplishing them and not let ambiguous ideas lead the way.

## Chapter 5: “A Virtual Japantown”: The Japanese American National Museum’s *Discover Nikkei*

### Introduction

Lisa Nakamura has observed that “people of color were functionally absent from the Internet at precisely that time when its discourse was acquiring its distinctive contours.” She notes that the “repercussions of the discursive gap are immense ... the Internet is a place where race happens; even in the absence of users of color, images of race and racialism proliferate in cyberspace.”<sup>1</sup> The same can be said of museums, which like the Internet, developed in the West as fantastical and utopic creations in which race was both curiously absent and present. While both museums and networked digital media share a discourse steeped in ideals of neutrality, universality, and democracy, they have also both functioned to erase and exoticize people of color, and to reinforce—or even provoke new forms—of racism.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, people of color use museums and the Internet to assert and celebrate the existence of racial and ethnic difference, and the concept of community is a common element in these efforts. The community museums that developed in the last half of the twentieth century were often “ethnically-specific museums” created by historically disenfranchised groups in the United States, which seized on the cachet of

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, xii.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Nakamura discusses new forms of racism evident online in “Race and Identity in Digital Media,” in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran, 5th ed. (forthcoming), <http://sites.google.com/site/theresearchsiteforlisanakamura/>.

the museum to symbolically name and materialize their existence and difference from the mainstream. Similarly, people of color materialize themselves in networked digital media through various means. For instance, Ananda Mitra has studied cases of Southeast Indians using websites and blogs to foster a sense of belonging amidst their diaspora, employing formatting, language, images, and multimedia to create groups of insiders and outsiders.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the company Community Connect, Inc. built some of the earliest social network sites (launched in 1997) to be marketed to people of color—AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente. These “dedicated Web sites can be thought of as imaginary public spheres,” writes Dara Byrne, which can serve as “useful vehicles for strengthening their cultural identities, for teaching them how to navigate both public and private dimensions of their racial lives, and for providing them access to a more globalized yet unfixed conversation about their community histories.”<sup>4</sup> While these sites can also reinforce essentialized concepts of racial and ethnic identities,<sup>5</sup> the general capacity of networked computing to trouble the reassurances of the material world—to “cut across territorial boundaries of cultural groups” and “juxtapose differences in a homogeneous medium”—continues to hold promise for countering stereotypes and prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ananda Mitra, “Diasporic Web Sites: Ingroup and Outgroup Discourse,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 14 (1997): 158-181; “Using Blogs to Create Cybernetic Space: Examples from People of Indian Origin,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 14, no. 4 (2008): 457-472.

<sup>4</sup> Dara N. Byrne, “The Future of (the) ‘Race’: Identity, Discourse, and the Rise of Computer-mediated Public Spheres,” in *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*, ed. Anna Everett (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 18, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-38.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 159. It is this potential, along with other media and new patterns of global mobility, that prompted Arjun Appadurai to posit that “[diasporic] public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucibles of a postnational political order,” *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 22. Nakamura has offered that, while fluidity has its limits for motivating social change, “if cross-racial role-playing is

It is into this complex and contradictory space of race and ethnicity as they manifest through networked digital media that I venture next in this dissertation. My second case study, *Discover Nikkei* (DN) is an ambitious online project of the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Los Angeles, which invites people interested in Nikkei experiences to participate in a collaborative process of community-building, story-telling, archive-building, and discussion. I selected it as a case study because building community through social media is a central concern of the project. This study occurred principally while the site was in the final stages of a total redesign that aspired to better encourage and make visible “community” and “community-building relationships” than it had previously.<sup>7</sup> Community is the project’s goal, and it is its strategy for construction and long-term maintenance of the site. In the words of Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, JANM’s web manager and the project manager of DN, “We need to form a community that actively contributes to the site and feels ownership in it, and in that way we can keep the site vital without us having to have a lot of staff or have to pay writers to do it. Well, we’ll have to see if it actually works or not, but in theory this is what we’re hoping will happen.”<sup>8</sup>

It is my concern here to sift through the fog of community that is apparent in the project in order to discern its definitions and values, and then to consider how these work to further or limit its democratizing goals. My evidence is gathered from a

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able to give white people any sense of what the shock of ‘racial surprise’ feels like, it has the potential to disrupt notions of racial authenticity and identity which may be productive;” *Cybertypes*, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Vicky Murakami-Tsuda informed me this choice was not a result of formal evaluation, but the interpretation of needs from general feedback from users over the years. Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, 3 April 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Murakami-Tsuda has worked for the museum for 14 years—ten in its store, during which she set up its online shop; the last four in its Web unit, where she has been responsible for managing four websites, including one for JANM’s National Center for the Preservation of Democracy. Our interview was followed by several e-mail exchanges to answer questions that arose subsequent to the interview, as well as to clarify and elaborate on her answers.

two-and-a-half hour, audio-recorded interview with Murakami-Tsuda conducted at JANM, an online survey of DN users, and deep analysis of the interface design and content of the site owed to months, stretching from early 2009 to early 2011, spent reading content in every section of the website, as well as taking detailed notes on the comments and commenters of about eighty posts in its “Articles” section. Based on that evidence, I show that DN illustrates how invoking community through social media creates tension for meeting museums’ democratizing goals. While the project is centrally concerned with community, it lacks a transparent definition of the concept even as multiple, implied definitions work to shape the project’s use of social media: it is present here as a specific ethnic and cultural group’s experience, but it is equally concerned with nurturing an active community that visibly manifests itself on the site; it also operates with a sense of reciprocity and collective intelligence. The project also has clear democratic goals of broadening its audience, empowering them to speak and participate, and enabling Nikkei to represent themselves in all of their diversity. Amidst these varying definitions and goals, social media is used to create a self-referential environment in which a community can recognize itself. I illustrate that this process materializes insiders and outsiders in ways that are useful, but also complicates the project’s goal of encouraging participation and ultimately representing even more difference in its community. Further, there is tension in how community operates here with the presumption that it is an organic entity that spontaneously coheres through the actions of its members, even though museum professionals actually actively curate a significant amount of the content that represents the community. At the same time, DN exhibits a productive tension by

showing how the openness of social media can unfix racial and ethnic identity. By building and representing the ethnic, cultural, and diasporic identity of Nikkei, DN ultimately achieves a portrait of a community that is rife with difference—that is really defined by difference.

I offer that articulating the definitions and values that are present within the various contexts of community that surrounds DN could advance its goals of sharing authority with audience members, invest them more in the project, alleviate pressure on the staff to keep the project going, and represent greater diversity by using social media to cultivate a community board. Finally, I argue that regarding community beyond visible participation could help DN more fully appreciate and take into account the majority of its users that lurk on the site, which would allow it to expand how it conceives of success and capture the engagement of more of the audiences to which the project is relevant.

### *A Community Museum*

While the location and architecture of the Getty express a relationship with classical and mainstream art museums, for JANM they are a resolute expression of both community museums. Located in the Little Tokyo neighborhood of Downtown Los Angeles, abutting historic neighbors like the Central Library, Olvera Street, and Phillippe's (arguably the birthplace of the French Dip sandwich), JANM embraces history as the starting point from which to engage audiences. Its original building, the Nishi Hongwanji, was built by Japanese immigrants in 1925; it was the city's first Buddhist temple, and during World War II served as an assembly point for Japanese Americans being interned in concentration camps by the unconstitutional decree of

the United States government.<sup>9</sup> In 1998, JANM expanded; the two-story, floor-to-ceiling glass façade of the new Pavilion faces its Historic Building across a small plaza, which joins the structures and opens directly onto the street and sidewalk, symbolically relaying JANM's desired relationship with its neighborhood.

As I described in chapter three, community and ethnically-specific museums forcefully link the concepts of community and identity together, rooting them in shared experiences, locality, and cultural traditions. Co-opting the symbol of the museum is a political statement that demands recognition and rights from the state and civil society.<sup>10</sup> These demands are clearly expressed by JANM. Founded in the early 1980s by an alliance of Little Tokyo businesspersons and Asian (mostly Japanese) American World War II veterans, these Nisei (second generation) were concerned with preserving Japanese American history, especially memories of internment, as members of the Issei (first-generation immigrants) began to pass away.<sup>11</sup> Cultivated by the museum's administration, those seeds bore a very progressive mission:

The mission of the Japanese American National Museum is to promote understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience.

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<sup>9</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which authorized the relocation of Japanese and Japanese Americans (as well as small numbers of residents of German or Italian descent) from coastal areas to assembly centers throughout the United States. See Center for History and New Media, "Executive Order 9066," *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* (website), <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5154>.

<sup>10</sup> The District Six Museum in South Africa exemplifies the political uses of community museums. See Valmont Layne, "The District Six Museum: An Ordinary People's Place," *The Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 53-62, and Ciraj Rassool, "Introduction: Recalling Community in Cape Town," in *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating & Curating the District Six Museum*, ed. Ciraj Rassool and Sandra Prosalendis (Cape Town: District Six Museum, 2001), vii-xii.

<sup>11</sup> A concise history of JANM's formation may be found in Irene Y. Hirano, "Introduction: Commitment to Community," in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, ed. Akemi Kikumura-Yano, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 1-15.

We share the story of Japanese Americans because we honor our nation's diversity. We believe in the importance of remembering our history to better guard against the prejudice that threatens liberty and equality in a democratic society. We strive as a world-class museum to provide a voice for Japanese Americans and a forum that enables all people to explore their own heritage and culture.

We promote continual exploration of the meaning and value of ethnicity in our country through programs that preserve individual dignity, strengthen our communities, and increase respect among all people. We believe that our work will transform lives, create a more just America and, ultimately, a better world.<sup>12</sup>

JANM pursues this mission of social change in multiple ways, but its efforts are always informed by community. By consistently making memory, first-person voice, inclusion, and collaboration at the base of its practice, JANM evinces community on the models of the political, the local, and the communicative, and understands these to have moral and normative conditions of behavior.<sup>13</sup>

As a museum that collects, preserves, and presents the history and memory of a particular group of Americans, JANM claims space in the United States for Japanese Americans by inserting their experiences into a national narrative—ambitions made plain in its name. Elizabeth Crooke has observed that museums or heritage projects are useful in this regard as they make the fundamental, but rather abstract, concept of the past tangible; objects provide a sense of continuity between the past, present, and future, giving credence to the continuous existence and shared

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<sup>12</sup> Japanese American National Museum, "About JANM," *Japanese American National Museum* (website), <http://www.janm.org/about/>, accessed 23 June 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Another of JANM's major projects is the collaborative project to create teaching curricula, *Enduring Communities: The Japanese American Experience in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah*.

experiences of groups.<sup>14</sup> Efforts like these are reminders that “record making is primarily about power.”<sup>15</sup>

Collecting objects is valuable to projects like JANM, but is generally difficult since the material culture of disenfranchised groups is often destroyed as a result of decimation or forceful exclusion from larger society.<sup>16</sup> Also, non-Western traditions of record-keeping are often oral. Community and ethnically-specific museums thus often place particular significance on first-person voice and collect oral histories. Voice is fundamental to JANM and its conceptualization of community. In the words of staffmember Cayleen Nakamura, “The National Museum accepts the challenge of defining and creating a sense of community among Japanese Americans by finding ways to involve members of the community in fulfilling its mission. This notion is rooted in the belief that the best way to share this story is by using the authentic voice – the first-person narrative.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the museum launched projects like the REGenerations Oral History Project to document Japanese American post-war settlement and an initiative to collect oral histories from the diverse residents of the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights.<sup>18</sup>

JANM marries its celebration of voice to the celebration of dialogue: the act of speaking is empowering and much of that power draws from the feeling that people are listening. In the mode of Tchen’s “dialogic museum,” JANM conceives of

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<sup>14</sup> Crooke, *Museums and Communities*, 13-14, 66.

<sup>15</sup> James O’Toole, “Cortes’s Notary: The Symbolic Power of Records,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 51.

<sup>16</sup> Neither South Africa’s District Six Museum nor the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum started out with a permanent collection.

<sup>17</sup> Cayleen Nakamura, “Creating Community One Voice at a Time: Traveling Exhibition Programs that help Create Community,” in *Common Ground*, 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Darcie C. Iki and Arthur A. Hansen, “The REgenerations Project: A Comparative Collaboration in Community Oral History,” in *Common Ground*, 131-140, and “All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights: Exploring a Los Angeles Neighborhood,” in *Common Ground*, 149-166.

communities as created in the give-and-take of conversation. Dialogue is a part of their production and evaluative processes, and plays a part in exhibits and programs. This esteem for shared experiences created through dialogue extends to deeply valuing collaboration towards achieving its mission, apparent in how the institution once wrote about its definition of “museum”:

...we propose that a museum is actually a dynamic ‘field.’ That is, a museum entails a special set of networks that revolve around people exchanging objects, ideas, skills, and so forth, with the aim of developing an exhibition and related educational materials, public programs, and the like. These people carry out their work through the media of dialogue, individual and collective learning, and practical working collaborations. In this sense an exhibition, shown to the public, is only the end product of a complex and multifaceted set of social relations, negotiations, and sometimes even struggles having to do with differential access to resources, prestige, and power.<sup>19</sup>

In eschewing hierarchy for democracy and “mutual/reciprocal education,” JANM “seeks to define and build a sense of community” through a “culture of collaborations.”<sup>20</sup>

As such, JANM is liberal with how it imagines its communities. Like other ethnically-specific museums with progressive missions, JANM negotiates a name that privileges a specific audience while desiring to appeal to a much broader audience.<sup>21</sup>

It therefore defines community based on sharing ethnic and cultural identity, physical place, or common interests; on participation and dialogue; and on the grass-roots

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<sup>19</sup> Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, Akemi Kikumura-Yano, and James A. Hirabayashi, “Conclusion,” in *Common Ground*, 208.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-10.

<sup>21</sup> This challenge is vocalized in Lonnie Bunch’s vision statement for the National Museum of African American History & Culture, which reads: “Equally important is the opportunity to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us. This is not a museum that celebrates black history solely for black Americans. Rather we see this history as America’s history” (National Museum of African American History & Culture, “About Us,” *National Museum of African American History & Culture* (website), [http://nmaahc.si.edu/section/about\\_us](http://nmaahc.si.edu/section/about_us)). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s inclusion of the fact that its visitorship is 90% non-Jewish also expresses the desire for universal appeal. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “About,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (website), <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/about/>.

phenomenon of “the people;” thus, it imagines its communities as “local, national, and international,” and encompassing Japanese Americans, Americans, people interested in history and democracy, and the residents of Downtown and Greater Los Angeles.<sup>22</sup> JANM is both in and outside of these communities—it portrays itself as part of its neighborhood and also a bridge between neighborhoods; it sees itself as part of the communities it helps to constitute, yet it also defines community as something that is neither institutional nor professional. Following these ideals, JANM has made many efforts to appeal to audiences other than that from which it takes its name. When its opening in 1992 coincided with large-scale civil unrest, the museum asked itself “what role [it] could ... play as a member of the diverse Los Angeles community”; a few years later it launched the project *finding family stories* to “foster a dialogue between the Japanese American community and neighboring communities by developing relationships with other community-based cultural institutions.”<sup>23</sup> This project led JANM to adopt what project director Claudia Sobral calls a “philosophical position” regarding the role of community-based cultural organizations in the museum’s practice: it does not operate in isolation, but fosters cross-cultural exchange by seeking working relationships with the surrounding populations in its neighborhood.<sup>24</sup> Liked shared conversation, shared work offers a process and challenge to expand cultural perspectives to recognize others, values put into practice when JANM partnered with a Latino architecture firm to design its permanent exhibit and released a public statement reaching out to Arab Americans and Muslims in the

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<sup>22</sup> C. Nakamura, “Creating Community,” 43.

<sup>23</sup> *finding family stories* began in 1995. Claudia Sobral, “Finding Family Stories: Institutional Collaborations,” in *Common Ground*, 123-124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

wake of the events of September 11, 2001. These examples also show how JANM's history suggests that community as a signifier of inclusion and exclusion is not always an antagonistic move, but one rooted in respect for difference. By describing other ethnic-cultural groups as communities that exist as lateral phenomena with Japanese Americans, JANM recognizes difference, but does not view it as hierarchical.

Finally, striving to show “that what fills the center are the margins,” JANM presents Japanese American art, history, and culture through the lens of difference.<sup>25</sup> Exhibits, research projects, and programs routinely refute definitive statements on identity. Deferring to difference has also only grown in importance to the institution. In 2009 it produced a white paper recognizing the “dramatic shifts in its audience demographics over the past 25 years”—thanks in part to an outmarriage rate of 60% among Sansei (third generation), one in three Japanese Americans now identify as multiracial—and how it pursued institution-wide change to acknowledge and serve diverse audiences that represent Japanese American identity as a continually evolving idea.<sup>26</sup>

### *Roots of Discover Nikkei*

The reliance on community and its deployment through voice, participation, conversation, and collaboration that inform JANM's efforts are also founding principles of *Discover Nikkei*. DN is the evolutionary outgrowth of the International

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<sup>25</sup> Karen L. Ishizuka, “Home Movies: Cultural Recovery and the Value of Display,” in *Common Ground*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> “Outmarriage” refers to “marriage between partners of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.” Japanese American National Museum, *The Cultural Museum 2.0: Engaging Diverse Audiences in America*, White Paper (Los Angeles, California: Japanese American National Museum, August 2009), <http://www.janm.org/projects/innovation/>, accessed 11 December 2010.

Nikkei Research Project (INRP), which began in April 1998 when JANM received a three-year research grant from The Nippon Foundation “to investigate the cultures and identities of Nikkei – people of Japanese descent – living in the Americas.”<sup>27</sup> As the project’s coordinator and central repository, JANM brought together scholars from throughout the Americas to “document Nikkei experiences *as perceived by the Nikkei themselves* and to make these data accessible through the National Museum’s Manabi and Sumi Hirasaki National Resource Center.”<sup>28</sup> The multi-year collaborative project focused on Nikkei identity-building and on the effects of transnationalism—the processes by which global migration flows affect the culture, social, economic, and political experiences of groups.

The original research agenda aimed to produce texts for an academic audience and to “[build] community among participants.”<sup>29</sup> JANM pursued the latter goal by structuring the research process to entwine the contributing scholars and institutions from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and the United States in a network of interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships that were to be reflected in the project’s publications. Towards these goals, periodic face-to-face meetings were arranged at conferences; scholars were encouraged to read and reference each other’s scholarship, and to deposit work in the Hirasaki National Resource Center; and, a website was launched to advertise the project, its participants, and its findings.

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<sup>27</sup> Kikumura-Yano et al., “Building Community Through Global Research,” in *Common Ground*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 196; original emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> A scholarly anthology and an encyclopedia about Japanese descendants in the Americas were produced by the INRP. *Ibid.*

At the close of the allotted course of funding for the INRP, JANM approached The Nippon Foundation to continue the project and was informed the foundation wished to support something more accessible to the public than traditional scholarly research.<sup>30</sup> While the INRP website had been intended to serve that function and had attracted international visitation, it had not been a project priority.<sup>31</sup> This time, The Nippon Foundation agreed to fund a website. As coordinator of the Nikkei Legacy Project (NLP), JANM has effectively moved online the INRP's goals of building a repository of Nikkei experience and community through global collaboration.

### *Discover Nikkei*

Launched in late March of 2005, DN originally billed itself as the continuation of the “global network” cultivated by the INRP and as a “community website about Nikkei identity, history and experiences.”<sup>32</sup> Today, its stated mission reads:

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<sup>30</sup> The Nippon Foundation is the current incarnation of the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation, which was founded by Ryiochi Sasakawa in 1962 to receive proceeds from gambling on motorboat racing, which Sasakawa had earlier worked to legalize. It was later renamed the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and again renamed in 1995 following its founder's death. The foundation's peace-building efforts contrast with Sasakawa's biography. He was a right-wing politician and accused of Class A war crimes following World War II; imprisoned for four years by U.S. forces, he was ultimately found not guilty. His foundation gave \$1.5 billion to charity, but “Sasakawa's critics have suggested that his charities were part of an elaborate public relations campaign meant to divert attention from other activities.” During the Cold War, Sasakawa was thought to be supporting ultranationalistic politics and organized crime. N.A., “Ryoichi Sasakawa, 96, Rightist and Gambling Figure in Japan,” *New York Times*, 20 July 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/20/obituaries/ryoichi-sasakawa-96-rightist-and-gambling-figure-in-japan.html>, accessed 18 March 2011.

<sup>31</sup> One of INRP's main researchers, Lane Hirabayashi, indicated this to me in an e-mail: “As I remember it, we did do preliminary work toward building a global community of scholars/people interested in Nikkei. Most of our energies, however, were focused on the two books that came out of the project ... So the way I see it is that, in terms of the INRP, we didn't get that far in terms of the Web phase of building community. At that preliminary stage it was more of a site to put up resources of various kinds--definitions, time lines, bibliographies, contact organizations, etc.” Lane Hirabayashi, reply to email “RE: Question about International Nikkei Research Project,” received 22 June 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Discover Nikkei, “About,” *Discover Nikkei* (website), <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/about/>, accessed 11 October 2009.

Discover Nikkei is an international network that celebrates cultural diversity and explores both global and local identities. The project connects generations and communities by sharing stories and perspectives of the Nikkei, people of Japanese descent who have migrated and settled throughout the world.<sup>33</sup>

Towards these ends, DN exhibits many of its originating project's characteristics: celebrating individuals' stories; envisioning community as based on ethnicity, connection, support, and dialogue between diverse people and organizations; constructing Nikkei identity as fluid and dependent on both individual and collective activities; furthering education and research; and, championing the view that taking a local-global perspective in the post-9/11, twenty-first century is a necessity for cultural understanding.<sup>34</sup>

According to Murakami-Tsuda, the funder's interests drove the development of the original site. The Nippon Foundation favored a multilingual project—it is, in Murakami-Tsuda's interpretation, more interested in Nikkei in Latin America instead of the United States.<sup>35</sup> However, JANM coordinates the project because it enjoys more stable resources and infrastructure relative to Nikkei organizations in Latin America. Following the INRP, its “core” audience was still scholarly, but expanded—largely “Asian American professors and their students.” The hope was that they

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<sup>33</sup> This revised mission appeared with the launch of the redesign. It is an abbreviation of the original, which reads: “... to promote cross-cultural understanding and to foster greater linkages between peoples throughout the world by making accessible resources and materials related to the Nikkei, people of Japanese descent who have migrated and settled throughout the world.” It continues: “The Discover Nikkei Website connects communities worldwide in the discovery and preservation of and access to Nikkei resources located in disparate cultural communities and educational institutions that preserve and collect important collections. The Website functions as an interactive database, forum, and community-building center where visitors have access to educational resources, tools and “best practices” in the preservation and documentation of collections related to the Nikkei experience.” Discover Nikkei, “About,” *Discover Nikkei* (website), <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/about/>, accessed 27 May 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Kikumura-Yano et al., “Building Community Through Global Research,” 204.

<sup>35</sup> Murakami-Tsuda described The Nippon Foundation in our interview as being “not interested in the United States” and preferring to support projects in “Third World” countries, specifically in Latin America.

would be the primary engine to populate the site with content and to promote the project. Seed content was provided by JANM, its extant partners, and affiliates cultivated for DN, which ranged in scope and renown from the Asian Pacific American Program at the Smithsonian Institution to several small organizations located throughout the Americas and in Japan.

The original interface was “designed to look more research-oriented, more academic.” That idea translated to a largely white, horizontal page punctuated with orange and headed by a teal banner that featured a collage of photos of Nikkei faces (Figure 5.1). The left sidebar menu declared the site’s available languages of English,

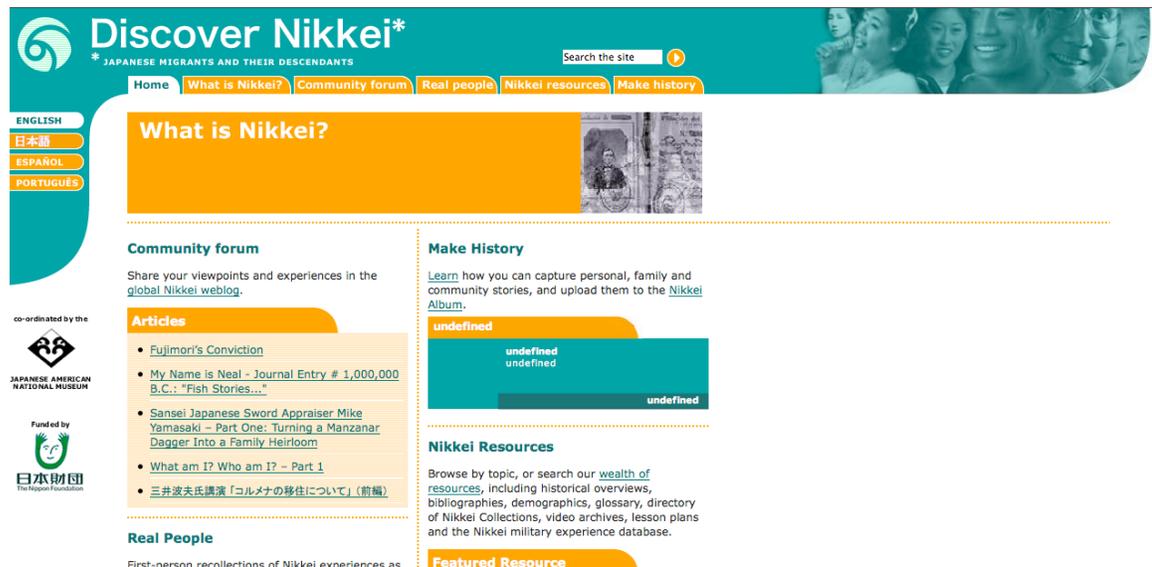


Figure 5.1 Screenshot of *Discover Nikkei* homepage, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/>, captured 27 May 2009.

Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese. Other than the common cornerstone link of “Home,” the global navigation bar displayed ambiguous links. Under “What is Nikkei?” one could find a definition of “Nikkei” from the INRP; the “Community forum” offered “articles” about the Nikkei experience, as well as a bulletin board for

posting events, news, and discussion topics; oral history interviews appeared under “Real people”; “Nikkei resources” provided access to an online version of the encyclopedia produced by the INRP about Nikkei migration and other secondary sources; and “Make history” presented some links to information about conducting oral history interviews and preserving and interpreting material culture. The offerings under these tabs were initially thin—“a lot of the design was designed to mask the fact that, when we launched it, we didn’t have a lot of content.” Interactive options for users were also limited: registered users could post to the bulletin board or comment on the articles, which staff were soliciting from various authors and which were slowly published over the first several months. Later, the sophisticated “Nikkei Album” was added to the “Make history” section; it is a tool that allows people to browse and/or create collections of photographs and captions by using their own materials or borrowing (under Creative Commons licensing) those already posted within albums.<sup>36</sup>

While the early hope was that students especially would feel invested in DN, visit repeatedly, and contribute to building the site, Murakami-Tsuda observed over time that students were introduced to DN in the context of a college class and only used it for the duration of an assignment. The participation of affiliates was also sometimes anemic; all were paid to provide content, but larger organizations were often remiss in their obligations.<sup>37</sup> It became apparent that the heaviest users of the site were small, locally-based affiliates, and individuals interested in exploring the

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<sup>36</sup> Creative Commons licensing allows authors and creators of content more flexibility than older types of copyright for licensing their work for reuse. See Creative Commons, *Creative Commons* (website), <http://creativecommons.org/>, accessed 18 March 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Murakami-Tsuda approximated the fees paid to affiliates to be between \$2500 and \$10,000.

experiences, identities, and issues involved with Nikkei people. The redesign sought to serve these two constituencies since Murakami-Tsuda perceived they had the most to gain from the project and would likely be the most invested in sustaining it: the affiliates, especially those without websites or with low-trafficked websites, would garner exposure, while individuals “who are personally interested and wanting to connect with others looking for similar experiences” could be edified.<sup>38</sup> They would be the cornerstones of a site redesigned to foster community, which based on Murakami-Tsuda’s explanations would amount to an extra-institutional group of people who were mutually invested in a common interest, who communicate and interact frequently, and who wish to build enduring connections with each other and the project. Also, she felt DN would benefit more from nurturing relationships with small affiliates because they would feed the site content that could not be found elsewhere.

This community was desired not just for its fuzzy connotations of a “common good,” but for the practical reason of making the site self-sustainable. Murakami-Tsuda foresaw a community that, motivated by its commitment to the site and each other, would contribute content and self-police for spammers and inappropriate content. She explained:

As far as the community, I mean, I think a lot of it is really building a network of individuals and organizations on a global scale that are interested in, sort of, the Nikkei experience. I mean that would be the common sort of bond. But, I think a lot of it, with community, it’s really a sense of ownership, feeling that, you know, you have some stake in this larger project or this larger thing—like you know, when you’re a member of a church community, when

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<sup>38</sup> Murakami-Tsuda perceived that big-name institutions like the Smithsonian and Stanford University, which have personnel and resources to create their own websites and repositories, have less incentive to regularly provide DN with content (and hence did not). DN retains them as unpaid partners since they bring credibility to the site.

you're a member of a community, it's not a pass... It's not a passive, it's a step beyond a passive thing. It could be passive, but you know, even within a community there's different levels of interaction, right? There's some members where it's a very passive thing, where they just, they just participate. Then there are people who actually help, you know, will volunteer and then there's people who will actually be the ones who are organizing, coordinating. So, I mean, even with a community, you know, there's very diverse roles and I think that applies here too, with websites. The majority of people will never actively participate—they'll just, you know, quietly, just look. But, then there're people who will help, who will actually post things. And then there will be the people who are actually, you know, who help us outreach, and, you know, help us further develop it, you know there's, and, I think, with any comm—you know, I kind of look at it as, you know, it's like ... a virtual Japantown, kind of, you know? And not every person in a community gets along together [laughs], there's always different opinions and different perspectives, there's all these different elements, but, you know, but there's one thing that really, you know, connects them all together.

With this community's help, she stressed that, ideally, her staff—project coordinator, Yoko Nishimura, and a web technologist—would eventually serve more of a support role than the administrative and content development one it plays now. This goal was glaringly important the day I interviewed Murakami-Tsuda, as she had learned the day before that her hours had been cut to half-time in light of the global financial crisis that was then at its peak.<sup>39</sup> As such, she saw it as a primary problem that the network of organizations and people DN had so far been successful in building were mostly connected to each other through the hub of JANM. Relationships were “one-to-one only: it's us with this user, us with this organization, us with....” Her aim was to create, in the vision of community common to social media, a network of people with dense, interrelated connections:

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<sup>39</sup> In the fall of 2010, Murakami-Tsuda became a full-time employee again when she was given the job of Communications Production Manager, which expanded her duties to include management of all print and online communications for JANM. The following spring she told me her time to work on DN had “shrunk considerably,” although she continues to nurture partners, as well as maintains the Facebook and Twitter pages for the project, and coordinates the DN-themed events and workshops that happen on-site at JANM. Vicky Murakami Tsuda, e-mail response to “RE: Two questions,” received 18 March 2011.

... And what we are really hoping to happen through this new site redesign is more, sort of, organic, real sense, like in a real community. It's not, you know, one other person and one other person and one other person. Those other people know each other as well, right? And so, that's, you know, it's part of the social networking kind of thing. And so, part of it is trying to bring some of that social networking kind of elements to Discover Nikkei more. There's some in there, but I mean honestly right now, it's not happening very much through the site, on the site right now. And what we're hoping with the new site is that will happen a lot more, and actually, in more frequency.

*The New Discover Nikkei and its Constructions of Community*

The redesigned site launched in beta on July 3, 2009 and makes visible its community ambitions in multiple ways. First, it materializes community in its front-end design. Having received feedback from users that “the [original] site looked intimidating for non-academics, non-professional writers,” and that they were often overwhelmed by choices on the homepage, Murakami-Tsuda supported a new design that strives for a more “informal” look that presents information in a more intuitive and straightforward manner (Figure 5.2).<sup>40</sup> It is plainer, dominated by blue and white, and confines animation to the rotating globe at the center of the logo in the upper right corner. In keeping with the conventions of social media sites that want to look

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<sup>40</sup> One of the early introductions on DN's Bulletin Board gives this opinion. Reid Yokoyama (ryokoyama) wrote on 4 April 2006 in the “Introductions” section: “Plus, after speaking with some of the administrators, I am no longer intimidated about posting here!”

casual and welcoming, the new



Figure 5.2 Screenshot of Discover Nikkei homepage, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/>, captured 3 July 2009.

DN employs a rounded and larger font than the first design. Simplified to “Home | Stories | Community | Resources | About,” the order and labels in the top-level global navigation bar emphasize that “we’re very clearly, the two big things on the site are the stories and community.” Tabs were renamed for greater transparency and are arranged roughly by levels of interactivity available to users.

The major components of the site are as follows. “Stories” include the Nikkei Album, which is being rebuilt to be more “intuitive” to use (albums have been available to browse, but its “add” and “edit” functions were disabled and may finally relaunch at the end of March 2011). Previously “buried” under the “Make history” tab as it was a late addition to the site, Murakami-Tsuda felt it was not well-used. In March of 2009, there were 243 published albums, mostly contributed by the staff or from “arrangements as part of our affiliate relationships, or with professors on class

projects, or related to sort of the programs that we've been doing." The album expresses the potential for creating a repository of rich content that can be "remixed" by users to tell various stories. The next option in the "Stories" menu is "Journal," which is the richest content area on the site that is currently open to entries by users. It contains non-fiction articles, fiction pieces, and comics that Murakami-Tsuda and Nishimura solicit from affiliates, from staff, panelists, and various other sources. The last option, "Interviews," contains the oral history interviews.

The "Community" tab, which Murakami-Tsuda admitted might be opaque to people who "blindly come to the site," includes pages that represent various communities—the "Nima-kai" (registered members), organizations, and taiko groups. It also houses the two communicative options users have for posting unmoderated content: a "Wall" feature envisioned to work like an information stream akin to Facebook's Wall (it is still under development as of this writing), and an events calendar that maps Nikkei-related events throughout the world. The fourth tab on the global navigation bar, "Resources," houses static content: the "Nikkei Wiki" (although called a wiki, it is not interactive—it links to the online encyclopedia of Nikkei migration on the old site); the "How-to" guides that were previously available under the "Make history" tab; a lesson plan database; and access to the Japanese American Military Experience Database of JANM's Hirasaki National Resource Center. Finally, the "About" tab contains the definition of "What is Nikkei?," information about how to support the project by participating and visiting often, donating, promoting it, or volunteering, the terms of use, privacy policy, site map, and contact information.

Besides materializing community through its design, DN signifies it in the language it uses to solicit participation and dialogue; in the content included on the site, which speaks to insider and outsider groups; through its architecture, and finally, by trying to materialize a physical community at JANM. In terms of language, Murakami-Tsuda named the community—the “Nima-kai Community” and highlights it on the homepage, where it appears just “above the fold.”<sup>41</sup> Feeling that “user” “sounded so impersonal” and that “member” might be confused with JANM’s paid membership program, Murakami-Tsuda sought a less generic term for people who register for the site. She asked for suggestions from users through DN as well as by making appeals to the DN Facebook Group, which she maintains.<sup>42</sup> A voting process selected “Nima-kai,” which mixes the Japanese words *Nikkei* and *nakama* (“colleagues,” “fellows,” or “circle”) to refer to their community. The significance of “Nima,” registered individuals, and the Nima-kai is represented throughout the site by a prominent pictorial motif of stylized *kokeshi* dolls, Japanese wooden dolls carved without arms or legs (see previous figure). Nimas are also materialized through the creation of basic profile pages that display a name, profile picture, and biographical information. These pages also link to whatever content they have contributed to the site, signifying the importance of active, visible communication and participation in DN. Additionally, Nima who do visibly participate are rewarded by being recognized and profiled as “Nima of the Month,” a feature on the Nima-kai page.

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<sup>41</sup> “Above the fold” is a web design term that refers to the content that fills a browser when a website first opens. Since a user need not scroll down to see what is “above the fold,” web designers routinely put the elements deemed most important to a site in that area.

<sup>42</sup> Murakami-Tsuda remembered starting the Facebook Group some time in September 2008. Its URL is <http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=25482351199>.

The site's language about community also constructs it on the basis of visible participation and communication. In Murakami-Tsuda explained, "As much as possible, we're trying to push, 'How do you become a part of this?'" Besides the "Community" tab in the global navigation bar, mentions of community are found in the introductory text that accompanies each section. The welcome statement begins, "*A whole new look, many new features, improved usability, and tools to help our global community connect, not only with us, but with each other.*" The Events Calendar asks people to "Remember, your participation is an important part of building a stronger community!" Admonitions to become a Nima bloom at every turn: links to create an account and log-in remain in the global header; the "Community" page announces, "Join the Discover Nikkei global community, where Nikkei interact and bond together! Use the tools in the community section to actively share information about your community, wherever it is located." The Journal, while previously open to article submissions, had not advertised that fact; now "Submit an Article" is an option on every article page. Opportunities to interact with staff and other Nima are plentiful: through the year-plus time I researched the site, the right sidebar has asked people to e-mail the DN team with any error messages they encounter, to "Support this Project" because "we need your help!," and asked people to take a survey that would "Help us Build our 'Wall'!" People are also reminded in the Journal and Events Calendar that they must log-in or register to contribute descriptive tags or comments.

The content contributed by Nima-kai also help to materialize community by designating subjects of discussion that are appropriate to the "Nikkei experience."

The idea of a Nikkei community feeds from a collective identity that coheres from recognizing shared ethnicity, culture, and historical experiences; as the new homepage defines them, Nikkei are “people spread out around the world who share a common cultural past.” Similarities are apparent in the many photos that depict Nikkei faces; shared territory is also implied on a Google Map that charts the locations of Nimas (principally British Columbia, Canada; São Paulo, Brazil; and California, Oregon, and New York). Additionally, the articles in the Journal section share stories in common veins of experience: ancestors’ migration from Japan to the Americas; experiences during World War II; celebrating Japanese holidays and eating Japanese or Japanese-American food; the pleasures and trials of wrestling with identities as Japanese American, *hapa* (Hawaiian for “mixed descent”), or Nikkei; and of growing up in places where such identities were either well-established or non-existent. Common identity is also apparent in shared experiences of racism. Neal Yamamoto’s weekly comic, “My Name is Neal,” frequently deals with stereotypes of Japanese Americans. For example, “Eye Exam” records a “true story” from Yamamoto’s life, when a white male asked him in high school if “tight eyes limit your peripheral...vision?” (Figure 5.3). Yamamoto illustrates his response as delivering, without turning his head, a jarring “thwack!” to the questioner.

A more subtle way that community is layered into DN is in its infrastructure of links. Murakami-Tsuda described the old site as a “top-down,” “hierarchical” experience, built on the outdated web design notion that users enter sites from homepages. Since she knew this was not the case for most users—they predominantly find DN thanks to Google searches—she wanted to make it easier to find related

content without having to visit the homepage. Guided by her desire to make the site more self-sustainable, DN was redeveloped using Django and MediaWiki, open-source tools that can support content development and interaction over the long-term (as they are not owned by companies that can dissolve). They were also chosen because they could weave deep interconnections throughout the site based on less hierarchical links. Consequently, users can now navigate content in multiple ways, such as by the name of the author of an article or affiliate or by



Figure 5.3 Screenshot of *Discover Nikkei* article, “Eye Exam,” <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/1/12/my-name-is-neal/>, captured 19 March 2011.

descriptive tags. These links create webs of relationship between DN's content and its users, fashioning a highly self-referential environment in the manner of Michael Warner's publics, which recognize themselves in the circulation of discourse and mutual attention to that circulation.<sup>43</sup> By emphasizing a dense structure of navigation, Murakami-Tsuda relies on these ideas for building and portraying community on DN.

The final way that DN strives to materialize community is by hosting public programs about its content at JANM.<sup>44</sup> Begun in 2008, these programs intend to introduce DN to new audiences as well as to get new content for the site, since panelists are asked to contribute articles to the Journal. Such programs serve to bring this social media project into the space of the museum, making the community visible to the museum and to itself. Whereas social media is often carefully corralled by museums in online spaces (as was the case with the Getty's *A Different Lens*), DN crosses into the physical space of JANM through these programs. Such "hybrid" experiences are not new for museums—institutions have for several years been creating hybrid projects that seek to motivate visitors to partake in a cyclical experience.<sup>45</sup> Such projects try to manifest community through encouraging recurring patterns of engagement. *Discover Nikkei* programs bring the project's concerns and users directly into JANM, where their anonymity can be resolved and they are materialized. Such programs advertise DN within physical space, which starts to dissolve the borders between online and onsite experiences.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 65-124.

<sup>44</sup> I credit the idea that museums use social media to physically materialize community at their on-site facilities to John Shiga's analysis of the "cultural logic" of mash-up culture influences participants try to materialize "artifacts, people, and events in order to make them 'real.'" See "Copy-and-Persist: The Logic of Mash-Up Culture," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 2 (June 2007): 95, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Early examples are described in Barbara J. Soren and Nathalie Lemelin, "'Cyberpals!/Les cybercopains!'"

*Democratizing Effects and Limits of Community in Discover Nikkei*

The materialization of community in such ways serve various democratizing goals of DN's, as well as express limits. Rather than appearing as welcoming to all comers, DN constructs and represents privileged communities that are based on Nikkei identity or use of the site, creating insider and outsider groups in both instances. Nakamura observes, "the Internet is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where 'race' is created as an effect of the net's distinctive uses of language."<sup>46</sup> Dara N. Byrne examined this language at work in her research about ethnically-targeted social network sites, in which an "underlying assumption in the rhetoric" of essentialism circulated on the basis of common experience and knowledge of "food, music, geography, blood, slavery, white domination, disenfranchisement, and skin color." Like those websites, DN risks and actualizes moments where Nikkei identity appears as "authentic" or "essentialized" around a group of "facts."<sup>47</sup> Such "facts" are evident throughout the site, and are especially so in the Journal, which routinely shares stories around common themes. I discerned these themes at work first by reading several articles and describing them based on my impression of their major subject, but also found that they were supported by the "tag cloud" that appears on the Journal's "Advanced Search" page, which shows the sedimentation of major themes on the site.<sup>48</sup> "Tag clouds" are clusters of tags that

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<sup>46</sup> Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Byrne, "The Future of (the) 'Race,'" 29.

<sup>48</sup> The tag cloud displays all entered tags, with the size of tags increasing based on use. The largest tags, as of 18 March 2011 and as written, are: Brazil, california, Canada, cartoon, comic, community, culture, deka-segi, education, family, fiction, food, hapa, Hawaii, history, humor, identity, issei, Japan, Japanese American National Museum, literature, little tokyo, Los Angeles, manzanar, multiracial, music, nikkei in japan, nisei, peru, Okinawa, travel, World War II, yonsei, 442<sup>nd</sup>. The next largest tags are: a-bomb, Amache, ansel adams, Bolivia, book, camps, business, Chicago, childhood, Christmas, civil rights, Colorado, concentration camp, concentration camps, COPANI, dorothea lange, Fujimori,

signify the popularity of tags based on their size. So, by grouping together similar tags among the most popular and next most popular tags, it is possible to see that stories of World War II and internment; places of settlement in the Americas; art and culture, including food; identity; and migration and travel dominate the Journal. These themes create a narrative texture through which a user may compare one's experiences and determine her status as an insider or outsider.

The article, "Are you a true JA?," provides an example.<sup>49</sup> The author, being "yonsei (fourth generation) and [having worked] at the Japanese American National Museum," notes being frequently asked that question and being puzzled by how to answer: "How do you explain an entire culture without boring the questioner to death? How do you define a culture without it sounding trite? How do you talk about anything Asian without making it exotic?" His facetious solution is to craft a quiz against which he can judge his own authenticity. Criteria include: "I celebrate Oshogatsu every year," "I think spam musubi is the best comfort food," "I have been asked by more than one total stranger if I know where a good sushi restaurant is," and "I have named or currently have a doggie named Kuma, Kuro, or Shiro." In the fashion of magazine personality quizzes, the author offers that people who get a perfect score "(like [he] did)," are "super JA," while a middling score qualifies one as a "regular good old JA," and "Anything less than ten means that you are not a JA and should leave the room immediately. Just joking. This quiz is arbitrary and means

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holidays, immigrants, Issei Pioneers, Japanese American, Japanese Canadian, japantown, journalism, language, new year, new york newspaper, Nikkei, Paraguay, photography, playwright, poet, poetry, politics, racism, restaurant, san Francisco, sao paulo, sansei, seattle, serialized story, south America, southern California, sports, stereotypes, strawberry, taiko, terminology, toyo miyatake, tradition, tule lake, U.S. FrontLine, uchinanchu, utah, war, WWII.

<sup>49</sup> Koji Steven Sakai, "Are you a true JA?," *Discover Nikkei* (website), 25 July 2007, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2007/7/25/kojis-column/>.

absolutely nothing.” The quiz is tongue-in-cheek—its teasing tone weaves between offering up this laundry list of qualities as admitted stereotypes, and as a common pool of characteristics through which Japanese American identity and community can be negotiated. This process is apparent in the comments, wherein five people offered their scores. None measure up to being a “super JA”: two manage “regular good old JA” status, with one noting that “i scored 11. but I’m not JA. is there an ‘ambiguously non-JA’ category? :],” while the others lament scores below ten—“hummm....I’m only 6. I was born and growing up in Japan....it’s a long way to be true JA.” These instances of DN users judging their own experiences against those of the author show the active negotiation of identity. While they circulate essentialist ideas, they also simultaneously dismantle them as other users offer juxtaposing experiences of being Japanese-American—an idea I will return to in a moment. Still, these moments work to create outsiders, such as by using but not explaining insider vocabulary: e.g., “JA” is slang for “Japanese American,” “Oshogatsu” signifies the celebration of the Japanese New Year, and “spam musubi” is a form of onigiri (rice ball) using Spam that is a popular Japanese American snack, especially in Hawaii.

Studying the discursive identity-building tactics of Southeast Indians on the Internet, Mitra has illustrated that a “unique discursive problematic” exists for websites, which is that “a small community as well as the global audience” may be “simultaneously addressed.” This simultaneous address creates tension between “in-groups” and “out-groups,” using format, language, multimedia, and links to speak differently to members of out-groups versus in-groups, the latter sharing a common

history of using a particular website, of interests, language, etc.<sup>50</sup> DN addresses insiders and outsiders in similar ways and constructs two groups of insiders. DN constructs people as outsiders simply in its name: “Discover Nikkei” marks the site as a platform for “Nikkei,” an identity that may be discovered by both people who can claim it as much as by people who cannot. Further, text that defines the purpose of the site and introduce its tools orient the site to non-users, while the terms “Nima-kai” and “Nima” indicate insider knowledge. These different statuses are evinced by the tendency of people to identify themselves in relation to “Nikkei;” without prompting, people with Japanese heritage note what generation they are to their homeplaces or if they are *hapa*. Outsiders also indicate if they are not Nikkei. For instance, Jane Schiff identifies herself as “a 3rd generation Russian American Jew” in a comment.<sup>51</sup>

This process of self-identification is not anti-democratic, but it can, as Mitra notes, introduce tension into ethnically-specific sites by creating a sense of territory and signifying who has the right to speak. That tension appears in the following comment on the comic “Eye Exam.” “d00d” writes:

My name is.....well, never mind. Sounded to me like the guy was just asking an honest question – didn’t look like he was teasing or whatever. I had a lot of Asian friends in high school and a bunch of them asked me if I got tired of seeing the bridge of my nose all the time. It does kinda get in the way, but thats a whole nuther story. Anyway and it didn’t bother me cause I knew they were just wondering. Oh well, I was gonna write some more but on second thought maybe I won’t. Wouldn’t want to say the wrong thing without meaning to and get slapped...<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Mitra, “Diasporic Web Sites,” 154, 176.

<sup>51</sup> Jane\_Schiff, comment on Koji Steven Sakai, “Embarrassment,” *Discover Nikkei*, 27 February 2009, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2009/2/27/kojis-column/>.

<sup>52</sup> This comment is presented as it was written. d00d, comment on Neal Yamamoto, “Journal Entry #43AOZ: ‘Eye Exam,’” *Discover Nikkei*, 14 Jan 2008, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/1/12/my-name-is-neal/>.

There is no reply to this comment. It stands as a momentary assertion of an outsider, which is contradictory in that it expresses being an outsider and not feeling welcome to speak, and yet speaking any way. I call attention to this not to argue that DN should try to welcome all comers equally—it would not be possible to do that and, as Byrne has surmised, while ethnically-specific sites risk constructing essentialist identities and communities, they provide safe public spaces for people of color to negotiate their identities. This construction of insiders and outsiders is an inevitable fact of ethnically-specific social media sites. While it may not always be appropriate to respond to every contentious comment that appears in a social media project, moments like these do open opportunities for the dialogue JANM seeks to have with the general public. Yet, the comment speaks to the need for conversation about race and ethnicity and is pregnant as representation of the people who do not speak on the site because they feel like outsiders or because they are nervous about engaging in public conversations about race and racism. As DN is invested in participation and as JANM tries to productively confront the ethnic and racial diversification of its core constituency, it might serve DN's goal to be a forum about identity by providing clear “community guidelines” that transparently assert its accepted rules of discourse and help bolster DN as a place that is accepting of differing experiences and viewpoints. These would also give users an understanding of what discourse is not welcome. Further, the DN team might seek training in dialogue facilitation about difficult issues to help direct comments like d00d's to cross-racial understanding.

Such features would support JANM's and DN's anti-racist goals and put in place measures to support people as they hazard to participate, especially as creating a

safer space for discourse might also encourage even more diversity to pervade DN. As mentioned before, DN constructs a class of insiders based on Nikkei identity or site use, but the assertion of that class also shows those identities to be highly diverse and fluid. The project asserts that difference is immanent to community, or in other words, that community “seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference.” Anthony Cohen explains:

The community boundary is *not* drawn at the point where differentiation occurs. Rather, it incorporates and encloses difference and ... is thereby strengthened. The boundary represents the mask presented by the community to the outside world; it is the community’s public face. But the conceptualization and symbolization of the boundary from within is much more complex. To put this another way, the boundary as the community’s public face is symbolically simple; but, as the object of internal discourse it is symbolically complex.<sup>53</sup>

DN makes that symbolic complexity quite plain. It renders Nikkei identity and communities as rife with contention and difference in the following ways. For one, the site’s definition of the term “Nikkei” presents it as always tenuous. The “What is Nikkei?” page on both the old and new sites shares the definition created by the INRP, which stresses that “Nikkei” is multiple, fluid and dependent on contexts of “situations, places and environments.” The page elaborates these contexts as a process of confronting questions about blood and kinship; self-identification and affiliation; connection to Japanese traditions and cultural values; geography; differences of gender and generation; and, being *hapa*. In stating that what it means to be Nikkei “is not static,” but “a symbolic, social, historical, and political construction” based on “a dynamic process of selection, reinterpretation, and synthesis of cultural elements” that occurs within the dynamic contexts of everyday

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<sup>53</sup> Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 12, 74.

life and is “intensified within the current context of global capitalism,” *Discover Nikkei* announces its intention to portray that complexity and process.

Secondly, DN’s content makes difference and conflict key aspects of the Nikkei experience. Browsing DN is akin to peering through a kaleidoscope. The malleability of Nikkei identity and community is evident as the articles, oral histories, comments, user profiles, Nikkei Album, etc. work to materialize a community composed of people distributed throughout the globe, whose individual histories and local contexts shape their experiences. These qualities are visualized in the map displaying the geographic dispersion of registered users.<sup>54</sup> They are visible in the mosaic created by the site’s blocks of text, which mix English, Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese, and in the ways Nikkei are shown to lack stereotypical markers of identity (Figure 5.4). People with “Japanese” last names write in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, and people with “English” and “Latino” names write in Japanese. A *hapa* of Japanese and “white Jewish” heritage writes about celebrating Passover, posts comments in English and Spanish, and explains that her fluent Japanese allows her to pass as a native in Tokyo on the phone, but never in person.<sup>55</sup> Mary Kobayashi responds in Spanish to an article about Nikkei in Peru—and locates herself in “Toronto, Canadá.” All of this content taken together represent Nikkei identity and community as multiple and uncertain even by those who claim them.

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<sup>54</sup> As of 14 August 2010, the registered members claimed location mostly in the US (96), but also Japan (8), Brazil (6), Canada (6), Chile (6), Peru (4), Argentina (2), no location (2), United Kingdom (2), and one each in Australia, Bolivia, Paraguay, Portugal, and the US Minor Outlying Islands. Discover Nikkei, “Nima-kai,” *Discover Nikkei*, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/users/>.

<sup>55</sup> Victoria Kraus, “Japanese School Memories, Part III: Not Looking the Part,” *Discover Nikkei*, 17 March 2007, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2007/3/17/half-enough/>, accessed 25 March 2011.

Finally, the diversity of Nikkei also manifests in the different opinions offered by individuals. An article prompted by Valentine's Day brought on a heated exchange about feminism, the definition of feminism, writing quality, and the protocol of blogging versus



**Value Messages Collide with Reality: Joseph Kurihara and the Power of Informal Education - Part 5** 10 Mar 2011 EN  
Eileen H. Tamura  
>> [Read part 4](#)

**Nonformal Education: Instilling Patriotism**

While Kurihara believed that he was getting an education of high quality at St. Ignatius School, he disliked having rocks thrown at him, being spat at, and kicked, and he had grown weary of being called "Jap."<sup>1</sup> In California ...



**Nikko, la propuesta culinaria de Omar Frank Maruy: Cocina nikkei llena de peruanidad** 10 Mar 2011 ES  
Enrique Higa Sakuda. Asociación Peruano Japonesa

Recordar la infancia es volver a aromas y sabores: un plato preparado por mamá, un postre horneado por *obaachan*, el restaurante al que toda la tribu familiar iba para celebrar una buena comida y la dicha de estar juntos.



**The Japanese American Family - Part 8 of 8** 9 Mar 2011 EN  
Arthur Sakamoto. ChangHwan Kim. Isao Takei.  
>> [Part 7](#)

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Researchers have become so fixated on the drama of the World War II internment that the general study of contemporary Japanese Americans themselves has been unfortunately neglected in recent years. We have sought to help fill this research gap by investigating ...



**Los nikkei de América Latina y los nikkei latino** 8 Mar 2011 JA ES  
日本の日系ラティーノに対する支援策を検証～  
「弱者」と決めつける危険性  
Alberto J. Matsumoto

2010年8月末日本政府は内閣府を通じて「日系定住外国人施策に関する基本方針」を発表した<sup>1</sup>。日系定住外国人の集住する自治体による、国に対しての「外国人が日本社会に適應して生活していくために必要になる施策について、国としての体系的・総合的な方針を策定してほしい」という要望のもと

Figure 5.4 Search page of articles from *Discover Nikkei*, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/articles/?page=2/>, captured 27 March 2011.

published writing.<sup>56</sup> Another by a Japanese-American man about feeling embarrassed at “[seeing or hearing] of an Asian American or Japanese American doing something stupid, embarrassing, or downright immoral and unlawful” provoked a clash about whether or not he was supporting or countering stereotypes.<sup>57</sup>

The open culture and tools of social media support the materialization of Nikkei community and identity on DN as fragmented, fluid, and actively negotiated. But, by inviting audience members to take part, it also faces the challenge that only some will take the opportunity. As such, DN doesn’t represent the Nikkei experience so much as it manifests a particular Nikkei community—that of participants. The construction of Nikkei identity and community through DN will always be qualified because only a small subset of people who identify as Nikkei make themselves visible on the site. This is a challenge inherent to the museum’s efforts to work with communities in their own representation. In the same way that survey results are slanted to the opinions of personalities that are likely to opt in, so exhibits about communities will be shaped by the few members who choose to be part of the process, or by the most vocal participants.<sup>58</sup> Further, as discussed at the end of chapter two, the conditions of public discourse may even further dissuade people from participating, especially when there are no measures in place to support civility. Yet, if DN’s main goal is to get people to represent themselves and their diversity on

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<sup>56</sup> Victoria Kraus, “Cross-culturing Valentine’s,” *Discover Nikkei*, 16 February 2007, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2007/2/16/half-enough/>.

<sup>57</sup> Sakai, “Embarrassment.”

<sup>58</sup> Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 79-101.

the site, I suggest that the DN team might foster that activity by considering how they define community largely on the basis of public communication, and expanding it.

DN relies on social media because its goal is to open the construction of the Nikkei experience to people who identify as such:

...[what] we're trying to do is provide a space where people, people in all these different communities can tell their own stories from their own perspectives, in their own voices. So, it's not the Japanese American National Museum saying, "This is what the Nikkei experience is like in this, for this group of people." It's that group, that person, or that community saying, 'This is *our* experience.' And we're just providing the opportunity for them to share that with our audience, and with our community.

Towards this goal, the project enlists social media to invite as many people as possible to participate, but it may be well-served by increasing the ways they can.

Right now, the ideal community sought by Murakami-Tsuda for the site is a community of visibly active users: people who register, create user profiles, and contribute to the site's maintenance by writing articles, posting events, making Nikkei Albums, commenting, or flagging content as inappropriate. This preference is evident in the old site's admonishment that "Anyone can view the forum, but to *participate fully* you need to register once and login," and in the new site's designation of the "Nima-kai Community."<sup>59</sup>

However, for all her efforts, these calls for participation have met mixed results. Illustrating the typical social media power law, DN receives many more visitors than users that make themselves visible. About 35,000 to 40,000 unique visitors come to the site each month, but few leave traces that indicate their visit. In June 2009, the site had only 2400 active user accounts and even fewer contributed

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<sup>59</sup> My emphasis.

content to the site.<sup>60</sup> Conversational exchanges are also subdued; my review of the 43 articles published in the Journal in July 2010 counted only eleven comments in response. While Murakami-Tsuda informed me eight months after the launch of the redesign that “significant growth” had occurred in the Journal and Events with almost daily updates, they were “still struggling with ... getting people to create accounts, log in, and update their user profile pages.”<sup>61</sup>

Despite this lack of visible engagement, anecdotal evidence suggests that DN resonates with many users, even if they do not make themselves visible on the site. Consider this story Murakami-Tsuda shared about the person she believes to be DN’s most regular non-staff user—a woman she thinks does not “even [have] a user account.” The user is a JANM docent, “an older Nisei” (Murakami-Tsuda estimates her age in her 80s since “she was in camp”) who:

... reads like every single article on our site. And she prints them out. She prints them out and reads all our English articles. You know, ‘cause sometimes she’ll come up to me and say, “Oh my god, I really enjoyed that article” [laughing]. And she even told me, she started printing out the Spanish language articles because her pastor’s wife is like from Puerto Rico or something, and so she started printing out the Spanish articles and giving it to the pastor’s wife to read. And ... she’s like, ‘You have too much content on there.’ It was so funny because she was telling me, she used to tell her kids, ‘You spend too much time on the computer,’ and now she’s spending all her time on *Discover Nikkei* [laughing].

Murakami-Tsuda knows that this type of deep, but invisible, engagement with the site is likely the norm. She regularly encounters an appreciation for DN coupled with unwillingness or indifference to showing that appreciation online:

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<sup>60</sup> Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, e-mail response to author, received 16 June 2009. On the old site, the Bulletin Board displayed hundreds of posts with an adjacent “Replies” column that showed a prevalence of zeros.

<sup>61</sup> Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, e-mail response to author, received 3 March 2010.

... every time I write one of my articles, ... I try and send the link to my friends and my family to say, 'Oh, my latest article is on, check it out.' Part of it is self-promotion, but part of it is trying to get them to visit, you know, *Discover Nikkei* and hopefully they'll look at other stuff while they're there. But, they'll always, they'll e-mail me back and say, 'Oh, you know, I really enjoyed that.' And it's like [laughing], 'Post the comment online!' But I can't get them to post it online, but at least I know that they're reading it and that they're enjoying it. But, you know, she's [referring to the docent] another one, she's like, 'Oh, I really enjoyed that.' Post it online!

Lacking an established evaluation framework for DN, Murakami-Tsuda is understandably frustrated by the reluctance of DN users to record their engagement on the site. Yet, even if they did, a metrics program could not capture all moments of engagement with DN, especially since spam and bots render such metrics inaccurate. And, even the comments that are contributed—frequently simple statements of thanks—are dim reflections of the actual experience that prompted the sign of gratitude.

The emphasis on visible communication that accompanies community pursued through social media reveals itself in this case to be largely inadequate for understanding the reach and resonance of the site, and suggests the need to redefine community in a more expansive way. Constructing community as activity loses sight of the significant activities of lurkers like the docent mentioned earlier, who behaves offline the way any museum desires. Murakami-Tsuda acknowledged this when I asked her to explain how one might understand the role of the docent in a community:

VMT: I mean, I think, she's... As far as interaction with the site it's fairly passive, but she took us a step further when she decided to start, you know, handing, start making copies to give to other people; that takes it, sort of the next step, to the next level, right? I mean, it would be like me sending a link for a story to someone else, but it's, you know, much more old school [laughing]. It's like the equivalent of sending a link, but it's, you know...

Author: Yeah, right, but it happens in a different way.

VMT: Yeah.

Author: Would you think of her as a lurker, but then like you said she did, she shared it?

VMT: Yeah, so it's, I mean, it's, it's probably closer to a more of a lurker, but it's sort of a step above. I think... because of, you know, technical level I doubt she would actually, directly, you know, submit... But, you know, in talking with our former web editor, she actually introduced him to other people for a story that he was interested in, in writing about.... And, and in that sense, and I guess part of this, when we think about DN, we don't think of the project as *just* the site. This project is, the site is one element of the project, but it is, I think the network, or the larger community, is the most important part of the project—they're the most valuable part of the project. The most valuable asset of the project is not necessarily what's visible, what's actually on the site, it's the larger network. And in that sense, she's, you know, she plays a bigger role in that network, or in that community, then she does, as, you know, interacting within the site itself.

Author: So, ... the site is not the community. The site is a tool for the community?

VMT: Yeah. I think, yeah. A tool for or, tool for sort of, to connect, tool for connecting the community together.

Murakami-Tsuda's insight that the community she seeks weaves in and out of visibility on *Discover Nikkei* illustrates how museums can miss acknowledging people who are deeply engaged with their online projects simply because they leave no visible trace other than an anonymous IP (Internet Protocol) address. To try to measure the actual and potential value of DN only, or primarily, in numbers would be an error since its richness lies in its users. A more complete approach to evaluation would record numbers, but also would perform surveys and interviews of users *and* staff who interact with the site to incorporate what benefits they have gained as well as what feedback they have received in the course of their work. For, it is evident that Murakami-Tsuda's frequent interaction with the site had had a deep effect on her,

motivating her to identify with the global sphere of experience and identity of Nikkei (she had not before joining the project) and influencing critical thinking and empathy with other cultural and ethnic groups. She shared these thoughts on how her interactions with the site affected her worldview:

... I think I've grown more as an individual through my interactions with the site and it's gotten me to think a lot more about identity issues and sort of globalization issues... then I would of. Because, you know, the whole issue in, like, Brazil and Latin America with the *dekasegi* [Nikkei in Latin America who, in the face of economic crisis, have migrated to Japan for work], you know, I had never really know any of that before this project and I'm starting to think about, how things relate. It's like we're working with the Little Tokyo Historical Society about Japanese hospitals. You know, the first Japanese hospital started in like Little Tokyo by these five Nisei doctors, but because of the restrictive laws they couldn't open the hospital, so they sued the, I think State of California, and it went to the United States Supreme Court and they *won* that case and that's how they opened the... That in itself is a really fascinating story, but then I started thinking about it, it's an actually really relevant story, even though it's pre-war, it's relevant to access to health care and access to health care by immigrants ... with language issues, and ... with citizenship, you know, like that kind of stuff; there's really relevant connections that can be made to wider ... American ... diversity issues... That, as we sort of see these things, you know, like the Japanese American World War II experience, you know, as compared to what happened to Arab American Muslim communities post-9/11 ... there's that parallel. But, ... just talking about Japanese hospitals, you know, finding the parallels to other things, or finding the parallels between our experience and the experience of like, Nikkei in Brazil. So, I think it's got me thinking about those kinds of things and looking for those connections more than I would have before this project.

An ethnographic approach to evaluating the site would be able to capture how users interact with the site over time and how its texts influence their sense of identity, agency, and understanding of a global context of experience.

Finally, expanding the view of the site's community could help the team consider new ways to invite people to participate. Take, for example, the way the Journal has been and is currently implemented. With the Nikkei Album closed for

participation, the Journal is the most content-rich opportunity people have to represent themselves. While the community is supposedly something that is organic and exists a priori of JANM and DN, it is also fundamentally constructed by them since Murakami-Tsuda and Nishimura determine the stories that will be collected and highlighted. Until the redesign, they solicited all of the articles by commissioning authors to write specifically about topics they wanted to highlight, or were related to exhibits or programs happening at JANM. The redesigned site makes this process more open by offering the opportunity to submit an article. But, these, too, are reviewed by the DN team. Murakami-Tsuda explained to me how the process would work:

I think, first of all, we would just review it to see if it's, the content itself is relevant, ... If not, sometimes what we'd probably do is work with that individual to say, 'You know, this is not quite, you know, it's not Nikkei,' if it's something close, we might just try and offer some suggestions of how to change it so it's something we can use.

With the launch of the new site, Murakami-Tsuda reports seeing outside interest in writing articles growing, which is good since that task had kept her busy. She is DN's most vocal and tireless champion, as well as its most frequent visible user; and, up until her duties at JANM expanded in the fall of 2010, she interacted with it almost on a daily basis and worked tirelessly to generate new articles.<sup>62</sup> While paid to do such work, she often performs this labor outside normal work hours. She is constantly seeking article writers (she even asked me to write one, only somewhat jokingly) and updates the DN Facebook Group Wall almost every day. She admitted,

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<sup>62</sup> Of the eleven comments left on the forty-three articles that were published in July 2010, seven were written by Murakami-Tsuda.

“I swear, I think my husband just, is just fed up [laughing], because all I talk about is *Discover Nikkei!*”

Maintaining this key area of the site has been a chore. She told me during our interview that “it’s getting easier and easier for us to convince people to contribute,” but she also laughingly noted that “I have to tell you, sometimes we have to beg.” Although Nishimura now bears the major burden of nurturing relationships for getting new content on the site, it is apparent that the staff’s workload and general goals might be served by opening up its editorial process to its audience. Murakami-Tsuda is already making moves in this direction by directly asking members of DN’s Facebook Group to submit articles. But, they could also ask people to join a community editorial board, which could be tasked with editing submissions and recruiting more, as well as, given the right resources, create a way for audience members to review and vote on ideas for submissions.

Such mechanisms could help advance DN’s goals of diversity and participation, especially as my survey of audience members indicate that there is room for growth. Conducted over May 2009, my survey (conducted in English) of users of DN was advertised on DN’s bulletin board and on the Wall of its Facebook Group; Murakami-Tsuda also kindly e-mailed it to several users she knows. Again, the purpose of this tool was not to collect scientifically sound data, but to get a sense of how external users interacted with DN, if they felt it creates a sense of community, if they felt a part of it, and how they interpret the project’s goals (see Appendix B). The sixteen people who completed the survey showed much in common in terms of demographics, but their answers to open-ended questions revealed much difference.

They stretched in age from roughly 26 to 69; 13 live in California, the others in Honolulu, Portland, and Vienna, Virginia. There were nine men and seven women; ten self-reported as “Japanese American”; three as “Japanese” or “Asian;” two as “hapa”; and one as white.<sup>63</sup> They were uniformly highly-educated, and relatively affluent: all completed a four-year college and the majority (10) had completed graduate school of some kind; three, including a substitute teacher and a graduate student, reported annual incomes of less than \$40,000; but, most (11) made over \$60,000 annually. The majority were frequent social media users,<sup>64</sup> and quite involved with JANM: seven had first heard of DN because they were in contact with the museum (e.g., as a volunteer, on JANM’s e-mail lists). The majority (14) had visited JANM three or more times.<sup>65</sup> Half were quite frequent users of DN: echoing Murakami-Tsuda’s observation of metrics that suggest most people visit weekly and monthly, two said they visited one to two times per week; six said they visited once a month.<sup>66</sup> When asked if DN represented a community, or felt like part of it, divisions among the audience asserted themselves in significant ways. Nine reported feeling that DN was a community, but five others felt it did “partially,” was “close,” or did “not yet.” Their answers that explain why show various divides at work in this audience: one felt older than the community, but was curious to see what younger people were doing; another felt the site was “too liberal” and desired more diversity of opinions; and one noted that it did not qualify yet fully as a community because

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<sup>63</sup> One of those included here as Japanese American wrote “Asian/Japanese American,” while one included as “hapa” specified “white/Jewish/Japanese.”

<sup>64</sup> The majority of the group used the following popular social media sites: Facebook (13); Wikipedia (13); YouTube (12); and LinkedIn (11).

<sup>65</sup> One participant had visited JANM once and one had never visited.

<sup>66</sup> Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, reply to e-mail by author, received 18 March 2011.

people were “not interacting regularly” on the site. Additionally, they displayed diversity in their participation on the site: almost half (7) were “lurkers”—they had only read or browsed items on the site, but the majority (13) promoted and shared the site in various ways—the most popular way being “through word-of-mouth (in person or on the phone);” the second most popular being through e-mail.

These details illustrate an opportunity for the DN team to nurture relationships with its audiences and invite more diversity into the site. While the site likely attracts an even more diverse group than makes itself visible, some are not seeing their interests or experiences represented. By creating a community board, the DN staff might potentially share duties with members of the audience, which would ideally allow more differing viewpoints and experiences like those reflected among my survey participants to expand the content on the site. Further, creating a board or including more ways on the site that allow people to participate in anonymous ways, such as by voting, “liking,” or book-marking content, would also lower the bar for participating. Such opportunities could nurture relationships with audiences, stoking a culture of reciprocity and commitment that Murakami-Tsuda so much desires for the long-term life of the site.

### Conclusion

*Discover Nikkei* is an ambitious project of the Japanese American National Museum to construct and mobilize a community in the interest of representing itself to both insiders and outsiders. Community constructed as openness, reciprocity, common experience, and shared interest has oriented the project towards the voices and interests of its audience, but community defined by public communication seems

to have influenced the implementation of only public options to participate, which overlooks the diversity of its audience as an online user group and skews how the staff approaches and evaluates the site. By considering how hidden definitions and values of community have influenced the project's practices, the staff might clarify their goals and direct the project more effectively towards representing the richness and unpredictability of Nikkei experiences, increasing participation on the site by diversifying how the audience can participate, and be more open about its processes by asserting community guidelines and bringing audience members onto a community board to help shape the site's content. Expanding the site in such ways would ideally extend the reach of the project, enabling it to do even better what it already excels at—painting a diverse and surprising portrait of global Nikkei experiences.

## Chapter 6: Let the Audience In: The Science Museum of Minnesota's *Science Buzz* Website

When we ask our visitors “*What does a new discovery or question mean to you? To our society? To the world?*,” we actually let them answer!<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) is one of the older science museums and science centers in the United States, and one of the first sixteen museums to be accredited by the American Association of Museums.<sup>2</sup> Well-established and reputable for its commitment to public education, the institution is also renowned for its innovation—it is famous for pioneering the use of live theater as an interpretive tool in the early 1970s and today continues to develop and sell interactive components for museums.<sup>3</sup> It seems both surprising and fitting, then, that the SMM is also the home of one of the most open—in some ways radically so—museum social media projects, which allows registered members to claim a space of authority usually reserved for staff and publish posts, without moderation, to a blog.

This final case study concerns how SMM invokes community through *Science Buzz*, a project that utilizes social media to democratize public science education. It aims to make the phenomena of “current science”—“science in the news, emerging

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<sup>1</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, *Detailed Report Narrative* (St. Paul, MN: Science Museum of Minnesota, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> American Association of Museums, “Accreditation Program History,” *American Association of Museums* (website), <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/history.cfm>, accessed 25 March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Inez Roach, *A History of the Science Museum of Minnesota, 1907-1975* (St. Paul, MN: The Science Museum of Minnesota, 1981), 37. The SMM also invented solid, blackboard-surfaced globes for naval training aids during World War II. *Ibid.*, 22. Also see Curio, “A Conceptual Framework,” 39.

research, [and] phenology”<sup>4</sup>—more open to outsider curiosity and knowledge by making it more conversational and participatory. In its current rendition, Buzz is an in-house exhibit research, development, and design project that consists of exhibit infrastructure and content built for use by visitors to the museum’s physical location in St. Paul and to a companion website. Computers in Buzz’s portable kiosks present content from the website, which is fed by a database and is regularly updated. (Figures 6.1 and 6.2). While I reference the hybrid nature of the project and briefly discuss its physical hardware and how that hardware allows social media to make the physical museum’s boundaries more permeable, my discussion and analysis concentrate on the *web component* of this hybrid project because it leans heavily on the rhetoric of community while the physical components do not. The SMM has described Buzz as “an innovative interactive online community website for discussing science in the news;” Buzz also includes “Community” in its navigation, and promotes community throughout the site using the conventions of social media.<sup>5</sup> But, implying the powerful perception that social media and community go hand-in-hand, the rhetoric of community is curiously confined to Buzz’s web portion.<sup>6</sup>

Online, Buzz makes community strategy and goal in the democratization of education about “current science.” This is motivated not only by the site’s engagement with social media, but also by broader ideas that have influenced its

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<sup>4</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Detailed Report Narrative.” These definitions emerged over the growth of the project: “The definition of ‘current science’ has shifted and expanded over time, and now includes science behind the headlines, emerging research, and seasonal science.” Liza Pryor, “*Science Buzz – Case Study of an Exhibition*,” *Exhibit Files* (website), 24 July 2008, [http://www.exhibitfiles.org/science\\_buzz](http://www.exhibitfiles.org/science_buzz), accessed 3 September 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Detailed Report Narrative.”

<sup>6</sup> I visited SMM in April 2010 and the use of the term community is not used explicitly in its gallery space in reference to Buzz. Buzz signage asks visitors to “Be part of the Buzz!,” which is described as a “site,” not a “community”.

development—specifically the New Museology and Public Understanding of Science movements, as well as current ideologies and theories of learning. As with my other case studies, community is central to the project, but is deployed without definition in its practice or evaluation. In this chapter I consider how that lack of articulation of definitions and values shapes the use of social media for the project’s goals. I conclude that community’s impact both serves and inadvertently limits how the project employs social media towards democratization. Senses of community as openness, extra-institutional, and



Figure 6.1 A *Science Buzz* installation at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Photo by author, 23 April 2010.

based on communication, reciprocity, and common interest are shown to be at work. Given the freedom and license to be creative and to “fail,” the project has become increasingly audience-oriented and incorporates many different ways to participate,

including anonymously. The project is also transparent in its language about the project, providing “Community Guidelines” that delineate a framework for civil discourse and stating that “museums don’t know everything.” Further, in the ways it allows social media to let outside sources of information flow into SMM’s physical space, it suggests how social media begins to help museums acknowledge the usefulness of disorder for knowledge-building and deterritorialize their grasp on knowledge. Lastly, there is anecdotal evidence that a sense



Figure 6.2 Homepage of *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org>, captured 8 September 2008.

of community based on common interest and reciprocity helps propel the staff to be highly participatory in the project and responsive to public input.

But, the project also shows how basing community on public and immediate communication may skew the use of social media towards the implementation of public ways to participate, when features that would allow private interactions may also serve its goals. Finally, I also explore how the project's famed openness is also qualified in its ability to serve its democratic ends. While Buzz allows users to publish unmoderated content to its blog, it also somewhat discourages that opportunity. Further, the opportunity to write labels for museum objects—a privilege typically reserved for museum staff—is shown to be a lackluster challenge to the museum's authority.

I discerned these issues from multiple sources of evidence. I interviewed the project's current principal investigator, SMM Exhibit Project Leader Liza Pryor, on-site at SMM, drew on internal and external documents about the project, and solicited feedback from Buzz website users via an online survey. I also interacted with the site over the course of a year, registering as a user, reading posts, ranking posts, voting in polls, and making a comment; I also tried to contribute a blog post—and will explain why I did not below. Additionally, I surveyed over fifty blog posts in-depth, making notes on their contents and the number of responses they garnered. Before discussing this evidence, I provide some background on the SMM and origins of Buzz to understand the many ideas and goals that influence how community appears in the project and how social media are wielded to produce it.

### *The Science Museum of Minnesota*

The Science Museum of Minnesota is a large non-profit that, like many American science and natural history museums, locates its roots in one of the several

private scientific organizations that formed in the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In an era of building nations and national citizens, the idea that “[knowledge] of North American natural resources was . . . key to national development” gave impetus to professionals in various cities to create societies, academies, and institutes about natural history.<sup>8</sup> The SMM proper was founded in 1907 by a group of St. Paul businessmen interested in “the intellectual and scientific growth” of the city.<sup>9</sup> Its current mission retains that spirit of entrepreneurialism, but recasts it with the touch of universalism that is common to modern science centers: “Turn on the science: realizing the potential of policy makers, educators, and individuals to achieve full civic and economic participation in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Towards the formation of citizens and consumers, the SMM marries two traditions of public science education: the “science museum” and the “science center.” The former evolved from the cabinets of curiosity of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, through which princes and aristocrats displayed their collections of natural and artificial objects as symbolic representations of their power, while naturalists trying to cope with the encounter of the “New World” assembled research collections of natural objects for the express purpose of advancing

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<sup>7</sup> The Saint Paul Academy of Natural Sciences was founded in 1870 by a group of physicians, teachers, and other professionals in St. Paul.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela M. Henson, “A National Science and a National Museum,” *Proceedings of the California Academy of Sciences* 55, no. 1 (October 18, 2004): 37.

<sup>9</sup> These men founded the Saint Paul Institute of Science and Letters, which absorbed the collections of the Saint Paul Academy of Natural Sciences. The current name was adopted in 1970. See Roach, *A History*, for the complete early chronology of the institution.

<sup>10</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “History & Mission,” *Science Museum of Minnesota* (website), <http://www.smm.org/about/history/>, accessed 7 September 2010. Sharon Macdonald discusses the universalist claims of science centers in “Exhibitions of Power,” 176-196.

knowledge through first-hand observation.<sup>11</sup> These proto-museums were fundamental to the development of the structures and practices of modern science museums, to the construction of “scientific ‘ways of knowing’,” and to the founding of a new understanding of “truth” that relied less on a man’s status and more on his adherence to particular methods of truth-seeking.<sup>12</sup> Operating near and sometimes in civic spaces, they played a role in developing a model of knowledge-building and citizenship owed to observation, comparison, and protracted conversation.<sup>13</sup> Frequented initially by an elite community of scholars, these cabinets were opened to the public in the late seventeenth century and helped popularize these ideas and invest museums with the power to validate “truth.”

Founded on these ideas and on collections that were the permanent residue of the nineteenth century’s temporary world exhibitions, science museums could be characterized by the turn of the century as “grand institutions: expressions of the pride of nations in their technological achievement, and statements of the natural order, both scientific and social, by both scientists and governments.”<sup>14</sup> The twenty-first century SMM evolved from this formula and today occupies a 370,000 square foot building on the banks of the Mississippi River. Like its early antecedents, which gathered many activities under one roof, the SMM not only displays a vast and growing permanent collection of scientific and ethnographic artifacts, but also invests in scientific research internally and abroad.

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<sup>11</sup> The conventions and purposes of these cabinets are explained in Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, and Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor.” Also see Silvio Bedini, “The Evolution of Science Museums,” *Technology & Culture* 6 (1965): 1-29.

<sup>12</sup> Macdonald, “Exhibitions of Power,” 180, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 97-154.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Gregory and Steve Miller, *Science in Public: Communication, Culture, and Credibility* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998), 200.

Alongside static displays of its collection, the SMM offers the many “hands-on” opportunities that characterize science centers. Inspired by American anxiety about the United States’ scientific stature that followed the Soviets’ successful launch of Sputnik in 1957, science centers emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as a new genre of museums with such activities at their core.<sup>15</sup> Based on a model devised by former Manhattan Project physicist and science teacher Frank Oppenheimer, science centers typically eschew permanent collections for installations that illustrate scientific phenomena—indeed, they challenged the definition of museums by “[teaching] through objects, rather than about them.”<sup>16</sup> Along with children’s museums, they pioneered a model of museum education that “[focused] on experiential and content-based problem-solving activities working with the real objects of art, history, and science; on participatory, ‘hands-on’ learning, on apprenticeship under the tutelage of people engaged in real-world intellectual activity; and on learning experiences designed to engage all the senses.”<sup>17</sup> Although science center methods have been criticized for extracting “scientific principles out of both the natural and social worlds” and giving them a universalist slant, every genre of museum now employs them since they can address diverse learning styles.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Demonstrations and opportunities for physical interaction with museum artifacts have a long history in science and technology museums. Opportunities to push buttons, turn handles, etc. were proffered at the Deutsches Museum, which was founded in 1903, as well as the Children’s Gallery in the London Science Museum, which opened 30 years later. Silvio Bedini cites the “Leslie museum of technology,” established 1787/8 in Philadelphia, as supposed to have moving models of agricultural and manufacturing machines. Bedini, “The Evolution of Science Museums,” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Oppenheimer opened the Exploratorium in San Francisco in 1969. See Gregory and Miller, *Science in Public*, 200-203, for a concise history of science centers. The quotation is from Hilde Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 118.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory and Miller, *Science in Public*, 208.

Both science museum and center, SMM combines models that have traditionally differed in desired impact and audience: “unlike museums, with their national and scientific allegiances, science centers tend to be rooted in the local community and to reflect local culture and interests.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, although SMM describes itself as “a large regional science museum” and its attention often turns to scientific concerns of the Midwest and Minnesota, it sits at a nexus of local, national, and international aims, concerns, and audiences.<sup>20</sup> Its work today—and *Science Buzz* in particular—is inspired by the merging of these educational models and by three bodies of thought that have had a major impact on notions of citizenship and museum education in the early twenty-first century: New Museology; the international “Movement for Public Understanding of Science;” and the development of an ideology and theories about informal, or “free-choice,” learning.

### *Ideological Contexts of Science Buzz*

The tenets of New Museology, discussed in chapter two, inform SMM’s practices in its physical space. These seek to serve multiple learning styles and to make science accessible by providing myriad hands-on and immersive activities as well as featuring individual people’s stories in installations. These principles are infused throughout *Science Buzz*, which strives to make individual’s experiences with science personal and active. Another major influence is the Public Understanding of Science Movement, which cohered in the last several years of the twentieth century. Scientists and governments, particularly in the United States and the United

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>20</sup> While serving a physical audience of over a million a year and supporting Minnesota K-12 curriculum standards, SMM also supports international scientific research and museum professional development as well as widely disseminates its products.

Kingdom, have tasked the professional science field since the late 1980s with communicating their work to the public. This effort is the result of scientists recognizing that professional science enjoyed a rich record of research but an anemic record of innovation, that formal science education had so far failed to create a satisfactorily “scientifically literate” public, and because of threats to their research budgets. Towards creating a scientifically literate citizenry that might be more supportive of funding, the movement tries to address and reform the long and tense relationship between science and the public by fighting popular stereotypes of scientists as confined to labs and the Ivory Tower, as villains or heroes, as mad or rational, as out-of-touch nerds or laser-focused truth-seekers.<sup>21</sup> The movement’s goals differ based on how “understanding” is interpreted, either as appreciation or knowledge. Proponents of appreciation see it as fostering public support for government funding of scientific research, as well as raising scientists’ social status. Proponents of knowledge aim for broad scientific literacy, regarding it as the soil for cultivating an informed and productive national citizenry that can fuel the development of democracy and capitalism.

Despite criticism of these goals as ultimately self-serving and misguided, and research that suggests that increases in knowledge may translate to greater skepticism rather than appreciation of science, the Public Understanding of Science Movement is alive and well.<sup>22</sup> In the US it receives much of its funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), which supports scientific research and research about science education. NSF monies for scientific research often come with requirements of public

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory and Miller, *Science in Public*, 2-10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

outreach, while all monies for research about science education require evaluation. Support for public understanding of science through museums comes through topic-focused programs (e.g., Nanoscale Science and Engineering Education) and general educational programs that fall under the mandate of the Directorate for Education and Human Resources (EHR), which “has primary responsibility for providing national and research-based leadership in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] education.”<sup>23</sup> The EHR’s Informal Science Education program is often the funder, as it “supports innovation in anywhere, anytime, lifelong learning, through investments in research, development, infrastructure, and capacity-building for STEM learning outside formal school settings.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, this movement and the NSF have stoked a serious culture of evaluation among science museums and centers that is lacking among other genres of museums.

A most notable aspect of the movement, and key to the use of community on *Science Buzz*’s website, is its reliance on rhetoric about citizenship. It undergirds the movement’s entire rationale, as science literacy has come to be regarded as one of the essential skills for navigating the modern “information economy,” “knowledge economy,” or “learning society.” In the words of Jane Gregory and Steve Miller, “now the scientific establishment and national governments insist that the public must understand science if they are to be useful citizens, capable of functioning correctly as

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<sup>23</sup> Towards these responsibilities, the directorate focuses on the following themes: “1) Furthering public understanding of science and advancing STEM literacy; 2) Broadening participation to improve workforce development; 3) Promoting learning through research and evaluation; 4) Promoting cyberlearning strategies to enhance STEM education; 5) Enriching the education of STEM teachers; and 6) Preparing scientists and engineers for tomorrow.” NSF, “Informal Science Education (ISE),” *National Science Foundation* (website), <http://nsf.gov/pubs/2010/nsf10565/nsf10565.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> NSF, “Directorate for Education and Human Resources (EHR),” *National Science Foundation* (website), [http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm\\_summ.jsp?pims\\_id=5361&org=DRL&from=home](http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5361&org=DRL&from=home).

workers, consumers, and voters in a modern technological world.”<sup>25</sup> Most recently this link is exemplified by the popularization of “citizen science,” a term likely coined by educators at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (CLO), which in the late 1980s began to recruit lay people to participate directly in professional scientific research.<sup>26</sup> Through helping to collect data, citizen science allows people to learn about science and, in the process, reshape their perceptions of the field and its practitioners. “Citizen” here signifies everydayness, personal agency, and relevance, and most importantly, the embeddedness of individuals within the larger social and political structure of a nation or a democracy. Promoting the understanding of science as essential to modern human life—essential, even, to our survival—the movement seizes on the new delivery methods made possible by modern technology, such as live webcasts, videoconferencing, and social media.<sup>27</sup> In particular, projects utilize social media to easily recruit more participants than they could previously, as well as to help disseminate the concept of citizen science.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gregory and Miller, *Science in Public*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Bonney and Melinda S. LaBranche, “Citizen Science: Involving the Public in Research,” *ASTC Dimensions*, May/June 2004, 13. While the term is new, the practice of involving laypeople in scientific research dates to the late nineteenth century. See *Ibid.*, 978.

<sup>27</sup> The director of the MIT Museum assesses the importance of the public understanding of science in survival terms: “There are good reasons to care about public engagement with research. It is science-in-the-making that holds the key to many of the most pressing challenges we face. Today the public is confronted with conflicting claims about what science has to say and what it doesn’t have to say, for example, on the role of rising carbon dioxide emissions in global climate change, on the potential value of experiments with human embryonic stem cells, or even about the history of life on Earth (as in the new Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky). So it is crucial that citizens should acquire a feel for the real thing, for scientific and technological practice.” John Durant, “Real Science on Show,” *Nature* 449 (2007): 283.

<sup>28</sup> This dissemination has resulted in the concept’s dilution. CLO has developed a specific framework for “citizen science” as a research method, but the term is now frequently used to refer to any research that invites public participation, as well as the scientific pursuits of lay people. CLO has refined a citizen science framework that specifically refers to projects that abide by the “integration of explicit and tested protocols for collecting data, vetting of data by professional biologists, and inclusion of specific and measurable goals for public education.” Rick Bonney et al., “Citizen Science: A Developing Tool for Expanding Science Knowledge and Scientific Literacy,” *BioScience* 59, no. 11 (December 2009): 978. The term has also influenced the coinage of “citizen history,” which is used to

Finally, a third major factor in *Science Buzz*'s emergence is the construction of the current age as an "information" or "knowledge economy" that is fed by a "learning society." The economy of industrial goods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been said to have given way to an economy based on services and the exchange of information. Patterns of consumption are also changing: "goods and services are becoming so abundant, that success in the marketplace is determined less by the ability to fulfill general needs and more by the ability to satisfy a consumer's personal desires and lifestyle."<sup>29</sup> The concepts of "free-choice" and "informal" learning have flourished in this context. They emphasize the import of learning throughout life and outside formal schooling, as well as reflect shifts in understanding about how people learn. Museums have long relied on the "behaviorist conceptual" model of learning that regarded visitors as passive vessels to be filled with knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Educational research that suggests learning is not straightforward, but is highly situated in physical and personal contexts has motivated a shift to the "constructivist model of learning, [which] suggests that learning is a continuous, highly personal process."<sup>31</sup> This insight supports the idea that museums can expect visitors will learn something, but they cannot determine *what* or even when, as individuals' process of making meaning is highly personal and may not be fully

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refer to public contributors to historical research projects or to the work of amateur historians. For instance, the term has been in use among employees at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum since 2008/2009, where it was directly inspired by "citizen science." Also, Martin Belam, Lead User Experience & Information Architect at Guardian News & Media, uses the term for his historical research: "'The Curation Gap' – What Journalism Can Learn From 'Citizen History,'" *currybetdotnet* (blog), 20 January 2010, [http://www.currybet.net/cbet\\_blog/2010/01/the-curation-gap---what-journa.php](http://www.currybet.net/cbet_blog/2010/01/the-curation-gap---what-journa.php).

<sup>29</sup> John H. Falk, Lynn Dierking, and Marianna Adams, "Living in a Learning Society: Museums and Free-choice Learning," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 334.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Also see George Hein, "Museum Education," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 340-352.

<sup>31</sup> Falk, Dierking, and Adams, "Living in a Learning Society," 325.

apparent until days or even years have passed. As places of leisure, socialization, and learning, museums are an obvious resource in a learning society. Challenged to find out what visitors want to learn and to make it convenient for them to do so, museums find the web and social media particularly attractive since they can extend access and establish multiple channels for feedback.

### *Science Buzz is Born*

*Science Buzz* reflects all of these major trends. Funded early on by the locally-oriented Bush Foundation and later under the mantle of the NSF's Informal Science Education program, it began life in 2003-04 as the project, "**Presenting Current Science and Research: A New Model for Exhibit Making**" (NSF 0337389).<sup>32</sup> As laid out in the project's 2008 summative evaluation:

*Science Buzz* is a museum-wide initiative to develop exhibits, programs, and a web site about timely current science topics and new scientific research. The institutional objective is for people to recognize SMM as a resource for finding out about recent developments in science and technology. The goals for these exhibits are to:

- Have a distinctive identity which visitors associate with engaging, informative exhibits on current science, but are integrated within each gallery;
- Attract and engage visitors in the content, objects and activities of current science (with low-cost components that can be easily modified and updated);
- Inform visitors about current developments in science and technology;
- Provide insights into how current science is relevant to people's lives;
- Encourage visitors to share their perspectives and opinions about science issues in the news.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The Bush Foundation, a charitable organization set up by the founder of 3M and his wife, focuses its giving in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota around the areas of leadership-building, educational achievement, and self-determination of the area's sovereign Native nations. Bush Foundation, "Goals and Programs," *Bush Foundation* (website), <http://www.bushfoundation.org/Goals/default.asp>.

<sup>33</sup> People, Places & Design Research, Jeff Hayward, and Jolene Hart, *Summative Evaluation of Science Buzz at the Science Museum of Minnesota* (Northampton, MA, August 2008), 1.

These goals show the project is both oriented towards serving its audience, but also to serving its brand. Dispensing information about topical science issues, like low-carb diets, flooding, and Avian flu, Buzz aims to make the public aware of the “[science that] happens all around us, all the time.”<sup>34</sup> It strives to cultivate informed citizens and consumers of science as well as “to foster dialogue between visitors, staff, and experts.”<sup>35</sup> Pryor articulated why in a 2008 write-up: “Because science is an essential literacy for full civic and economic participation. Visitors might not ever need to create a recombinant vaccine or a clone, manipulate quantum dots, or generate a stem cell line, but they’re asked to make sense of issues surrounding those techniques and products with every election, trip to the grocery store, or visit to the doctor’s office.”<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, the project hopes to bolster an audience around its brand, or in the words of its NSF abstract, “to position SMM as a resource for complex science and science issues.”<sup>37</sup> Buzz thus reflects a larger trend in museums to assert relevance and accessibility by changing the popular impression that they only deal with “well-established science.”<sup>38</sup> Further, the focus on current science and its constantly

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> SMM, “Detailed Report Narrative.”

<sup>36</sup> Pryor, “*Science Buzz* – Case Study of an Exhibition.”

<sup>37</sup> National Science Foundation, “Award Abstract #0337389: Presenting Current Science and Research: A New Model for Exhibit Making,” *National Science Foundation* (website), <http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0337389>, accessed 27 February 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Other institutions placing emphasis on current science include the MIT Museum, the Science Museum (London), the Natural History Museum (London), the Exploratorium, and the Maryland Science Center. SMM’s front-end research for *Science Buzz* suggested a significant majority of visitors to science museums in the United States felt that these institutions deal solely with well-established science. Jeff Hayward and Jolene Hart, ‘Front-end’ *Research for Current Science Exhibits at the Science Museum of Minnesota*, Evaluation (Northampton, MA: People, Places & Design Research, October 2004), 21. The front-end research for *Science Buzz* involved interviews with about 100 visitors, each, to the Science Museum of Minnesota, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, the

evolving nature dovetails with one of SMM's "key program and audience-building strategies," which is "to generate change in all of its core exhibitions ... [as] our visitors have told us that it is change that motivates return visits."<sup>39</sup>

Incorporating current science into physical museum space is intrinsically challenging; producing cases, interactives, signage, etc. is costly in both money and personnel time. The very substance of such things also helps solidify knowledge as established, objective, and unchanging.<sup>40</sup> *Science Buzz* tackles these issues in various ways. Pryor, who took over as principal investigator the year after its public launch in November 2004, described its original rendition as "a much more traditional exhibit project ... it was very focused on trying to do exhibits ... but faster."<sup>41</sup> Its earliest stage saw the *Science Buzz* team develop "templates" and wireless "furniture pieces" that are easily moved and modified, enabling them to create new exhibits with a turnaround time much quicker than the average.<sup>42</sup> However, these advances still could not deliver the rapid response sometimes called for: "if it's really supposed to be about emerging science, if it's supposed to be about breaking news, if it's supposed to be about seasonal stuff that I can see today, a couple of weeks to four months is not fast enough."

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Maryland Science Center, and the Science Museum of Iowa. The data is described as "reasonably representative of science center audiences." Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> SMM, "Detailed Report Narrative."

<sup>40</sup> Porter, "Seeing Through Solidity," 107.

<sup>41</sup> Liza Pryor, interview by author, St. Paul, MN, 23 April 2010. The first principal investigator was Cari Dwyer, another exhibit project leader at SMM.

<sup>42</sup> During this time they also developed *Science Buzz*'s two most popular interactives: the "News Cast," which allows people to try their hand at reporting recent science news via teleprompter, and the "Quiz Show," which challenges up to three players about their knowledge of various current science topics.

### *Science Buzz Meets Social Media*

At the same time that Pryor inherited *Science Buzz*, then-SMM Internet Developer Bryan Kennedy joined the team. Along with technical expertise, he brought enthusiasm and understanding of the emerging social media culture. *Buzz* had not been envisioned as a hybrid on-site/online project, but “it was really obvious to [Kennedy] that we could use [the web] to drive content to the exhibit floor.” For her part, Pryor, an experienced exhibit developer but who lacked prior web development training, felt “stymied by the production process” and brought openness “to doing things differently.”

So Bryan built the original website ... and at the time we weren't imagining it as any sort of 2.0 technology. We were really thinking about it as a vehicle for... it was a “push” technology. We were trying to get content on to the exhibit floor. But, the second we started doing it we realized it had the potential to be a lot, a lot more than that. And we were very under the radar, ‘cause it was just kind of an experiment. And nobody, nobody above us... I mean, obviously our boss knew what we were doing, but there was no, like, “big picture” museum oversight of that. They weren't trying to brand it, or own it, or direct it. ... We got to play around with what worked for us, and that was great. And even now, we still get to do it, most of the time. But, it allowed us to... You know, the beauty of the Internet is that you can try a lot of stuff and failure is cheap ...

To its existing suite of exhibition furniture, the team added computer kiosks that would show content from the website, which would come to be internally described as “the heart of the *Science Buzz* experience.”<sup>43</sup> It uses the open-source content management system Drupal and “social technologies” like RSS feeds, tagging, and Voice-XML, which have “[revolutionized SMM's] exhibit development process while giving museum visitors (both physical and virtual) a new way to

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<sup>43</sup> SMM, “Detailed Report Narrative.”

discuss science issues.”<sup>44</sup> These tools make it easy to update content and deliver it to the exhibit floor and the website: for example, a kiosk can be programmed to pull content tagged “natural disaster,” or a developer can update exhibit content by recording audio through her phone. Standardized templates allow quick turnaround times for printing signage for the several *Science Buzz* stanchions that are positioned throughout the museum. The team has also created tools that allow museum staff, no matter what level their web coding skills, to enter text, photographs, and video into forms that publish content to the website. Finally, the team makes liberal use of the ability to embed videos and photographs from media-sharing sites like YouTube and Flickr, a capacity that Pryor credits with making the project sustainable since the traditional, time-consuming practices of obtaining copyright would undermine the project’s currency. Taken together, these innovations have enabled SMM to create online and on-site exhibit content within hours of breaking news: “it’s ... the day after Christmas, and the tsunami [in Indonesia] happens and we can have an exhibit on the floor in the Museum within two hours without any of us actually being physically at the Museum.”

Further, freed from the constraints of physical space, the Buzz website allows the project to “provide additional resources, and ... a means to archive stories and responses. We can feature many more stories and go into greater detail on the website than on the exhibit floor.” It also allows “[reaching] audiences who don’t typically visit the museum.”<sup>45</sup> This reach broadens access and enriches the perspectives Buzz can provide on an issue, as was evident with a blog post about the science behind the

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<sup>44</sup> Bryan Kennedy and Liza Pryor, “Building Science Buzz: Open Source Opens Doors,” *ASTC Dimensions*, August 2006.

<sup>45</sup> SMM, “Detailed Report Narrative.”

7.7 earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005. In the days following, witnesses to the quakes began to comment on the blog, providing first-person perspectives on the tragedy, including statements about what was needed in aid.<sup>46</sup> Pryor observed later: “Before *Science Buzz*, we might have tried to ‘collect’ Pakistani voices to use in the exhibit. Now we don’t have to; people come to us on their own and represent themselves.”<sup>47</sup>

The incorporation of these technologies into Buzz, especially as a website, has brought SMM further acclaim in the general museum field. After it won awards for Best Innovative or Experimental Application and Best Overall Museum Website at Museums and the Web 2006, Pryor was soon fielding calls from other museums interested in their model. Consequently, SMM developed a business plan that sells Buzz furniture templates, including computer kiosks, to other museums; the kiosks are run from a central database. The project is now in use, in various forms, in fourteen other museums throughout the United States.<sup>48</sup>

As an NSF-funded project organized by a museum with a commitment to evaluation, Buzz is also a well-evaluated project in total. Front-end evaluation drove its implementation and an outside consultant performed a summative evaluation in 2008 that assessed its goals as listed above.<sup>49</sup> While people engaged with the kiosks did not always recognizing Buzz’s brand, they did perceive current science to be a

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<sup>46</sup> See, in particular, Muhammad Fawad Malik, October 11, 2005, and Jalal, October 16, 2005, comments on Bryan Kennedy, “The Science of the Pakistan Earthquake,” *Science Buzz*, October 9, 2005, [http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/the\\_science\\_of\\_the\\_pakistan\\_earthquake](http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/the_science_of_the_pakistan_earthquake).

<sup>47</sup> Liza Pryor, “What’s the Buzz? Bringing Breaking News into the Science Museum,” *ASTC Dimensions*, June 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Some of these museums just provide links to Buzz on their websites, but others have bought exhibit components that SMM customizes for their use. Kiosks at Discovery Place in Charlotte, North Carolina or that are part of SMM traveling exhibits use aggregators to pull customized content.

<sup>49</sup> Hayward and Hart, ‘Front-end’ Research; People, Places & Design Research, *Summative Evaluation*.

main theme. Within both internal and external evaluation documents, it is worth noting that community circulates, but without definition that would direct that evaluation. A SMM-generated “Detailed Report Narrative” about Buzz mentions community and implicitly defines it as communication: “Wherever possible, we solicit visitor feedback, input, and opinion, trying to build a vibrant *Science Buzz* community.”<sup>50</sup> Also, an IMLS-funded study aimed at assessing “the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on museum learning and practice” focused on Buzz and sampled blog threads (posts and comments) based on four discursive moves: “building an argument,” “exploring new ideas,” “building a writer’s identity,” and “building a community identity.” Community is not defined in the study—it is presented as a given—“the Buzz blog is a site where writers engage in building community.” It is assumed to be recognizable based on “construction of a connection between ideas/people;” “articulation of a shared role;” “articulation of a shared experience;” and “invitation [to participate].” The researchers concluded that these discursive moves—e.g., “Will we survive [global warming]?”—were less frequent than communication that asserted individual identity.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, Buzz continues to evolve. From other sources of funding, it has branched into Nano Buzz and Earth Buzz, which focus, respectively, on nanotechnology and the Anthropocene epoch.<sup>52</sup> Pryor has also been reassigned; she now splits her time between *Science Buzz* and Earth Buzz. But, while the original

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<sup>50</sup> SMM, “Detailed Report Narrative.”

<sup>51</sup> J.T. Grabill, et al., “Take Two: A Study of the Co-Creation of Knowledge on Museum 2.0 Sites,” in *Museums and the Web 2009: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2009), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2009/papers/grabill/grabill.html>, accessed 27 March 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Earth Buzz is funded by the Future Earth Initiative.

Buzz no longer has staff dedicated to it full-time, it continues to be well-supported by a team of ten staff, as well as by exhibit floor staff, volunteers, interns, and staff from organizations partnered with Buzz. They are equally as important as the technology that keeps Buzz topical and responsive to audiences.

### *Science Buzz's Constructions of Community*

The website, [www.sciencebuzz.org](http://www.sciencebuzz.org) (originally [www.smm.org/buzz](http://www.smm.org/buzz)), has changed over time in terms of its design and contents, but it has always been infused with the rhetoric of community.<sup>53</sup> Like my other case studies, it strives to make community evident in language, design, and through opportunities for participation and conversation. The earliest design included “Community” in the global navigation bar and until mid-2010 displayed “A Science Museum of Minnesota Community” in the header.<sup>54</sup> Pryor explained the former choice to be an impromptu decision of Kennedy’s, while the latter language stemmed from Buzz being “part of a cluster” of concurrent (and now defunct) projects in the museum’s Learning Technologies Center, which in the mid-2000s was experimenting with the concept of “learning communities.” While Kennedy’s decision may have been impromptu, in the context of the growing social media culture at the time it certainly was not random. Along with implying interest in the theory of social learning—that people learn well in groups<sup>55</sup>—the language appeared as the team turned to social media to “pull”

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<sup>53</sup> Buzz launched a redesign of its website in mid-January 2011, which included altering its homepage. This chapter was drafted based on the site’s form in 2010, but my comments are still relevant as Buzz’s features and conventions remain technically the same. Where a difference is significant, I have tried to address that.

<sup>54</sup> I noted the absence of this language in September 2010. When the site was redesigned in January 2011, the following statement was added to the homepage: “Science Buzz is a community people who care about science and society.”

<sup>55</sup> Nolan and Weiss, “Learning in Cyberspace.”

information from the public in concert with “pushing” information out to them. It signified the museum’s recognition and openness to the public as a resource of knowledge, as well as its understanding of basic challenges to human participation within social media’s open frameworks of engagement. Pryor explained:

Bryan’s an interesting person and has done a lot of thinking about Web 2.0 stuff and just Internet stuff in general and really came to the table with this attitude that, to get good stuff, you have to put up with some bad stuff. And let’s figure out like, what’s the bad we can tolerate so that we get to the good. And, also, if you don’t want it to be a straight push, then you have to make the barriers for participation as *low* as you possibly can.

The use of community also expressed the museum’s desire to perceive its audience as such, constructing it as an extra-institutional entity with which it could form a sustained and hopefully less hierarchical relationship. As Pryor explained when asked what made Buzz or SMM’s other “communities” a “community”: “It was that, it was a free-choice thing: people were coming on their own, because of a common interest. And, you know, in some ways we were trying to flatten the playing field. There was equality because of equality of content, not because of status within or without the museum. And, that’s probably, that’s probably all there was to it.”

Buzz strives to represent community as an organic and communicative entity by utilizing social media conventions that make its audience members visible and seem co-present. These conventions include opportunities for participation and textual communication and break down as follows. The global navigation bar gives access to all of its content; it reads: “Blog | Topics | Features | Community | Exhibit | About.” These features offer both static content for users and interactive opportunities. The Topics tab contains webpages that rotate based on the season and special exhibits at the SMM; these are static in the sense that they only provide

content to read. The “Exhibit” tab provides information about Buzz kiosks for potential buyers. The “About” tab also contains static content, including locations of Buzz kiosks, a help page, and information about copyright, privacy, credits, awards, and how to contact the Buzz team.

The interactive features are numerous. They include the “Buzz Blog,” which is a standard blog built into the website. The “Features” tab offers interactive opportunities that are supposed to be updated monthly; its pull-down menu includes the “Object of the Month,” “Scientist on the Spot,” “Changing Seasons,” and the ability to browse the site by images or tags, as well as Buzz’s recommendations for other science blogs. Interactive opportunities appear in “Object of the Month,” which features an object from SMM’s permanent collections and a label written for it by Buzz staff. It is another example of how Buzz strives for openness and to acknowledge the agency and knowledge of users; the section announces, “Museums don’t know everything,” and gives users the chance to “Write your own label.” Also, the public can ask questions of the “Scientist on the Spot,” a professional scientist enlisted by Buzz to answer questions about her work and profession. Finally, the options listed under the “Community” tab relay social media’s typical conflation of community with frequency of communication, participation, and identity articulation. It includes “Latest Comments” from users, a page on how to “Contribute” to the project, the leaderboard for “Buzz Points” (explained below), “Community Guidelines,” a “Member Gallery” that lists all registered users, and information about using the site that is specific to “Mentors,” “Scientists,” and “Teachers,” groups that are singled out for reasons explained below.

Trying to materialize its audience as a community, Buzz shares affordances with other social media platforms that allow users to signify personal identity and co-presence. People who register can flesh out a basic profile, which displays a registrant's login name; point total—points being awarded for taking visible action on the site, such as rating a story, posting a comment or image, or writing a blog post or poll question;<sup>56</sup> communicative activity on the site (i.e., blog posts and comments); and an image and biography, if desired (Figure 6.3). These profiles appear together within the “Member Gallery,” where they suggest the scope of the audience and a sense of collectivity.

That members' profiles display their activity on the site above their biographies suggests how Buzz wants to materialize people and community principally through words and actions. The import of communication is evident throughout the site, which carries the tagline, “Let your voice be heard,” by the inclusion of communicative features under the “Community” tab, and by the description on the “Community” page, which explains that the project is

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<sup>56</sup> Speaking to the conventional privileging of self-articulation as an indication of full, or ideal, membership in a social media community, the most points are rewarded for posting a biography.

“experimenting with ways to let everyone ‘talk science’.”

The screenshot shows the Science Buzz website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Blog, Topics, Features, Community, Exhibit, and About. Below this is a yellow banner with the text "Be part of the buzz... Login/Register" and a search box. The main content area features a user profile for "Amelia". The profile includes a placeholder image with a question mark, a "Back to Science Buzz Home" link, and three tabs: "full profile" (selected), "activity", and "biography". On the left side of the profile, there are three statistics: "Total points: 56", "Who has the most points?", and "How do you get points?". The main profile area is divided into two sections: "My blog posts" and "Comments I've made". The "My blog posts" section indicates that the user has not created any posts. The "Comments I've made" section lists three comments with titles in red: "Crows use tools to capture a fatty snack", "Is texting taking a toll on teen health?", and "Nasal spray may treat Alzheimer's disease".

Figure 6.3 Screenshot of author’s *Science Buzz* profile, captured 22 September 2010.

Further, the “About” page welcomes people with an explanation of why “Science is an essential literacy,” and proclaims that their contributions are considered a core experience of the site.

Opportunities to communicate one’s presence and opinions on Buzz are numerous and expand if one signs up as a member. Non-registered users can vote in polls, ask questions of the Scientist on the Spot, or comment on blog posts, meaning people can participate under a veil of anonymity. Registered users have more options, including creating a profile, posting a story to the blog, writing a label for the Object

of the Month, and acquiring points for her actions, which get displayed on the site's leaderboard.

A closer look at the Buzz Blog underlines how *Science Buzz* aims for constructing community on the basis of frequent communication. The Buzz "Blog," which is identified and differentiated from other Buzz content by its prominence in the global navigation bar, follows most conventions of blogs, including date- and time-stamped entries that appear in reverse chronological order, comments below posts, tags to describe posts, and an RSS feed. Its inclusion plays on the popular, if not universal, conception of blogs as supporting a kind of fluid conversation by allowing comments and utilizing hyperlinks within text and photographs to signify Buzz as part of the unfolding conversations on the web. Further, the blog and the site as a whole also display blog writing-style conventions by often using the first-person voice, including personal details about the contributor, and evincing a casual tone that incorporates popular culture references, humor, and slang.

Finally, Buzz evokes a sense of community as frequent and ongoing conversation by privileging recent posts. The display of posts in reverse chronological order is a defining feature of blogs and results in promoting attention to the most current post. Buzz's homepage shows "New posts" and "Latest comments" on the Buzz blog, and "Latest comments" appears as the first choice in the pull-down menu under the "Community" tab. As was explained in previous chapters, the construction of punctual time and a sense of simultaneity have been key to the construction of group feeling in the nineteenth century and after. Similarly, Mark Warner writes about how important the sense of circulation of shared texts is to the idea of publics.

The publishing of writings that reference each other in the “punctual” time of days or weeks, such as in op-eds and letters to the editor contribute to people’s recognition of being in a public. This “punctual time of circulation is crucial to the sense that discussion is currently unfolding in a sphere of activity;” it affords people a sense of simultaneity and currency.<sup>57</sup> Writing in the early 2000s, Warner perceived the Internet as not incorporating punctual time; he wrote, “[highly] mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are increasingly organized as continuous (‘24/7 instant access’) rather than punctual. At the time of this writing Web discourse has very little of the citation field that would allow us to speak of it as discourse unfolding through time.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, the proliferation of social media relies on both continuous and punctual time to create a sense of co-presence and community. For instance, Twitter draws people into a common sphere of activity by publishing posts with notations of “57 seconds ago” or “about 20 hours ago,” which gives a sense of continuous and elapsing global time unmarked by regional time zone; after 24 hours, “tweet” are marked with an exact time. Buzz marks time as continuous and punctual. On its homepage, it uses the convention “12 hours 31 min ago” for posts, while posts within the blog display the date, and comments display date and time.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Who is the Science Buzz Community?*

While it is apparent that many definitions and ideas about community are at work in Buzz, it is also apparent there are multiple audiences with various interests and agendas at play. I explain these here because they express how community is an

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<sup>57</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 96.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> After Buzz was refreshed, it still promoted latest comments on its homepage, but did not include times they were posted. However, the continuous convention was still utilized in interior pages.

ambiguous aspect of the site and how articulating ideas about it might help Buzz evolve how it implements social media to serve multiple audiences.

Who comprises the “Community” of Buzz is hard to discern since its interface addresses multiple ones: the pull-down menu that appears under “Community” lists four particular groups: “Mentors,” which is a relic of an experiment initiated by General Electric as part of its long-standing relationship with the Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota: “they were interested in using *Science Buzz* as a tool by which mentors and students could build a relationship.”<sup>60</sup> “Scientists” are addressed within the goals of the Public Understanding of Science movement; they are advised they can contribute blog posts about their work, add Buzz as an outreach element of their funding, or bring a Buzz kiosk to their institutions.<sup>61</sup> Also, teachers are invited to browse the site by the State of Minnesota’s science education standards and encouraged to “Give your Students a Voice” and “be part of a discussion that stretches far beyond the walls of your classroom.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, the “Member Gallery” speaks to the audience of Buzz users.

As to who those users are, that is also unclear. A survey attempted as part of the summative evaluation attracted only 127 participants and its findings, as the evaluators admit, are not likely representative. They write:

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<sup>60</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Mentors,” *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/mentor>, accessed 25 September 2010. People recruited by this partnership would identify themselves as mentors while registering for Buzz and would be paired with a student. Features available only to this group would then allow them to see each other’s activity on Buzz and potentially cultivate relationships through nurturing of interests.

<sup>61</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Scientists,” *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/community/scientists>, accessed 25 September 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Teachers,” *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/community/teachers>, accessed 25 September 2010. When the site was originally built, the State of Minnesota was rewriting its science education standards and in the interest of being “useful, not only on the exhibit floor, but to our education staff, who have a lot of relationships obviously with schools,” the site was categorized according to those standards.

One-quarter of the Buzz website users live in Minnesota; most users live in other U.S. states, although there are some from other countries. Most users are young – 40% are children and teens and 23% are aged 18-30. About half of the respondents were visiting the website for the first-time; about one-quarter have used it four or more times. About one-third said they have visited the [SMM]. About half of the users are current students; most have no special training in science (only 12% have science careers). Additional analyses comparing first time website users with repeat users show that the repeat users are more likely to have visited SMM. Also, it looks like the website is attracting repeat visits among the 13-29 year olds.<sup>63</sup>

Pryor also has a hazy impression of the online audience thanks to the numbers she can glean about site visitation from Google Analytics (which are also not comprehensive).<sup>64</sup> In 2006, the program was recording 30,000 to 40,000 visits to the site each month.<sup>65</sup> Pryor reported to me in the spring of 2010 that, in any given month, seven to ten percent of online visitors have previously visited the site and 89 or 90% of visitors are new visitors. The numbers also indicate “there’s a giant, big red bull’s-eye over the Twin Cities. Obviously there’s a bigger overlay that encompasses, you know, Minnesota and maybe the four states, or five states right around it.” At the same time, the site regularly records monthly visits from every state in the United States and the District of Columbia, as well as from about 170 countries.

The small sample of Buzz online users who participated in my online survey do not provide useful demographic information (although they express similar information as given above), but does provide a peephole into the diversity of reasons people visit and their perceptions of Buzz as a community. Of the five participants who provided a reason as to why they visit, they explained: “for pay and for self-

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<sup>63</sup> People, Places & Design Research, *Summative Evaluation*, 56.

<sup>64</sup> These numbers are limited to on-site users. Collecting numbers on the activity from the 5000 to 7000 visitors who enter the SMM’s doors each day is complicated since all of the institutions’ computers for staff or visitors have the same IP address.

<sup>65</sup> SMM’s “Detailed Report Narrative” reported 30,000 to 40,000 visits in 2006.

esteem;” “Usually reading posts and comments;” “fun way to keep in touch;” “I enjoy reading about and discussing science topics;” “I like science.;” “it’s interest [*sic*];” “Primarily I engage with the Buzz because it is a component of my research assistantship, but I also do it because it’s fun! I like the ability to talk science in a creative way to laypeople.;” “Because it’s my job, and because it’s one of the more fun parts of my job—I enjoy finding informal ways to write about science.”; and “interested information.” Twelve people reported feeling that Buzz represents a community. Four offered explanations of why:

commenting develops a sense of community or relationships

its [*sic*] always people conversing ideas an [*sic*] points instead of swearing like on other sites

Technically, they’re my co-workers (even though Liza’s the only one I’ve met in person). Since I read all the Buzz’s content, I get to know the principle contributors (at least their cyber-selves) pretty well. I can even identify different contributors by their writing style similar to how you might recognize a friend’s voice. Further, I am honored when regular contributors comment on my work and when I can comment or contribute on their’s [*sic*]. It’s a “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” kind of deal.

There’s a pretty big range in participation levels, but I think that Science Buzz is a place where people feel comfortable to voice opinions and ask questions. Regular users often develop a recognizable voice, and you begin to see what sort of subjects they are most interested in. Those seem to be characteristics of an online community, I guess.

These answers speak to various motivations and activities that influence visitation to and public participation on the site, including pay, a sense of fun, of empowerment, of friendship, for conversation and learning, and because it is a “safe space.” The last two, which were offered by people who work on Buzz, also suggests how senses of community rest on communication, familiarity, and reciprocity, and that such ideas influence the behavior of people who facilitate communication on the site. A master’s

student who conducted her thesis on how staff facilitation works on Buzz similarly noted this factor. She writes:

According to several staff bloggers, this orientation away from doing ‘science journalism’ and towards fostering community affects the way they facilitate on *Science Buzz*. For Alan, it often determines how he writes posts and responds to users:

I have been trying to sort of push that, my posts, toward trying to engender or trying to create conversations with other people...rather than focusing on informational posts...I check in with conversations that are happening on the site, and reply to them, and try to draw connections between various other blog posts.<sup>66</sup>

While users come to Buzz with multiple motivations and agendas, what is evident is that, like with any other social media project, lurkers are the dominant audience. Pryor confirmed my impression of this from my review of a sample of 80 blog posts; she said that the Buzz team and other project-related staff generates the majority of blog posts, but that most comments come from outside the museum. Further, few visitors create accounts: as of September 1, 2010, Buzz’s account holders totaled 3460, about 1% of monthly visitors.<sup>67</sup> Yet, for all Buzz’s encouragement of user participation, Pryor also felt that this lack of visible participation was to be expected:

... that makes sense. I mean, it is user-generated and I think we have lots of really great examples of users generating really awesome stuff. But, frankly, you’re surfing around. You come to this website. You’re not prepared, you’re not expecting to have to like, “Now it’s my turn to write an essay,” right? You have to be pretty fired up about something or know a lot about something or anticipated in some way, been a user who’s kind of gotten experience with it over time. But, most people are not up for that challenge, and that’s fine—we don’t expect them to be. Comments, though, we get dwarfed, for sure.

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<sup>66</sup> Curio, “A Conceptual Framework,” 75.

<sup>67</sup> Liza Pryor, e-mail response to author, September 1, 2010. The Detailed Report Narrative recorded “some 700” user accounts in 2006; Pryor told me the number was 1700 (the last time she checked) during our interview in March 2010. She periodically purges inactive accounts.

Pryor hopes to “crack that final nut” of who constitute its online users if she can secure supplemental funding from the NSF. This information is desired because the team has little sense of what such users—the people who might be construed as Buzz’s community on the basis of frequent engagement—are most interested in seeing on the site. For, while Buzz’s openness has enabled more communication with audiences, it has not enabled better understanding of their engagement. While Buzz frames participation around topics of current science, its audience does not always heed that directive and often offers obtuse comments about their engagement.

Buzz users appear on the site as highly diverse and with agendas that only sometimes align with the project’s mission. On the end of the spectrum that does align, a post by a self-identified nine-year-old, “Hairworm Observed Emerging from Mantis,” attracted forty-seven comments (twelve contributed by staff) that report similar observations and ruminations on the behavior of hairworms from California, the Phillipines, South Africa, and Australia.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Pryor’s post about why chickens lay unfertilized eggs has attracted a sustained and unexpected audience:

[It] is consistently very close to the number one post and has been for years. I mean, we have long surpassed any knowledge that we have about chickens and in fact we had to go out and seriously recruit an extension service poultry expert because we were getting *so* much stuff about chickens. There is just a lot of urban chicken enthusiasts out there; chickens in the city is a growing trend and there are a lot of people with chicken questions and it’s way up there. Is that what we ever thought we’d be known for? No. But, there it is.

Other popular posts that enjoy sustained attention stray from Buzz’s mission.

Knowing that many people come to Buzz via search engines, the team intentionally courts popular attention by writing posts about common Internet memes or current

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<sup>68</sup> ringulsrud, “Hairworm Observed Emerging from Mantis,” *Science Buzz*, 6 October 2005, [http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/hairworm\\_observed\\_emerging\\_from\\_mantis](http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/hairworm_observed_emerging_from_mantis), accessed 25 September 2010.

popular culture, such as with the post, “A Zombie Apocalypse Could Actually Happen.”<sup>69</sup>

It was posted for Halloween. It was kind of a jokey post, I don’t know, maybe there was a zombie movie out right now. It was really just about... I don’t know. There was a virus that was making some mammals act in a way that was vaguely zombified. ... I don’t even remember now what the context of the original post was, but it was never intended to be something that comes to the top and like we’re known for; it is. Because people are always looking for “zombie apocalypse” on the web—it’s a really common Internet meme and we pop right up there.

The popularity of this post resulted in comments preoccupied with purchasing guns and ammunition, which prompted another SMM staffer to append the body of the post with a reminder that “This is a *science* blog, so lets do our best to rein it in a little. In a sciency [*sic*] way, you know?”

Even when users stay within the website’s concerns, the information they contribute is not particularly edifying. Similar to Vicki Porter’s experience with comments about the Getty, the comments contributed to *Science Buzz* are not particularly substantive. People may be intrigued by the difficulty of measuring cloud behavior, but often they just say: “cool.”<sup>70</sup>

Such comments do not help Pryor and her staff understand how to develop Buzz or get a clearer grasp of its audience. Pryor informed me the project did not

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<sup>69</sup> Joe, “5 Scientific Reasons a Zombie Apocalypse Could Actually Happen,” *Science Buzz*, 30 October 2007, [http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/bursts/5\\_scientific\\_reasons\\_a\\_zombie\\_apocalypse\\_could\\_actua](http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/bursts/5_scientific_reasons_a_zombie_apocalypse_could_actua), accessed 25 September 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, comment on shana, “Wily and Unpredictable Clouds Meet Your Match,” *Science Buzz*, 3 September 2010, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/blog/wily-and-unpredictable-clouds-meet-your-match>, accessed 19 December 2010. More substantive comments would make an educational project like Buzz easier to evaluate. Pryor said: “...interested in quality, right? I don’t care if you leave a comment if the comment that you leave is not valuable to anyone else. ... I mean, if you go to sixty different posts and write “Awesome!” or “Cool!,” that’s fine—it doesn’t violate the community policies. I’m not going to delete it, but it’s not very valuable; who cares if you think it’s awesome or cool? I mean, at least tell me why you think it’s awesome or cool.”

begin with a target audience other than the SMM's physical visitors in mind—"our very general audience" of "adults and families with kids." When it moved onto the web, Pryor noted that Kennedy showed interest in cultivating a young adult audience ("[thinking] in some ways they're a natural audience for this"). But, the audience today is the web public and as such it faces the issue, like *Discover Nikkei*, of always talking to in-groups and out-groups.<sup>71</sup> Yet, Pryor also has an ideal audience in mind: "we would love it if it was people who visit the museum and visit the website repeatedly, that's the ideal. I have no idea if that's happening or not. But, I think one of the things we will do when we finally have some data is we'll look pretty hard at that group and try to figure out, what is it, what is it that they're interested in, what are they searching for."

#### *Community's Effects on Science Buzz for Democratizing Goals*

Pryor's interest in discerning Buzz's most loyal users and the staff's general commitment to the community-building intent of the project indicate how the project is keenly audience-oriented. So, while community has not been a defined aspect of the project, senses of it have certainly shaped how the project has developed to incorporate social media. These are firmly geared to being open and responsive to audiences in the interest of encouraging participation and a sense of agency; they are also rooted in a sense of reciprocity, which involves the museum asking its audience to take certain risks, but also taking risks itself. Yet a hazy sense of community as a self-evident good may have also precluded more pointed implementation of social

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<sup>71</sup> This public is circumscribed to English speakers and those who can read near an eighth grade level. Pryor explained that the team, "When we write for ourselves, we write to an eighth grade level, or we try to write to an eighth grade level." She also noted that, for technical reasons, the site will likely remain produced only in English.

media towards the project's democratizing goals. An assessment of how ideas about community influence the use of social media in the project will illustrate these claims.

First, the project's definition of community as openness, communication, and reciprocity is expressed in its willingness to let users claim positions of authority on the blog. The Buzz team's willingness to risk being open to unmoderated content from Buzz members places them at the far edge of museums' experimentation with participatory media. This openness to risk is quite singular in the museum field, apparent in the reactions Pryor often gets when presenting about Buzz to other museum practitioners. Pryor related:

It's funny; they all have questions when they come to us and buy furniture. "How do you moderate?" Like, this is always a big deal. Whenever we do presentations—and we do presentations all the time—the first question is always about moderation: "Isn't this a gigantic timesuck? Isn't it so horrible? What's your signal-to-noise ratio? Don't you just waste all the time in the world? Don't you just get so much inappropriate stuff? You let people post on their own?! Oh my god, how many times have you been burned?"

Early on, even the Buzz team had its qualms about letting an anonymous audience take the reins of the blog; Pryor described the site's "Community Guidelines," which outline the contributions and behavior that are appropriate to the site, as "actually an artifact of a time when *we* worried that maybe moderation was going to be a big deal, that we were taking this risk, you know." In reality, this openness has proved to cost the staff little time and the museum little reputation. The moderation of blog posts after publication is not cumbersome and inappropriate content is rarely reported.

As Pryor stated in our interview, the SMM's tolerance for risk stemmed from their understanding that "to get good stuff, you have to put up with some bad stuff." This attitude of openness and willingness to risk is also apparent in how the SMM

does not segregate social media to its online space. Buzz kiosks that appear throughout the museum let opinions and information flow in from the outside. Kiosks are programmed to point at certain pages in Buzz, but they also have live Internet connections and allow some amount of browsing. Again, this openness surprises other museums' staff, but Pryor understands it as compatible with the general attitude of discovery that Buzz aims to promote:

... when we tell people in other museums that, "Yes, not only do we use stuff from Flickr or YouTube or Vimeo, but we put links that take you back to that Flickr page or that Vimeo page or that YouTube page," they are *stunned* that we would do that. ... And I guess that makes sense. I mean, most people... A lot of museums want things to be a very closed community that you can only go to links that are approved, and they have fears about things that are big sites that are user-contributed like that. And it is true ... there is plenty of stuff that is not appropriate in the museum and there's plenty of stuff that... lots of people for lots of different reasons are going to find objectionable, and once I put a link to that and you can get to it, then you can get to it, then you can search around while you're still using this computer. Now, we have a firewall that keeps you from getting at the grossest of porn even if you can somehow get out past YouTube. And, you know, we put things in high-traffic areas... we make it so, socially, it would be uncomfortable, even to be sitting here to be like, "I'm going to get to my Facebook page, or whatever." You know, it would just be very obvious that that's what you're doing and that's not what you're supposed to do. But, people can do it. And a lot of other museums are, are freaked by that, that you would allow access to Google or to YouTube, or whatever. But, we really feel like that the availability, the ready availability of great stuff on those platforms more than makes up for the fact that we might have to deal with somebody who's pissed off that they found something they didn't want to see.

By leaving open the possibility that a visitor can venture beyond the museum, and allow outside resources to interfere within museum space, Buzz represents a level of integration and commitment to the benefits of networked digital media that is wholly uncommon in museums. It speaks to how a social media project can assist a museum in deterritorializing its hold on knowledge, rather than using it to shore up its own boundaries. And, it acknowledges that knowledge is messy and unowned, and that

such circumstances may be useful for serving a museum's larger goals. This openness conveys a sense of reciprocity with the museum's audience that is often missing when museums present themselves as "platforms" or "forums" for the public. Museums usually avoid risk, and as a result, their uses of social media often seem one-sided: they ask audiences to risk possible public censure but risk nothing themselves. The SMM's willingness to risk unpredictable information appearing on its websites and in its museum is an act of good faith with its audience, a willingness to risk the museum's reputation with some visitors in the service of supporting the learning of others.

Community as informed by a sense of reciprocity is also apparent in the site's use of language to make its goals and expectations transparent to its audience. While Pryor described the "Community Guidelines" as a device put in place for the benefit of Buzz staff, it also asserts Buzz's democratizing goals by establishing rules for civil discourse. The page notes the staff will ban "abusive, obscene, threatening, harassing, defamatory, libelous, profane, racist, etc, [*sic*]," as well as spam and off-topic (i.e., not related to science) discussions.<sup>72</sup> It also transparently explains that posts or comments that assert non-scientific theories on evolution will be deleted, and Pryor told me a similar statement would soon be added about climate change. Further, the page establishes grounds for conversation by expressing examples of topics to be explored and questions to be asked, as well as frames participation within science as potentially contentious, constructing debate and even controversy as an expected

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<sup>72</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, "Community Guidelines," *Science Buzz*, [http://www.sciencebuzz.org/community\\_guidelines\\_0](http://www.sciencebuzz.org/community_guidelines_0), accessed 17 March 2011.

element of the field and of the site. Although it is not required that users agree to these rules, their inclusion signifies the museum's commitment to transparency.

Finally, this sense of community as reciprocity is also apparent in how present and responsive Buzz staff is on the site. Along with new posts appearing every day on the blog, staff regularly comment on posts and on external users' comments.

Although I cannot provide definitive quantitative data that expresses the significance of the staff presence on the site, it is possible to see that presence based on the "Buzz Points" leaderboard. Found under the "Community" tab, the leaderboard displays Buzz members' point totals based on their visible activity on the site. While those point totals are not exactly accurate, staffmembers regularly occupy the top ten spots.<sup>73</sup> Their heavy presence signifies their commitment to keeping it dynamic and up-to-date. Of course, as the comments above suggest, this behavior is motivated because it is part of their jobs, but staff are also personally motivated to contribute out of a sense of fun, a sense of challenge, and a sense of interest in science education.<sup>74</sup>

The strength of personal commitment to Buzz is also indicated by the willingness of

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<sup>73</sup> The Leaderboard is a relic of when GE approached SMM about incorporating Buzz into its mentoring program. It was meant to help motivate participation. But, Pryor explained that it does not work correctly as people, like staff, who edit posts actually have points subtracted from their total; as such, highly active users actually get negative point totals: "so our most active media developers are actually way negative. They don't even show up on the Leaderboard because they're always fixing stuff like that so they're at, you know, minus 200,000 points or whatever. So, the Leaderboard is goofy." When asked why they retain it, she explained: "because points do motivate people. ... And, we have to figure out what it is we want to motivate people to do. So, we're not pushing it right now because, you know, you don't want unintended consequences, but we've already built the functionality; we might as well keep it and then figure out how do we use it for good instead of evil.

<sup>74</sup> Pryor's explained her personal interest and commitment to the site to me in these words: "I just love to see how it changes. It's so different then it was when it started. It's so interesting to try and figure out what people are thinking about; what is it somebody might want to know today. ... I mean, there are so many people who think that science is not interesting or that they're not good at science or it just isn't what they do. And it is; I mean, it's all around you. It's such an interesting challenge every day to try and figure out how to ... do that for somebody who hasn't ever had that done for them before. And then it's just personally interesting. I do a lot of surfing around. I read a lot of these things; I look at a lot of science news and there are always... I would say every day there are about thirty things I want to write about and I can't." Also see Curio, "A Conceptual Framework."

various staff to spend time on the site over the years of its life; as Pryor said: “There are not a lot of people who have started working for *Science Buzz* and gotten away from it. I mean, even if you’ve been reassigned—like, Bryan has been reassigned; I have been, in some ways, put on to other projects... But everybody still comes back to it. You know, ‘cause it’s... We’re all pretty invested.”

Other than being influenced by notions of openness, responsiveness, and reciprocity, Buzz’s use of social media is largely shaped by community defined as visible communication. That emphasis does not always require people to attach their actions to individually materialized identities in order to participate, which validates people’s sense of privacy, but it may not always serve the preferences or needs of the majority of its audience, most of whom prefer to remain invisible.

As Pryor noted, this may be due largely to the fact that many visitors are new to the site and may not be familiar with the options Buzz offers for interaction and thus not prepared to use them. But, as with *Discover Nikkei*, it is also likely that some of Buzz’s most engaged users prefer invisibility. As one of my survey respondents revealed, he is not a registered user of Buzz—he “never post[s] anything so don’t [*sic*] need one”—but he frequents the site, visiting Buzz “once a week or so.” The most visible action he had taken on the site was participating in the anonymous polls (he seems to prefer anonymity as he also completed my survey but did not leave his e-mail address). Although unwilling to materialize himself on the site, it is also apparent he is having quality experiences. He visits because it is a “fun way to keep in touch and learn,” and because he appreciates the civility of its dialogue—he reported feeling that Buzz represents a community to him because “its [*sic*] always

people conversing ideas and points instead of swearing like on other sites.” His engagement and appreciation for the site were further evident in that he shared Buzz’s content through conversation, via e-mail, and via social media sites.

Defining community on the basis of visible or frequent interaction limits the ways museums use social media to provide interactive and learning opportunities to their audiences. That is, in their desire to encourage visible participation, staff may neglect to implement anonymous or private ways they can use social media. For instance, allowing users on Buzz to privately bookmark stories of interest might encourage return visitation and engagement with content over time. An archive feature like this would allow people to collect science stories of interest to them from various places on the web and create a repository of links that could juxtapose information on a topic. This activity might help users learn about topics over time and perhaps build up confidence to post publicly about their learnings in the future.

Finally, while the ways Buzz uses social media in the name of community have garnered much attention for being radically open, a closer look at the opportunity to publish posts to the blog and to write a label for the Object of the Month shows them to have limits. That Buzz allows registered users to publish unmoderated posts to the blog marks the project as open to and trusting of its users. This opportunity conveys to users that they are agents of knowledge and that SMM seeks to empower them. But, when a registered member moves to create a blog post, she is greeted with a host of information that may inadvertently discourage people from participating (Figure 6.4). The form reminds the user that posts should involve a “short story highlighting new ideas in Science,” or if she wants to publish a shorter

post called a “Burst,” that it should follow the structure of a “one to two line super short post, fitting into one of these categories: Amazing Fact, On this day, Research Finding, Science Links.”<sup>75</sup> Each of these categories has specifications. An “Amazing Fact” should involve “an interesting tidbit of knowledge related to current science;” “On this day” should relate “something that happened today in history ... to current science;” “Research Finding” should share a “big discovery.” Faced with these parameters, the opportunity to post to the blog suddenly feels like a test.

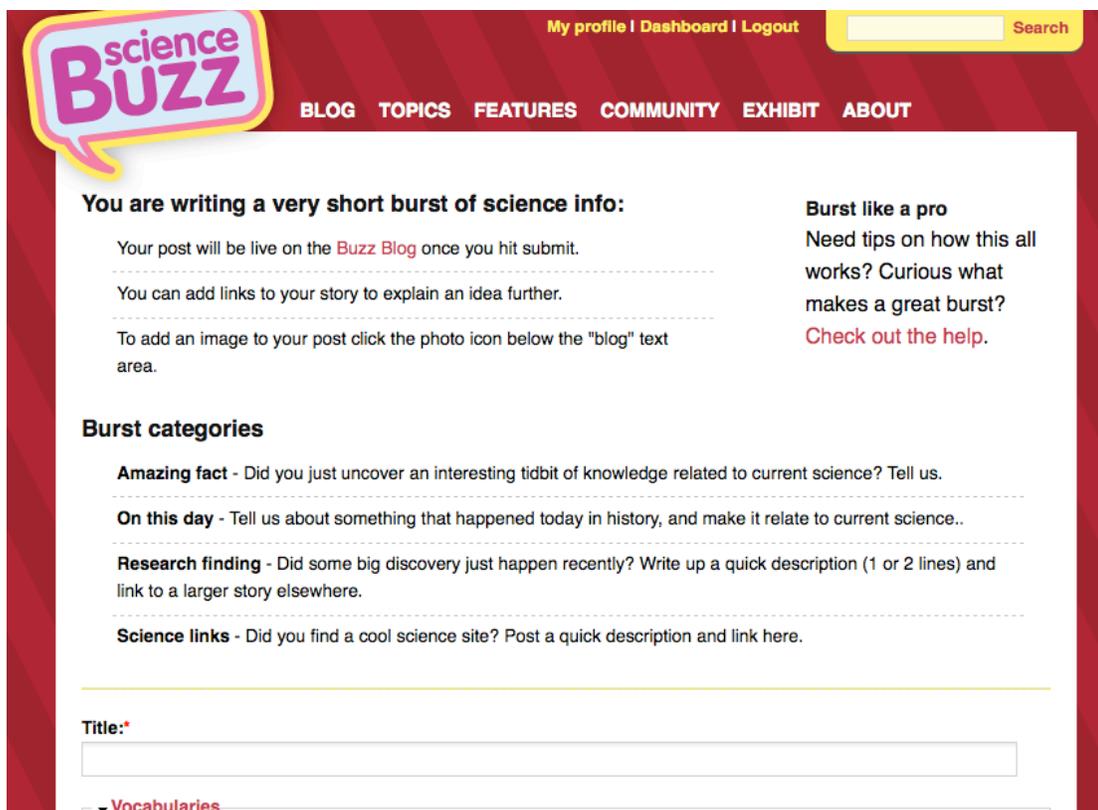


Figure 6.4 Screenshot of "Add Buzz Burst" page from *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/node/add/content-buzz-burst>, captured 27 March 2011.

It may not sound like a difficult test, but consider my experience. I recently came across a news article about a live bull shark found in the Potomac—animals I thought

<sup>75</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, “Create Content,” <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/node/add>, accessed 26 September 2010.

confined to the ocean I discovered can live in the brackish water of rivers, including a river on which I used to scull in a small, narrow boat. Interested in learning more and seeing if this was also news to others, I opened *Science Buzz* to post the story to the blog, but found myself too puzzled and intimidated by the form to follow through. After reading the news article, I had searched the web for more information, so I had already discovered that the appearance of bull sharks in rivers was, while news to me, not “new science.” Faced with the forms’ admonitions, I felt I would have to do more research to find current research about sharks living in rivers. Embarrassed a bit by my ignorance and suddenly confused as to what was appropriate to post, I closed the form.

Buzz’s “About” page explains that “We really encourage postings not only related to last night’s newscast, but also musings that flow from your interactions with the world: why don’t you see baby pigeons? What’s happened to all the fireflies? How come eggs from the grocery store don’t contain baby chickens? Are any two snowflakes alike? Activities, experiments, interviews, videos...all welcome.” Within this description, my shark story certainly qualifies as “current science,” but the form for the blog post does not provide a similarly straightforward explanation. This gap in understanding might be resolved by providing the type of detailed information available on the “About” page on the blog posting page, or at least by linking the form to the “About” page to offer more direct guidance.<sup>76</sup>

While Buzz may be inadvertently discouraging users from posting to the blog, its other most notably open feature, the Object of the Month, also demonstrates how

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<sup>76</sup> In Alex Curio’s thesis, she writes of the staff’s awareness that the way this form is set-up may affect contributions. This is because the form requires some knowledge of html. See Curio, “A Conceptual Framework,” 71, 73.

social media can reinforce rather than subvert traditional museum authority. This feature boldly broadcasts that “Museums don’t know everything” and invites the public to “Write your own label” for an artifact from the museum’s permanent collection. This activity aims to democratize an activity typically reserved for staff. The significance of this act may be understood by considering that the staff-written labels that appear in Buzz are themselves an affront even to some SMM staff. Pryor recalled several internal “dust-ups” around the Object of the Month. Originally the purview of the Science division, Object of the Month featured traditional museum label text written by curators. When the Buzz staff took it over, they adopted a more “open” and “narrative” approach, using story-telling to connect with the public. The Science division balked:

This was the last one I think that we did with the Science Division. It was a fight. They didn’t like it. They hated this really narrative, narrative approach. It’s funny. How can you get upset about a label about a fossil leaf? But, they didn’t like it. And then, it won. It won a big award at AAM, for label-writing [laughs].<sup>77</sup> Which just goes to show that, you know, not, not everybody who fusses about labels actually knows anything about labels. And that’s not to say it’s the only way to write labels either. I mean, the old school way of writing labels has, has some value to it, but it just isn’t the only way and it’s certainly not the way I’m going to interpret objects if I’m putting them on the web. You know, if I’m going to allow people to interact with them.

While less formal and academic styles of label-writing stir up questions about authority among museum professionals, the Object of the Month feature does little to trouble museum authority (Figure 6.5). While users are invited to try their hand at label-writing, the way the opportunity presents itself dilutes the potential power of the

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<sup>777</sup> To clarify, the label that won AAM’s 2009 Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition was actually about fossilized animal tracks (Science Museum of Minnesota, “Awards,” *Science Buzz*, <http://www.sciencebuzz.org/about/awards>). But, Pryor mentioned that this label, too, was not appreciated by the Science division: “This one is another one—what are these, footprints, fossilized footprints—and people *hated* it. *Hated it!* The Science division *hated* this label. They went bonkers. They just couldn’t stand it. Visitors love this label.”

activity. The instructions on the main page for writing labels for the Object of the Month read:

Use the form at the bottom of this page to write a brief label about this object: a memory, an interesting fact, something you notice, even a poem.

We'll put your labels on this computer and on our website! (Labels will be reviewed before posting. Labels may be edited for spelling and grammar.)

While the museum-written label appears front-and-center with the image, the public's "labels" appear below the label-writing instructions in a section titled, "Your Comments, Thoughts, Questions, Ideas." While people are allowed a chance to comment in a way that infiltrates the SMM's physical space and Buzz's website, this opportunity actually carries little authority or intrigue; it does not appear next to the object nor displace the

**Write your own label for the mummified hawk**

Museums don't know everything-tell us what YOU know about this sort of object.

Mummified hawk - learn more

Helpful hints for writing labels

Use the form at the bottom of this page to write a brief label about this object: a memory, an interesting fact, something you notice, even a poem.

We'll put your labels on this computer and on our website! (Labels will be reviewed before posting. Labels may be edited for spelling and grammar.)

**Your Comments, Thoughts, Questions, Ideas**

Anonymous says:  
Sweet! An amazing and priceless artifact found in the depths of

Figure 6.5 Screenshot of "Write Your Own Label" page from *Science Buzz*, [http://www.sciencebuzz.org/museum/object/2011\\_01\\_mummified-hawk/labels](http://www.sciencebuzz.org/museum/object/2011_01_mummified-hawk/labels), captured 27 March 2011.

museum's label. As the Buzz staff tries to keep the bar of participation low, I realize the reduction of this opportunity to allow for any musing on the Object of the Month is probably in the interest of not appearing intimidating. Also, there are likely technical capacities that would make it difficult to allow user-generated labels to occupy some space of authority on the site. However, this democratizing opportunity ends up reading as a rather empty gesture. I delineate this issue here because one of Buzz's main concerns is to shape the formation of a citizen-subject who is an informed and active participant in society and one of the ways it does that is by offering people the chance to share their thoughts and concerns on the site. But, when opportunities advertised as claiming authority amount to rather vague chances to voice one's opinion, this activity aligns with the empty neoliberal model of citizenship, which encourages individual action in the interest of relieving oneself as a burden from society. This model suggests that to "count" as a citizen, one must make oneself visible through action; it is supported by the opportunity to participate in public acts of communication that hold little consequence. Opportunities in such instances seem to be more about using social media to materialize an audience in order to soothe a museum's sense of service rather than to empower citizens.

### Conclusion

As a democratizing project, the *Science Buzz* website seeks to open science museum and scientific knowledge-making practices to the public. Pryor writes, "Including [visitor] voices, questions, and comments in a raw way, with opportunities for multiple contacts, means we can encourage scientific habits of mind, inquiry and critical thinking, and allow a community of learners to develop relationships with

scientists, museum staff, and each other.”<sup>78</sup> Towards these ends, Buzz has made use of the concept of community and social media to open opportunities for authority, conversation, and information-seeking to its audience and it has also strived to open the Science Museum of Minnesota to the ideas and information that circulate outside its doors.

This chapter has tried to assess how community and social media operate in Buzz towards these ends. I have argued that community has operated without clear definition in the project, but has nevertheless worked to shape how the project has implemented social media towards its goals. In the interest of complicating how museums understand the democratizing effects of invoking community and using social media, I have also illustrated how such unarticulated definitions of community may work to re-assert the authority of the museum or pose no challenge to it to begin with. I offer that these moments of closure might be addressed to some degree by articulating the definitions and ideas about community that are at work in the project in order to more effectively mobilize social media to serve the SMM’s goals for openness and citizen formation. For, it is evident that community has motivated SMM to take risks in the interest of better serving its audiences, and it has the potential do so even further.

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<sup>78</sup> Pryor, “*Science Buzz – Case Study.*”



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### Introduction

My object in this dissertation has been to complicate museums' understandings of community as they currently construct it through social media. I chose this focus because museums often invoke community in the interest of the continued democratic reform of these institutions. Community takes its earliest origins from the Greeks' democratic exercise of the *polis*, and as a result is steeped in ideal and historical visions of democracy. Community projects are supposed to alter museums' relationships with their audiences, challenging traditional flows of power by making institutions more open and reflexive, increasing accessibility, diversity, dialogue, and collaboration, and/or encouraging visitors to be agents of social action and social change.

Yet, when community lacks definition in practice, so too does the democratic reform sought through it. Museums often take invoking community to be the achievement of democracy in and of itself. For, without knowing what one means by community, the deep reflexivity that is necessary to direct it for democratizing measures is absent or inchoate, and the expectations, values, and norms that circulate in a project go unarticulated and unexamined, even as they shape how it is implemented and evaluated. It has thus been a main conceit of this dissertation that because museums do not tend to define what they mean by community, how they

assume its functions, and what they hope to achieve by it, that it casts a fog of ambiguity over their practices with social media.

### Summation

Towards the aim of sifting through that fog to understand how community works in social media practice towards democratic ends, I delineated the origins of the concept, its accretion of meaning, and how it has been imagined through networked digital media and valorized in social media. I illustrated utopic visions of community, envisioned in terms of the *polis*—the materialization of a civic body in a public space, where members gather to voice their opinions face-to-face—and in the notion of universalism. Community's sentimental side has been described, where it appears as a symptom of nostalgia for the idealized past of small towns and their supposed tight and deep clusters of social and moral relationships. Locality, already suggested by the *polis* and the romanticizing of small towns, also powerfully feeds modern ideas of community as neighborhoods. I also explicated how community shapes ideas about political citizenship, constructing ideal citizens as informed participants who frequently and vocally deliberate the issues of the day. Community's relationship to identity was explored in relation to multiculturalism and the rallying of disenfranchised groups for human rights. This association introduced concerns of difference and power to community. Finally, my discussion of community as it has been conceptualized through networked digital media illustrated that it speaks of a desire to return a sense of materiality and order to online social relations. This cataloging of ideas expressed how community is not an inherently democratic concept and can be utilized for various means.

Further, this history examined how community has come to be defined overwhelmingly by communication, and specifically, by a sense of communication as public, active, immediate, and simultaneous. The valorization of such communication is particularly apparent in conceptualizations of community through social media. By relentlessly encouraging people to speak, or to at least participate, in visible ways, social media aim to materialize people in the space of networked digital media. This investment in materiality mitigates anxiety about the anonymity of the digital public by returning a sense of face-to-face immediacy to dialogue, a sense of the audience, and a sense of place, both public and private, to online dealings. Mobilized through the trope of community, these moves help to establish a sense of social order.

Within that historical examination, I interwove examples of how museums have shown all of these ideas about community to be present in their practice. These examples demonstrated that they often use community as a self-evident good and not towards effective, democratic change. I explained this particularly in the climate of social media, where museums often assume community and democratic change to be simply achieved through using social media to open more channels of communication. Imagined this way, community inclines museums to push visible dialogue and participation in social media, even as this narrows their understanding of the spectrum of visitor engagement and skews how they evaluate their efforts with social media. Further, manifesting a community around a museum also helps museums assert their continued relevance and thus argue for their maintenance as physical entities. Museums' use of social media to cohere a community centered around them speaks of a continued investment in using networked digital media to

shore up their material boundaries, rather than embracing the networking potential of this media.

To explore the complicated ways that community shapes the implementation of social media in museums towards democratic goals, I researched three case studies of museums using social media to advance community in various ways. As none of them overtly define their concepts of community, I explored them according to: How does the project use community and what do those uses suggest about its definitions of the concept? What was/is the project's context of creation and execution? What are the project's stated goals? Are their unstated goals, and if so, what are they? How was/is the project evaluated? How does the project benefit the museum or audience? Does the project revise relations between the museum and its audience?

The Getty Center's *A Different Lens* illustrated the case of an art museum using a blog in the interest of democratizing its relations with the online public. To connect with the Getty's "community," the blog took the unusual approach of highlighting user-generated content about the Getty, rather than the Getty's content. But, this strategy was ultimately shown to be deploying community simply as a self-evident good as ultimately the user-generated content was used to represent the institution as it desired to be seen. At the same time, the case study showed that its manager had genuine interest in using social media to make the Getty more accessible to more people and to better serve its audiences. I suggested that digging into the ideas and values of community that informed the project might have helped steer the blog to be more conversational and potentially transformational by making a case for why the Getty should better attend to social media and its audiences, especially as what the

blog did accomplish was indicating that there is an audience interested in having substantive conversations with the Getty about art and that blogging could be used to begin to help revise its relations with audiences.

The second case study explored a more ambitious social media project from a history and ethnically-specific museum. The Japanese American National Museum manages the *Discover Nikkei* website for the purpose of creating a community based around interest in Nikkei identity. A project from a museum that is highly invested in democratic dealings with its audiences and in cultivating democracy generally, *Discover Nikkei* demonstrates how community creates insider and outside groups. I described how the construction of these groups is both beneficial, in that it represents the truly diverse and fluid expressions of Nikkei identity, and problematic, as it may discourage participation. I also described how the staff works tirelessly to encourage more people to participate in the project, but argued also that the lack of articulation of community here may be preventing the staff from utilizing social media even more towards its goals of encouraging participation and the expression of difference. I suggested that expanding its definition of community and focusing less on public participation could open up the opportunities for participation it provides its audience and help the team evaluate the project's impact.

The online component of an exhibition development project from a regional, but internationally important, science museum and center provided the third and final case study. *Science Buzz*, from the Science Museum of Minnesota, is an instance of a museum using social media to attract and construct a community based on a shared interest. Many definitions of community influence its implementation, but especially

that of public communication towards promoting dialogue and interest in science, and to support the construction of an ideal citizen-consumer as a visibly active participant in such dialogue. The project was shown to support these goals by providing multiple ways to participate, including anonymously, by providing a framework to users about what the site accepts as civil discourse, and by having a very responsive and committed staff. I suggested that an improvement would be to provide private ways to interact with the content on the site, allowing lurkers to bookmark stories of interest, possibly give them more reasons to repeatedly visit, and even gain confidence to participate publicly. Finally, I critiqued how the project opens museums' practice and authority to audiences, finding that it was not as radically open or empowering in its options for participation, but is unusually open in terms of how it lets networked digital media and social media permeate its physical boundaries, which while exposing museums to more risks also exposes audiences to more information.

### Problematique

As Miranda Joseph concluded in her criticism of community as it operated in an allegedly radical community theater, my analysis of these projects was not meant to diminish people's efforts, but to be "expansive, generative, and open" in the interest of advancing the democratic values that are deeply infused in notions of community and social media.<sup>1</sup> I started this project very skeptical to the usefulness of community in museum practice. It seemed to carry too many meanings and values, its ambiguity working to obscure more than transform power relations between museums and audiences. However, while I remain critical of how museums loosely use

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, 173.

community in their social media practices, especially in how they conflate it with communication and democracy, I felt inspired by the commitment of the staff I met to pursue community in the interest of helping museums better serve audiences and continue to try and open museum practices for the sake of transparency, diversity, and the enrichment of knowledge.

I surmise that community is useful in museums' practices with social media if it helps continually direct museums to the needs and interests of audiences. If it can direct social media to be used to establish points of consistent contact for audiences into museum practices, and museums have the structures in place to consistently monitor that contact, than community may keep museums "honest" in their efforts to make themselves more relevant to and representative of more people. Consequently, I end with a problematique for museums working with the notion of community through social media in the interest of democratizing their practices. This involves recommending to museums that 1) if they are going to address audiences as communities, to articulate how they are defining the concept in order to shape their practices, goals, and evaluative frameworks; 2) to change their framework of evaluation for social media projects; and, 3) to use social media more actively for its dematerializing rather than materializing capabilities.

It is the contention of this dissertation that the fog produced by community may be fruitfully parted if museums articulate their definitions of community from the outset of a project, which would allow them to more clearly understand their goals, how to attack those goals, and how to evaluate the project. Such a process does not require a comprehensive understanding of the history of the concept and its

relationship to democracy. Rather, it requires thinking about what values and expectations of audience engagement they are trying to convey by using community in place of other descriptors for their audiences. For instance, what is appealing about imagining audiences as engaging in face-to-face talk? What is useful about making them do so in public? Further, it requires recognizing that the technologies and cultural conventions of social media do not equate inherently with democracy and that they must be utilized pointedly towards that aim. For instance, if a museum determines that it seeks better communication with its audiences in the interest of learning how it can better serve them, it must consider what kind of communication best serves that goal, and how such channels of communication will infiltrate the doings of the museum. Then, it must turn a critical eye to social media in order to consider how they can serve expressed goals. This means not accepting that public communication and participation is always the preferred option, and instead considering how social media can allow multiple modes of communication, both public and private, to operate in a project. It means considering how to make the rules of discourse transparent and available to the audience. Finally, it also involves figuring out how such information will be collected, analyzed, and distributed to shape practice.

This approach is aimed at expanding how museums evaluate their efforts in social media generally. At this point, the opaque and limited data that museums can collect about online engagement means they have, like entities in every other sector of society, relied on measuring quantifiable transactions and thus reduced evaluating online engagement to numbers of visits and page views; duration of visits; etc. As I

have spent a good deal of verbiage criticizing the way social media stresses visible communication and participation over other types, I am also concerned with expanding approaches to evaluation that are not fixated on publicly taken actions.

How does one measure engagement that is invisible? One doesn't. Instead, one changes one's point of view about what is available to be studied. This can mean creating the means to collect data, such as through the survey that Liza Pryor soon expects to deploy about *Science Buzz* users. As my own surveys implied, these solicitations to the public allow people who do not feel comfortable visibly participating in projects to give museums feedback in a more private manner.

Broadening one's viewpoint on evaluation involves broadening one's viewpoint of who constitutes the audience for a project. My case studies illustrated how often the most engaged audience in social media projects is composed of museum staff and volunteers. While such constituencies are often regarded in the formative stage of a digital project and called on to beta-test, they are generally ignored in evaluative stages, even though they provide a gauge that suggests what engagement can look like for sustained and invested users. For instance, Murakami-Tsuda's exposure to the diversity of content and experiences on *Discover Nikkei* helped shape her sense of identity, her understanding of history, her appreciation for cross-cultural experiences, and fed her desire to be frequently engaged with the website and to share its contents widely with her networks. Of course, staff and volunteer experiences often happen within a deeper understanding of a project's goals, and, as they may feel a keen investment and loyalty to an institution, may be a group that skews to the overly positive. But, staff and volunteers should not be

ignored in evaluation simply because they have different contexts of understanding for a project than other visitors. For one thing, their experiences need not be compared to outsiders' experiences, but can be used to give a sense of the range of possible experiences.

Further, as I offered in chapter three, Michael Warner's theory of publics presents another avenue of broadening how museums evaluate their social media projects: "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*."<sup>2</sup> Such a viewpoint might influence museums to incorporate into evaluation considerations of the content that they make available online. Again, the evaluation of social media projects tends to focus on what audiences make visible to museums. But, in the realm of social media, might museums also be judged in terms of how they make themselves visible to their audiences? That is, how active are they in participating in their own projects? How often do they post to their social media projects? Are these texts always written in the same tone? The same language? How often do they respond to questions and comments? How often do they share information? How many staff are involved in communicating with the public?

In other words, I am wondering if a useful way of measuring museums' social media engagement is in terms of their generosity of information. I make this claim because, if museums want to use social media to democratize themselves, they cannot use them to simply place greater expectations on audiences as democratic actors. They must act in the model of the active citizen they profess to most value. To do this

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<sup>2</sup> Warner, *Publics*, 65; orig. emphasis.

is not to fixate on the ideal museum visitor or citizen-subject as an active, visible participant through social media, but to acknowledge that they are resources of information and knowledge for the public, and that the public, whether visibly or invisibly, can best make use of those resources if they can find them. This is not an argument for museums to digitize all of their holdings. Although sharing collections directly online is certainly useful, digitization requires significant resources and it may not be necessary nor desirable (i.e., for preservation or cultural reasons). But, it does mean participating in social media spaces in the interest of opening museums as sources of collections, information, and expertise. Such activities can make museums valuable contributors to the processes of collective intelligence enabled by networked digital media, and in my estimation, inform the most beneficial connotations of community through social media.

I have noted that museums' anxiety about the immaterial nature of networked digital media seems to influence them to use social media to bolster their investment in being singular, physical places. It is my final contention that, for museums to use social media most fruitfully for opening their resources and practices, they must better embrace the relatively immaterial nature of this media. Embracing immateriality through networked digital media means allowing that it may be most powerful for serving museums' missions—and for serving audiences—if they use it to create and participate in networks of information as often as they use it to assert their relevance as physical institutions.

Museums originally saw digital media as both threat and promise and these viewpoints are apparent today as they struggle to come to terms with social media and

how this culture and these technologies encourage openness, sharing, and the building of networks. But, the remediation of digital media over the past decades suggests that museums need not be worried that this media is an overwhelming threat to their maintenance nor that it means the complete loss of control over their assets. Rather, digital media has been acculturated as an augmentation of life in general, and continues to hold promise for how it can continue to do that. Hence, museums may fruitfully approach this media from Elizabeth Grosz's viewpoint, which regards the "crucial question that the virtual continually poses to the real" as "How can the real expand itself? The virtual poses no threat to the real because it is a mode of production and enhancement of the real: an augmentation, a supplementation, and a transformation of the real by and through its negotiation with virtuality."<sup>3</sup> Museums as repositories of knowledge and sites of knowledge-making may thus turn to networked digital media and social media to expand and transform themselves, rather than to reinforce the limitations and boundaries placed on them by materiality. A more generous approach to networked digital media would thus be to use it to feed digital networks with information and expertise, making museums continuously relevant by generating good-will, exposing their collections to new audiences, and by allowing new information about their assets to flow back in.

### *A Networked Museum*

Museums can use social media productively for democratic reform, in the sense of opening their resources and processes, by embracing the immateriality of this media to build networks, and by respecting that communities may not always form

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<sup>3</sup> Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 90.

around museums directly, but that they do form around interests which museums are well-placed to support. In other words, I am advocating museums experiment more with models that network their information together, rather than maintain information in silos based on their brands as physical buildings. An extant example of this model may be found in the Flickr Commons.

Launched January 16, 2008, the Flickr Commons began as a pilot project between the Library of Congress and the photo-sharing site Flickr. The Library of Congress had initiated the project “to increase discovery and use” of its multitudinous photographic collections.<sup>4</sup> The library aimed to introduce these holdings to people who did not visit the library’s website; to experiment with and assess the value of user-generated content, including tagging; and to gain experience acting in social media “communities.” They pursued this project with Flickr because it could arrange an appropriate rights acknowledgement for the library’s photographic collections and because the site already enjoyed a large and amicable culture of users, characterized by enthusiastic and invested photography aficionados.<sup>5</sup> The response to this project by both the public and fellow institutions is notable. The photographs received hundreds of thousands of views in the span of the first couple days they were accessible to the public.<sup>6</sup> Scores of institutions from around the world applied to join the project; to date, forty-five have signed on. The project generated so much interest from Flickr users and staff from contributing institutions that a group of people

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<sup>4</sup> Springer et al., *For the Common Good*, iii.

<sup>5</sup> A.M. Cox, P.D. Clough, and J. Marlow, “Flickr: A First Look at User Behaviour in the Context of Photography as Serious Leisure,” *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 2008), <http://informationr.net/ir/2-1/13-1/paper336.html>, accessed 28 November 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Matt Raymond, “Flickr Followup,” *Library of Congress Blog*, January 18, 2008, <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2008/01/flickr-followup/>.

formed a Flickr group devoted to the Commons, and created a blog, *Indicommons*, to promote participation in the Commons outside of Flickr.

This network of users, museums, libraries, archives, and other organizations demonstrates the power of social media to feed collective intelligence, and thus the power of social media to advance a more democratized approach to knowledge-making. Of course, that lofty goal is not always immediately apparent: plenty of the comments, tags, and notes contributed to Commons photographs may be more useful for linguistic studies about slang or humor than they are for contributing to knowledge about the collections. However, user-generated content has proved to be useful enough to the Library of Congress that its summary report of the Flickr Commons pilot described the results as “overwhelmingly positive and beneficial” and enthusiastically recommended the library continue and expand its involvement.<sup>7</sup> It reported that thousands of comments resulted in “immediate benefits” for improving the library’s metadata about its collections and that there were twenty “power commenters” who returned time and time again to verify information about photographs. Once information about a photograph was definitively verified by the library’s staff, it was entered into its metadata. By the end of February 2008, the library had updated over 500 of its records with new information, improvements credited to the Flickr Commons. They also noted that new knowledge is reflected on Flickr more quickly than it is in the library’s records.

Along with enriching public information, the library also saw other benefits from the project. It enjoyed seeing its referral traffic to its website rise by 2000% over the initial four-month period, as well as seeing photographs be given “new life”

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<sup>7</sup> Springer et al., *For the Common Good*, iv-v.

through the “[mixing of] past and present” in blog posts.<sup>8</sup> What all of these benefits speak to is the value that can be gained for both audiences and institutions when the latter embraced networked digital media for its ability to feed and build networks. This method uses this media less to make digital outposts of physical museums, and more to turn physical museums into networked museums. This is not to say museums cannot do both, but to argue that they can more forcefully pursue their missions with the latter model, as well as use social media more productively for democratizing museums.

While museums may worry that such a dematerialized approach will dilute their brands and result in their demise, I argue that it may stoke greater recognition. In the manner of book authors who experiment with putting their texts online for free, there is anecdotal evidence that letting their texts circulate more widely can raise awareness about their names, widen their audiences, generate new opportunities, and encourage book sales.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, institutions that completed a survey about their participation in the Flickr Commons report being well-pleased and even surprised by the “overall popularity and impact” of the Commons in terms of things like “overall number of views for collection photos, amount of user interaction as shown by user contributed tagging and comments, increased visitation to the institution’s Web site....” Some garnered kudos from government officials, some saw

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>9</sup> John Hilton III and David Wiley, “Free: Why Authors are Giving Books Away on the Internet,” *TechTrends*, March/April 2010.

large views of their photos, and one was glad to see international engagement with their photos.<sup>10</sup>

The Flickr Commons suggests the power of social media to create new opportunities and ways to engage with the cultural artifacts that are hidden away in museums. This open approach ideally generates new knowledge, as well as new devotees to museums. This promise was perhaps earliest explored with the Virtual Museum of Canada, which launched in 2001, and operates as a portal to exploring exhibits, an image gallery, educational resources, and other projects contributed by thousands of Canadian museums and coordinated by the Canadian Heritage Information Network. More recently, the Smithsonian Commons and the Balboa Park Online Collaborative (BPOC) represent museum complexes that are moving towards combining the resources of member museums in the interest of opening up their collections to enrich their usefulness. Michael Edson of the Smithsonian and Rich Cherry of the BPOC see these sorts of arrangements through the lens of the “commons,” a concept that tries to acknowledge museums as repositories of cultural property over which they should act more as caretakers than owners:

A Web-based multi-institutional museum commons could open up public access to collections, deepening contextual knowledge of objects and helping museum professionals recognize the unseen value of their own collections. For example, collections items that seem orphaned or fragmentary in one institution may enjoy a rich life on-line, once reunited with relevant collections and data from other institutions in an on-line commons environment. Commons-oriented intellectual property policies should also enable content sharing for educational and other non-commercial uses, or they may be used to facilitate new innovations or for-profit businesses beyond the scope of traditional rights-and-reproductions activities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jason Vaughan, “Insights Into The Commons on Flickr,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 10, No. 2 (April 2010): 198.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Edson and Rich Cherry, “Museum Commons. Tragedy or Enlightened Self-Interest?,” in *Museums and the Web 2010: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (presented at the Museums and

Museums moving towards these networked models may then embrace the immateriality of networked digital media in order to give their collections and resources greater exposure by making them more easy to find, and are also embracing the innovative culture of social or participatory media that lets cultural products inspire and beget more cultural products.

The networked museum is, by nature, an open museum. It is invested in exploring the benefits of emerging technologies and the social culture of openness, sharing, and collaboration that surrounds them to keep their assets circulating in public, cultivating their value and relevance. In allowing their collections and resources to reach more people, they may in fact gain better brand recognition and appreciation. Further, by circulating their assets through networked digital media, museums may also fruitfully turn their efforts through social media to help support communities that already exist, rather than try to simply attract them to museums. The Flickr Commons tapped into a passionate community of interest and, consequently, the Library of Congress found itself the recipient of great attention and appreciation. The Flickr Commons Group, begun in December 2008, currently has over 1000 members and its *Indicommons* blog continues to be updated every day with new finds or recent uploads to the Flickr Commons. This is a group that bonds around interest in photography—not museums, or libraries, or archives. But, at the same time, it seems likely that its members have also gained greater exposure to museums, libraries, and archives as a result of being involved in the Flickr Commons. Such a

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the Web 2010, Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2010), <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2010/papers/edson-cherry/edson-cherry.html>, accessed 24 February 2011.

scenario deserves some research to see what benefits have been enjoyed by the community and by the institutions that help fuel it. The findings might help direct museums' efforts in social media and networked digital media generally, assisting them in thinking carefully about how they can get their collections and resources in front of people who already care about, are already talking about, and are already sharing concerns about art, current science, the construction of identity, human rights, etc.

### Community Now

In averring that institutions might support communities through social media, rather than trying to build them around themselves, I am asserting how museums and audiences are best served when museums use social media to expand themselves rather than shore up their boundaries. Community is an ambiguous term and can be deployed towards either objective. It is a concept that expresses tension in museum practice. I argued at points that museums often seem to use community to corral those tensions, to temper them, and direct them towards the support of museums by using social media to materialize themselves and audiences. But, community may be best deployed through social media towards the democratic reform of museums by not trying to contain those energies, but to treat them as loose, immaterial configurations fueled by the flow of information, dialogue, and knowledge.

This loose approach to approaching community is fitting as museums move into the early twenty-first century, since fluidity, transience, and permeability mark scholars' modern perceptions of community. Gerard Delanty explains the "persistence of community ... in its ability to communicate ways of belonging,

especially in the context of an increasingly insecure world. In this sense, community as belonging is constructed in communicative processes rather than in institutional structures, spaces, or even in symbolic forms of meaning.”<sup>12</sup> As electronic technologies have influenced more fluid forms of communication to become more central to notions of community, its processual nature has fostered newer notions of community that are also seen as transient and fluid. Consider Delanty’s description of “virtual communities.” They are: “new kinds of social groups, which are polymorphous, highly personalized and often expressive. ... In these communities, which are often acted out in the global context, belonging has been reshaped radically, leading many to question the very possibility of belonging as it disappears into the flow of communication.”<sup>13</sup> In such a context, museums should begin to loosen their investment in notions of community and communication that are owed to physical manifestations of community, as this attitude will help them more critically approach social media in the interest of serving their audiences and keeping them relevant as spaces of knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions about *A Different Lens*

### 1. Introduction

Thank you for your interest in this research about the Getty Center's blog, "A Different Lens."

Please review the survey consent terms below and, if you agree to them and are over 18 years of age, check "yes" to proceed. You may exit the survey at any time by clicking "Exit this Survey" (at the top right of the page). Your answers on previous pages will be saved.

All questions are optional.

Terms of survey:

This is a research project being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies (principal investigator) and Amelia Wong (student investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you use or have used social media - digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people - developed or used by a museum. The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of such media on museums' visitors and practices in order to critique and possibly improve the latter. This knowledge is being sought for Ms. Wong's dissertation in the field of American studies.

This research process involves answering questions on a survey accessible through [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). It should take 15-30 minutes to complete the survey based on the length of your answers. The questions address demographics (Internet access, location, date of birth, race/ethnicity, gender, income level, schooling, occupation); your use and opinions of social media applications developed/used by museums; and, your use of social media in general.

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. Any electronic files will only be accessible to Ms. Wong on an encrypted, password-protected computer. Once the survey has been completed, the browser window will close automatically and respondents will not be able to access the survey.

To help protect your confidentiality, you may choose not to answer the identity information or request a pseudonym. Ms. Wong's dissertation and any other material (such as articles or conference papers) published from this research seeks to protect you to the maximum extent you desire. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigators learn more about digital media and outreach practices for museums. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of people's experiences with social media used by museums.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

This research is being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies, Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Mary Corbin Sies at University of Maryland, Department of American Studies, 1101 Holzapfel Hall, College Park, MD 20742; (301) 405-1361; sies@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (301) 405-0678; irb@deans.umd.edu.

This research has been approved according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

1. By checking "yes", you are indicating that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and, you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

If you are not at least 18 years of age or do not agree with the terms of this survey, please exit the survey immediately.

## **2. Demographic Information**

This section of the survey aims to collect demographic information about people featured in the Getty's "A Different Lens".

1. Name:

2. May the researchers contact you with possible follow-up questions?  
If yes, please provide your e-mail address:

3. Primary device you use to access the Internet:

Home computer / Work computer / School computer / Library computer /  
Internet café computer / Mobile phone / PDA / MP3 player

4. Type of Internet connection for primary device:

Dial-up/ DSL /Cable modem /Wireless /T-1 or fiber optic / Don't know

5. City and state (or province and country, etc.) where you primarily access the Internet:

6. Year of birth:

7. Gender:

8. Race/ethnicity:

9. Education (last level completed):

Middle school / High school / 2-year college / 4-year college / Graduate school (professional, medical, etc.)

10. Occupation:

11. Estimated Annual Income:

Less than \$25,000/ \$25,000-\$40,000 / \$40,000-60,000 / \$60,000-100,000 / more than \$100,000

### **3. A Different Lens**

This section is about your experience with the Getty's blog, "A Different Lens."

1. Did you know the Getty had a blog before you were contacted to have your work featured in it?

Yes/No

2. Did the Getty feature you for a blog post you wrote or a photograph you took?

Blog / Photograph / Both

3. How did you learn the Getty wanted to feature your work in its blog?

4. How did you feel about having your work selected for the Getty's blog?

5. Did you tell other people your work appeared in the blog? (In the comment field, please explain why or why not.)

Yes/ No / Don't recall

6. Do you feel you got something out of your work being featured on the blog? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)

Yes/ No / Don't know

7. After your work was featured in the Getty's blog, did you visit it to read other posts or make a comment?

Yes/ No / Don't recall

8. The blog is described on its "About" page (<http://gettylens.wordpress.com/about-this-blog/>) as having "sampled a range of perspectives from [its online and in-person] community." Does the blog represent a community to you? Do you feel like a member of that community?

9. How often have you visited the Getty in person?

Once / Twice / Three or more times / Never

10. Has being featured in the blog made you more or less likely to visit the Getty in person?

More likely / Less likely / No effect / Don't know

11. Had you visited the Getty's website before being featured in the blog?

Yes / No / Don't recall

12. Has being featured in the blog made you more or less likely to visit the Getty's website and/or its pages on Facebook, Flickr, or Twitter?

More likely / Less likely / No effect / Don't know

13. Did your experience with the Getty's blog change your definition/expectations of museums? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)

Yes/no / don't know

#### **4. Social Media Use**

This section is about your use of social media, defined for the purpose of this survey as digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people.

1. Why do you have a blog and/or post photographs online?

2. How often do you post to your blog and/or post photos online?

3. Do you feel like a part of a community with the people who read and/or comment on your blog and/or photographs? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)

Yes/ No / Don't know

4. What social media platforms do you use? (Check as many as apply.)

Email / Chat (e.g. AIM, iChat, etc.) / Blogger / Wordpress / LiveJournal / Xanga / Facebook / MySpace / Orkut / LinkedIn / Ning / Twitter / FriendFeed

/ Flickr / YouTube Digg / Reddit / Mixx / Stumbleupon / Technorati / Live (Microsoft) / Delicious / Diigo / Wikipedia / Wikis / Second Life / Other (please specify)

5. Which of your choices in the question above do you use the most frequently?
6. How often do you use them? (That is, every day? A few times a week? A few times a month? Etc.)
7. Why do you use these media?
8. Do you feel like you are part of a community by using this media? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)  
Yes / No / Don't know
9. How do you define "community"?

## 5. Museum Use

This is the final section of this survey. It concerns your use of museums.

1. Before the Getty contacted you to appear in its blog, were you aware that museums are using social media like blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.?  
Yes/ No / Don't recall
2. Please check all that apply: (If you check any of the first 3 answers, please specify which museums and media in the comment field.)
  - I read social media content (e.g. posted on blogs, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) produced by museums.
  - I subscribe to social media content produced by museums.
  - I contribute (e.g. comment, upload photos, etc.) to social media content produced by museums.
  - I do none of the above.
3. How often during a year do you visit a museum?  
  
What type of museum(s) do you visit? (Check all that apply.)  
art / children's/ city / historic house / history / natural history / science / technology / Other (please specify)
5. Why do you visit museums?
6. How often during a year do you visit a museum's website?
7. What type of museum websites do you visit? (Check all that apply.)

art / children's/ city / historic house / history / natural history / science /  
technology / Other (please specify)

8. Why do you use museum websites?

9. Are you a member of a museum? (In the comment field, please explain why or why not.)

Yes/ No / Don't know

Thank you for participating in this research. If you have any additional comments, please add them below.

Additional Comments:

## Appendix B: Survey Questions about *Discover Nikkei*

### 1. Introduction

Thank you for your interest in this research about the Japanese American National Museum's "Discover Nikkei."

Please review the survey consent terms below and, if you agree to them and are over 18 years of age, check "yes" to proceed. You may exit the survey at any time by clicking "Exit this Survey" (at the top right of the page). Your answers on previous pages will be saved.

All questions are optional.

Terms of survey:

This is a research project being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies (principal investigator) and Amelia Wong (student investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you use or have used social media - digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people - developed or used by a museum. The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of such media on museums' visitors and practices in order to critique and possibly improve the latter. This knowledge is being sought for Ms. Wong's dissertation in the field of American studies.

This research process involves answering questions on a survey accessible through [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). It should take 15-30 minutes to complete the survey based on the length of your answers. The questions address demographics (Internet access, location, date of birth, race/ethnicity, gender, income level, schooling, occupation); your use and opinions of social media applications developed/used by museums; and, your use of social media in general.

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. Any electronic files will only be accessible to Ms. Wong on an encrypted, password-protected computer. Once the survey has been completed, the browser window will close automatically and respondents will not be able to access the survey.

To help protect your confidentiality, you may choose not to answer the identity information or request a pseudonym. Ms. Wong's dissertation and any other material (such as articles or conference papers) published from this research seeks to protect you to the maximum extent you desire. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigators learn more about digital media and outreach practices for museums. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of people's experiences with social media used by museums.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

This research is being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies, Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Mary Corbin Sies at University of Maryland, Department of American Studies, 1101 Holzapfel Hall, College Park, MD 20742; (301) 405-1361; sies@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (301) 405-0678; irb@deans.umd.edu.

This research has been approved according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

1. By checking "yes", you are indicating that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and, you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

If you are not at least 18 years of age or do not agree with the terms of this survey, please exit the survey immediately.

## **2. Demographic Information**

This section of the survey aims to collect demographic information about people featured in the Japanese American National Museum's "Discover Nikkei".

1. Name

2. May the researchers contact you with possible follow-up questions?  
If yes, please provide your e-mail address:

3. Primary device you use to access the Internet:

Home computer / Work computer / School computer / Library computer /  
Internet café computer / Mobile phone / PDA / MP3 player

4. Type of Internet connection for primary device:

Dial-up/ DSL /Cable modem /Wireless /T-1 or fiber optic / Don't know

5. City and state (or province and country, etc.) where you primarily access the Internet:

6. Year of birth:

7. Gender:

8. Race/ethnicity:

9. Education (last level completed):

Middle school / High school / 2-year college / 4-year college / Graduate school (professional, medical, etc.)

10. Occupation:

11. Estimated Annual Income:

Less than \$25,000/ \$25,000-\$40,000 / \$40,000-60,000 / \$60,000-100,000 / more than \$100,000

### **3. Discover Nikkei**

This section is about your experience with the Japanese American National Museum's "Discover Nikkei".

1. How did you first hear about Discover Nikkei?

2. Please check all that apply:

I have read items on Discover Nikkei (DN).

I have written articles for DN.

I have posted to the bulletin board of DN.

I have browsed/searched the Nikkei Album of DN.

I have contributed to the Nikkei Album.

I have created a collection using the Nikkei Album.

I have used the materials form the Nikkei Album for other projects.

I have listened to/watch personal histories on DN.

I have used the educational resources on DN.

I have commented on items on DN.

3. How often do you read/browse/write for/etc. Discover Nikkei?

4. Why do you read/browse/write for/etc. Discover Nikkei?
5. Do you feel you get something out of reading/browsing/writing for/etc. Discover Nikkei? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)  
Yes/ No / Don't know
6. What do you feel is the purpose of Discover Nikkei? Do you feel that you are contributing to that purpose when you use it?
7. Do you promote/share Discover Nikkei to others? (Check all that apply. In the comment field, please explain why you promote/share it or not.)  
Yes, I promote/share it through word-of-mouth (in person or on the phone).  
Yes, I print out the material and share it.  
Yes, I e-mail the material to others.  
Yes, I use the "ShareThis" button (e.g. to post it to Facebook, etc.).  
Yes, I encourage people to join the Discover Nikkei Facebook group and/or follow it on Twitter.  
No, I do not promote/share Discover Nikkei.
8. Are you a member of Discover Nikkei's Facebook group? (In the comment field, please explain why you have or have not joined.)\  
Yes / No / Don't know
9. Do you follow Discover Nikkei on Twitter?  
(In the comment field, please explain why or why not.)  
Yes / No / Don't know
10. Does Discover Nikkei represent a community to you? Why or why not? If you feel it does represent a community, do you feel like a member of it?
11. Does the Japanese American National Museum represent a community to you?  
(In the comment field, please explain why or why not.)  
Yes / No / Don't know
12. Has Discover Nikkei encouraged you to find out what other ways the Japanese American National Museum is using social media?  
Yes / No / Don't know
13. How often have you visited the Japanese American National Museum in person?  
Once / Twice / Three or more times / Never
14. Does reading/using/etc. Discover Nikkei make you more or less likely to physically visit the Japanese American National Museum?  
Yes/ No / No effect
15. How often have you visited the Japanese American National Museum's website?

Once / Twice / Three or more times / Never

16. Does reading/using/etc. Discover Nikkei make you more or less likely to visit the Japanese American National Museum's website?

More likely / Less likely / No effect

17. Has Discover Nikkei changed your definition/expectations of museums?

(In the comment field, please explain your answer.)

Yes / No / Don't know

#### **4. Social Media Use**

This section is about your use of social media, defined for the purpose of this survey as digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people.

1. What social media platforms do you use? (Check as many as apply.)

Email / Chat (e.g. AIM, iChat, etc.) / Blogger / Wordpress / LiveJournal / Xanga / Facebook / MySpace / Orkut / LinkedIn / Ning / Twitter / FriendFeed / Flickr / YouTube Digg / Reddit / Mixx / Stumbleupon / Technorati / Live (Microsoft) / Delicious / Diigo / Wikipedia / Wikis / Second Life / Other (please specify)

2. Which of your choices in the question above do you use the most frequently?

3. How often do you use them? (That is, every day? A few times a week? A few times a month? Etc.)

4. Why do you use these media?

5. Do you feel like you are part of a community by using this media? (In the comment field, please explain your answer.)

Yes / No / Don't know

6. How do you define "community"?

#### **5. Museum Use**

This is the final section of this survey. It concerns your use of museums.

1. Before you learned of Discover Nikkei, were you aware that museums are using social media like blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.?

Yes/ No / Don't recall

2. Please check all that apply: (If you check any of the first 3 answers, please specify which museums and media in the comment field.)

I read social media content (e.g. posted on blogs, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) produced by museums.

I subscribe to social media content produced by museums.

I contribute (e.g. comment, upload photos, etc.) to social media content produced by museums.

I do none of the above.

3. How often during a year do you visit a museum?
4. What type of museum(s) do you visit? (Check all that apply.)  
art / children's/ city / historic house / history / natural history / science /  
technology / Other (please specify)
5. Why do you visit museums?
6. How often during a year do you visit a museum's website?
7. What type of museum websites do you visit? (Check all that apply.)  
art / children's/ city / historic house / history / natural history / science /  
technology / Other (please specify)
8. Why do you use museum websites?
9. Are you a member of a museum? (In the comment field, please explain why or why not.)  
Yes/ No / Don't know

Thank you for participating in this research. If you have any additional comments, please add them below.

Additional Comments:

## Appendix C: Survey questions about *Science Buzz* Website

### 1. Introduction

Thank you for your interest in this research about the Science Museum of Minnesota's "Science Buzz."

Please review the survey consent terms below and, if you agree to them and are over 18 years of age, check "yes" to proceed. You may exit the survey at any time by clicking "Exit this Survey" (at the top right of the page). Your answers on previous pages will be saved.

All questions are optional.

Terms of survey:

This is a research project being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies (principal investigator) and Amelia Wong (student investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you use or have used social media - digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people - developed or used by a museum. The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of such media on museums' visitors and practices in order to critique and possibly improve the latter. This knowledge is being sought for Ms. Wong's dissertation in the field of American studies.

This research process involves answering questions on a survey accessible through [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). It should take 15-30 minutes to complete the survey based on the length of your answers. The questions address demographics (Internet access, location, date of birth, race/ethnicity, gender, income level, schooling, occupation); your use and opinions of social media applications developed/used by museums; and, your use of social media in general.

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. Any electronic files will only be accessible to Ms. Wong on an encrypted, password-protected computer. Once the survey has been completed, the browser window will close automatically and respondents will not be able to access the survey.

To help protect your confidentiality, you may choose not to answer the identity information or request a pseudonym. Ms. Wong's dissertation and any other material (such as articles or conference papers) published from this research seeks to protect you to the maximum extent you desire. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental

authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigators learn more about digital media and outreach practices for museums. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of people's experiences with social media used by museums.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

This research is being conducted by Mary Corbin Sies, Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Mary Corbin Sies at University of Maryland, Department of American Studies, 1101 Holzapfel Hall, College Park, MD 20742; (301) 405-1361; sies@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (301) 405-0678; irb@deans.umd.edu.

This research has been approved according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

1. By checking "yes", you are indicating that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and, you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

If you are not at least 18 years of age or do not agree with the terms of this survey, please exit the survey immediately.

## **2. Demographic Information**

This section concerns demographic information about people who interact with the Science Museum of Minnesota's "Science Buzz."

1. May the researchers contact you with possible follow-up questions?

If yes, please provide your e-mail address:

2. Primary device you use to access the Internet:

Home computer / Work computer / School computer / Public library computer  
/ Internet café computer / Mobile phone / Game console / MP3 player

3. Type of Internet connection for primary device:  
Dial-up/ DSL /Cable modem /Wireless /T-1 or fiber optic / Don't know
4. City and state (or province and country, etc.) where you primarily access the Internet:
5. Year of birth:
6. Gender:
7. Race/ethnicity:
8. Education (last level completed):  
Middle school / High school / 2-year college / 4-year college / Graduate school (professional, medical, etc.)
9. Occupation:
10. Estimated Annual Income:  
Less than \$25,000/ \$25,000-\$40,000 / \$40,000-60,000 / \$60,000-100,000 / more than \$100,000

### **3. Science Buzz**

This section is about your experience with the Science Museum of Minnesota's "Science Buzz".

1. How did you first hear about Science Buzz?
2. Please check all activities that apply to your engagement with Science Buzz:
  - I have read posts.
  - I have read comments.
  - I have posted entries.
  - I have commented on entries.
  - I have browsed the site.
  - I have asked the Scientist on the Spot a question.
  - I have participated in polls.
  - I have written a label for an Object of the Month.
  - I have served as a mentor.
  - Other (please specify)
3. How often do you visit Science Buzz?
4. Why do you engage with Science Buzz?

5. Does the chance to earn points for activities on Science Buzz motivate you to post entries, etc.?

Yes/ No

6. Are you a registered member of Science Buzz? Why or why not?

Yes / No

7. Do you promote Science Buzz to others?

Yes, I promote/share it through conversation (in person or on the phone).

Yes, I print out the material and share it.

Yes, I e-mail the material to others.

Yes, I share links via Facebook, StumbleUpon, etc.

Yes, I encourage people to join the Science Buzz Facebook group and/or follow it on Twitter.

No, I do not promote/share Science Buzz.

If no, why not?

8. Science Buzz describes itself as “A Science Museum of Minnesota Community.”

Does Science Buzz represent a community to you?

Yes / No / Don't know

Why or why not? If you feel Science Buzz does represent a community, do you feel like a member of it?

9. Does using Science Buzz make you feel like a part of the community with the Science Museum of Minnesota?

Yes / No / Don't know

Why or why not?

10. Please indicate if you subscribe to any of the following:

Fan of Science Buzz on Facebook.

Follow Science Buzz on Twitter.

Subscribe to or Friend of Science Buzz YouTube channel.

Fan of Science Museum of Minnesota on Facebook.

Follow Science Museum of Minnesota on Twitter.

Contact of Science Museum of Minnesota on Flickr.

11. How often have you visited the Science Museum of Minnesota in person?

Once / Twice / Three or more times / Never

12. Has engaging with Science Buzz made you more or less likely to physically visit the Science Museum of Minnesota?

More likely / Less likely / No effect / Don't know

13. Has using Science Buzz made you more or less likely to visit the Science Museum of Minnesota's website?

More likely / Less likely / No effect / Don't know

14. Has engaging with Science Buzz changed your definition/expectations of museums?

Yes / No / Don't know

Why or Why not?

#### **4. Social Media Use**

This section is about your use of social media, defined for the purpose of this survey as digital, networked technologies that allow and encourage communication between people.

1. What social media platforms do you use? (Check as many as apply.)

Email / Chat (e.g. AIM, iChat, etc.) / Blogger / Wordpress / LiveJournal / Xanga / Facebook / MySpace / Orkut / LinkedIn / Ning / Twitter / Flickr / YouTube / Digg / Reddit / Mixx / Stumbleupon / Technorati / Live (Microsoft) / Delicious / Diigo / Wikipedia / Wikis / Second Life / Other (please specify)

2. Which of your choices in the question above do you use the most frequently?

3. How often do you use them?

Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Few times a year

4. Why do you use these media?

5. Do you feel like you are part of a community by using this media?

Yes / No / Don't know

Why or why not?

6. How do you define "community"?

#### **5. Museum Use**

This is the final section of this survey. It concerns your use of museums.

1. Before you learned of Science Buzz, did you know that museums were using social media tools to reach audiences?

Yes/ No / Don't know

2. Please check all that apply:

I read social media content (e.g. posted on blogs, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) produced by museums.

I subscribe to social media content produced by museums.

I contribute (e.g. comment, upload photos, etc.) to social media content produced by museums.  
I do none of the above.

3. How often during a year do you visit a museum?
4. Why do you visit museums?
5. How often during a year do you visit museum websites?
6. Why do you use museum websites?
7. Are you a member of a museum?  
Yes/ No / Don't know  
Why or why not?

Thank you for participating in this research. If you have any additional comments, please add them below.

Additional Comments:

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