CONTINUITY ACROSS CHANGE? WHAT MEMORY INSTITUTIONS NEED TO LEARN FOR THE FUTURE

Mar Dixon[1]

Sharing and reusing cultural heritage on social media

SL: […] Through digitization, museums have started to make their digitized objects freely available and are widely sharing them on the Internet. Museums have embraced social media to share their collections and to engage with audiences beyond their depots, exhibition halls and catalogues. At the same time, crowd-curated initiatives on social media have emerged in the context of cultural heritage. You are an experienced and well-known initiator of several of these types of projects. So, when I look at your blog on your website or at your Twitter account, the first thing that strikes me is the incredible amount of social media events and hashtags that are trending worldwide. This is why I would like to talk with you today about your social media initiatives to learn more about how memory work and safeguarding cultural heritage has changed. So, to get started with the interview, my first question would be what projects are you working on?

MD: My answer to your first question is @52museums, which is happening all year. I currently officially manage #AskACuratorDay, which is for museums, art galleries, heritage sites, science museums and all of it. I am currently working on a hackathon remix at a museum in London which hopefully is going to happen by the end of 2016.[2] And I have a couple of other projects which are non-disclosure that I can't talk about [laughs].

SL: Okay, this seems to me like a nice mix of upcoming activities. Let's talk a bit more about @52museums. What is @52museums about?

MD: @52museums is an Instagram and Twitter account where once a week heritage sites, science museums or whatever cultural venue take over the account on Instagram and Twitter. It started Jan 4th 2016. It has 16,000 followers now on Instagram. And it keeps growing. It's been featured in a couple of articles like on *Creative Review*[3] and it is international. And we'll go from Germany to the US to Canada to Italy, Australia has had it, New York has had it. Last week was interesting because it was a medical museum and two

from the UK, one shared it with one in Denmark. It is just another way for museums to play on social media that they can't do on their own channels.

SL: How did you get started with the social media initiatives? Why are you using social media in the first place? And since when?

MD: This is just great timing … You have to remember my background is in IT. So, when I was in the States, I used to be a network administrator. So being on pulse and online was never unique for me. I've had an e-mail address since 1988. So, when things transitioned from having forums and communicating with these other sites to social media, it was just natural progression for me. I had a website back in 1995. I moved to the UK in 2000, I did websites and network admin things at first but then I had my daughter in 2002. Going to museums as a mum and what that meant for me was different than what museums thought it should be. And then social media happened. It was just a natural progression to move from an outdated website as such to Twitter and facebook to engage with people […].

Yes, it was easier to engage with people that way. It was a bigger platform. I continued to blog, but I changed my blog to something different. Yeah and it's just, it is a good way to kind of listen to people which a lot of people don't do on social media which is a waste of time really. But it's also a good way to broadcast. It's a working term but it's also to say you have this concept or you have this idea, throw it out there and see what people think of it before investing time and doing it … So, this is why I use social media [laughs].

I always say the platforms will change but the concept is always the same. Whatever you put into it you'll get it. If you engage with the people you'll get something out of it. It's people who sit and are waiting for these wonderful things to happen that don't get it. Thousands of people walk through their [museum] doors for whatever reason, but, yeah, they never engage in any kind of conversation. It's trying to remember social media is social. So, there you asked me that element of it … which is where people fail [laughs].

SL: Do you think it's really work or let's say an effort to engage with people, to respond to what they're saying on social media? I mean, let's look at the example of #AskACuratorDay.

MD: #AskACuratorDay is quite a funny one! For #AskACuratorDay, for most of my events it's one day but it's a pick and choose thing. If a museum has an exhibition opening and they're just like oh, you know: »We're just going to get stressed out of it«, don't get involved in it, that's fine! Take a year off and do what museums like last year did: They contacted us and said: »You know we're going through a transition. We don't actually have a curator right now, but we don't want to announce it.« And that's fine. But to #AskACuratorDay or any kind of questions what I always advise museums and heritage sites to do is that you don't have to respond to all of them, but just pick a few out throughout the day just to acknowledge that you are listening because if somebody says something that didn't interest you and you don't respond to

them, their natural reaction would probably be to check out your timelines and see when was the last time you were active. And I think if you're wanting to respond to somebody else they're going to say: »Oh, okay that is social!«, they don't want to answer everybody but they get to that person and you know that's fair enough. It's people – when you look at their timeline and you then notice they don't respond to anyone but they're talking about marketing, or they're talking about tickets that they're selling. That's a major turn-off! It's like going to a pub and just sitting next to somebody who is bragging about themselves constantly. You'd walk away from it.

But, yeah, the commitment is however much you want to do it. Some days I say to people like the social media people who work in museums and heritage sites that although they are busy they can grab a tweet in between meetings and just say: »Thanks for visiting!«, or you know, »Glad you had a good time!« You don't have to be serious about it, you don't have to be like, you know, compassionate or sincere. Just acknowledge that they tweeted you. And I usually advise people to look at transportation such as *Virgin* or *London Midlands* or *British Airways* on social media to see how they handle social media because they get a lot of negative but they get a lot of positive also. So, it's a good way to engage on how you can do certain things.

SL: Yes, I guess to get an idea how to reconnect with the public. That's right.

MD: Yeah.

SL: Okay, just a quick question: Who is »we«? You're obviously collaborating with other people, initiatives or institutions.

MD: Who do I collaborate with?

SL: Yes, because at some point you mentioned: »It's us doing it.« So, who is »us«?

MD: It's a horrible thing. So, no … yeah, it's me, it's just me. #AskACurator is just me. All my hashtags are just me. But the reason I say »we« is because without the museums and the public getting involved none of the hashtags will matter. So, for me, I can't take any credit for the hashtags, it is about the people who get involved. So, I've got used to saying ›us‹ or ›we‹ [laughs].

The Open Community Lab for commonplace practices of reusing cultural heritage

SL: Okay, thank you. That's good to know [laughs]. And the hackathon in the museum in London is kind of a different initiative, isn't it?

MD: Yeah, that's completely different. We have a community, an *Open Community Lab*[4]. And we'll invite people to apply to be part of this. We call it a remix rather than a hackathon so it is not just about coding. So, it is seven skills that we are asking people to identify themselves with and come in. And then

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4   URL: http://opencommunitylab.co.uk/ (access date: 9.8.2017).

a team consists of one person from each skill set and they can build whatever prototype they want as long as they build a prototype within three days.

SL: Okay, only within 3 days? That's quick! In Germany, for example, there is a cultural hackathon called *Coding Da Vinci*, which bridges cultural heritage institutions and its open cultural data sets with coders and hardware developers. The hackathon, however, runs for six to ten weeks in total.

MD: Yeah, we stayed away from coders. The coders and developers that we request are basically just people on the team that ensure people are going in the right direction but we actually have a team of experts. So, graphic design is one of them, communication specialist is another one, content expert is another one. Content can be whatever, it could be history related or specific to certain things. We wanted a variety. So, you don't want a team of just coders. We want people who bring in the fun element, the family element or the graphic designer element. And yeah, it is rapid prototyping. So, they've never met each other. They meet each other for the first time on Friday and by Sunday night they have a prototype, a working prototype.

SL: Mhm, okay.

MD: That is very quick [laughs]! But as I've said, we have a team of experts, and we coach them, and we have a lot of resources available for them to work with.

SL: Okay, so what resources do you work with? Digital resources?

MD: No, I mean physical elements, 3D printers, Fablab, we'll have a material sewing machine, things, anything they need to get their prototype to what it should look like.

SL: Who else is taking part in the remix event besides coders and graphic designers? What are these seven required skills? Do you need to have a tech background per se?

MD: No to a tech background. We ask for: coders, communication, content experts, graphic designers, tech experts, fabrication and dreams to sign up. The idea is that anyone and everyone can pitch an idea to remix an object or exhibition within a museum but then they have to find one of each skill set to become a team. If they don't, they have to find a team to take them [as their own skill set]. It's tense on the Friday during the team making and pitching time but we believe innovation doesn't come from being nice. You have to have compassion and truly believe in new ways of thinking. While the person who pitches the idea usually feels they ›own‹ it, they soon find out they have to work as a team to make the prototype happen. The brilliant thing is usually what is pitched on the Friday is nothing like what we see on the Sunday. And that for us shows growth in the people which is often more important than the prototype.

»I'm just a troublemaker«

SL: I see. Thank you for the explanation. I also ask myself how you see yourself within the field of heritage work. I mean, there are various stakeholders at play. On the one hand there are memory institutions, but also initiatives like *Europeana* that are, let's say, aggregating data but also creating thematic online collections. But there are also, I'd say, cultural enterprises, such as *Promoter*, you might know that one in Italy too, that are actually bringing together their competencies and skills in the area of ICT[5] for memory institutions. And there is you, let's say it like that. Who are you? What role do you play in this context, in the field of digital cultural heritage?

MD: I'm just a troublemaker, really! As an outsider, I'm really lucky that I get to challenge and push them [museums] into a direction they probably feel uncomfortable with. But because I am not part of the sector they can't fire me.

SL: Okay [laughs].

MD: So, it's a good advantage that I have. And I don't have to worry about a step you don't want to do as such. The fact that I get to do this internationally helps to get more people involved. You know, it starts off with so many of the big players involved in it already that they would be embarrassed not to get involved as well. It kind of sounds like bullying and I'm not some kind of a bully. But I am trying to push it, the staff, into a direction where … the public already is there, the public don't want to give up on museums. Museums and heritage sites need to stop looking at their clock because museums and heritage sites work at such a different time than everyone else! Something that should take maybe a month will take almost a year for that sector. And we're losing, you know, we're losing customers, we're losing people who were our advocates – they are giving up on us because we're living in such a fast-paced time now. And museums aren't reaching up, keeping up. I'm in a fortunate position where I work with tech and other sectors where I can fold in some of the knowledge that I'm learning in the other sectors to kind of hold a mirror up to the [museum] sector and say: »Look, this is what's happening. Don't come crying to me in 5 years when there are no customers left. I am trying to give you stuff on all that matters for free«, I don't get paid for this, you know, »for free, I am trying to do this for you guys!« So, I, yeah, I am basically an annoying little step sister at a wedding that you really didn't want to invite [laughs].

SL: Why do you think we need a »troublemaker« or advocate like you?

MD: I think it is easy for any sector to pat themselves on the back and get used to things you know like: »You're all doing a good job. We're trying this and we're trying that.« And you need someone to be forthright and honest and who knows it enough. I mean, I've never worked in a museum so it's

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5   ICT stands for information and communication technology.

funny for me to speak on all these topics. But I visit them! So actually my role is more important than the curator role in it. So, it's relevant because sometimes they forget that the public … they yeah, they don't forget their mission! They just forget *why* they're doing it. And it should be, you know, for all museums the mission should be to share the knowledge that they have. It should be, but they can have all the knowledge in the world yet if there's no public to share it with it's redundant!

Continuity across change?

SL: Okay, we talked a bit about the fact that museums have embraced social media even though there is still room for improvement. Where else do you see potential for museums in the future?

MD: Well, websites are vital – as long as they are relevant; blogging I always say is very very vital to capture content. Even though you know the platform that I blog on has changed, I've consistently blogged, you know, for over 20 years now [laughs]. God, I'm old! [laughs] But the knowledge is still out there somewhere. Blogging is a very good way to share, blogs going with a website – that's an imperative!

Instagram is getting up there right now. YouTube, doing short little videos and putting them on to YouTube is becoming a really good one! And I think we're getting a little bit better at not needing professionally done filming now. You know, people are realising that actually it's better if it's just on your phone and it's like two minutes rather than a professionally done one at six minutes because by then our attention spans are gone. But it's worth reflecting that some museums are doing excellent with Snapchat and other ones, you know, they embarrass the hell out of themselves if they even tried to do Snapchat because for their collections it just isn't right.

SL: Mhm, and what about wearable tech? I don't know, is this already a topic? What do you think?

MD: Yes, yes! Well, wearable tech is a topic. That is a little bit different in our memory as such. The thing with wearables tech right now is – in museums and heritage sites – is they're not even really acknowledging the fact that this exists. But yeah, thousands of people are coming through the door wearing a Fitbit or wearing a wearable tech, a smart watch. And what we did before was fail completely when smartphones came out because we just pushed them aside and said: »That's for rich people only. There is only a certain amount of people for those. So, let's just ignore that!« Picture that, everybody has a smartphone, yeah, even nine-year olds. And we're rushing to do something with these smartphones, acknowledge that we know that they exist and we're making apps. But who downloads apps, right? So, yes, there are those few people who will raise their hand but every once in a while the majority of the room is, nobody does unless it's an app that does multiple things, so it has multiple museums on there, like the *Google Art Project* or, you know, or some-

thing similar. Research on wearable tech right now, with smart watches, with the Fitbits, they're doing what they did with the smartphones in completely ignoring it right now. Which is going to hurt in the long run.

SL: So, they are basically ignoring wearable tech like the smartphones earlier, is this what you are saying. I am sorry the reception got cut off again.

MD: So, yeah, they didn't pay attention to smartphones until it was too late. And then everybody went out and tried to build apps, which doesn't work. And now they're ignoring the smart watches and Fitbits that people are wearing and there is not enough research being developed into what can we learn from that. Can we look at the Fitbit somehow and capture data that they liked, the art they're standing in front of. Now, it's a little bit creepy but we can anonymise it, we don't have to say it was Mar Dixon standing there. We can just say that a person was standing there for x amount of time. That probably meant that they liked it, you know. But we're doing none of that research. I'm lying, I'm looking into one piece of research with that but it shouldn't be me doing it, it should be the sector doing it [laughs].

SL: So, you're saying that memory institutions are struggling to keep up with social and technological change? Did I get you right?

MD: Yeah, I feel they hold on to the glory of what works. And they're not always completely honest about what doesn't work and how they can improve on it. They kind of go: »Okay, we tried that.« It didn't work, they quit, and never talk again. Or they do that other thing where they say: »Oh, it didn't work. I'm going to go to every single conference and talk about why it didn't work.« [laughs]

SL: What do you think would then be a sustainable way of safeguarding heritage in times of social change? What are your thoughts about »sustainability«?

MD: There is no one answer for that because, yeah, the thing with the word »sustainable« for me is that it's foolproof. And we don't have that yet because our frameworks aren't ready because of the technology and because of, you know, a lot of things, politics, whatever else you might want to throw into it. We are ever changing. So, the only sustainable thing we can do is change with it. And unfortunately, we just don't do that! I would love to say that working with young people will make us more sustainable. But even the young people who are going to university and to school are being brought up in this manufactured way which sounds really really horrible. I don't mean to come out and sound negative with that but the curriculum started in such a way – it's almost, you know, you pass the test so you're smart instead of getting you to be creative in thinking. But there are very resilient ideas that are coming out from people that are not being listened to. And to be sustainable, we need to be able to fold these new ideas in and not just go: »Oh, you don't know what we're talking about, you don't have a degree!« … And we tend to do that a lot,

we tend to go: »Oh, you haven't worked in a museum, so your opinion doesn't matter«, whereas actually outsiders are usually the most insightful.

But this listening and actually not just thinking about it, doing some stuff around what changes need to happen so that the situation is going to be more sustainable. Because at least the public will see that you're trying, that there is an effort being made whereas right now we just see this vicious circle of: »We have a thing that isn't working. Let's put money into this. We have some ideas now. Oh, it didn't work. This isn't working.« And we're just going round in circles and it's just being seen as a waste of money. There are pockets of things that are working but nothing is sustainable for a whole sector! And I think that's one of our issues also: that something might work for the *British Museum* or another museum but it is not going to work for a more contemporary art gallery or, you know, a museum in Ohio. So, we have to look for what your own personal solutions are but look how wrong the issue is and how we can fix it and how we can make these changes work for you. And right now, we just don't … we concentrate on the wrong things a lot of the time.

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SL: Thank you for your time, Mar! It was nice talking to you again.

MD: No worries! Do you have enough information?

SL: For now, I think I do [laughs]. Thank you for the interview!

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