



Pulling Back the Curtain: Turning Internal Content into External Exhibitions on the Web

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By utilizing an existing social application, SFMOMA creates the opportunity to expand the reach of its collections and the life of its content... without a significant impact on the workload of content providers.

The advent of social media and participatory websites poses exciting opportunities for museum professionals. The possibility of generating audience engagement, expanding the reach of our collections, enabling participation, and sharing larger stories is exciting to think about. Too often, though, we are told there simply isn't the time or money to produce additional web content or create the infrastructure required to fulfill our lofty goals. This article offers a valuable and promising retort to the naysayers. We believe that most museums already possess a vast range of appropriate content. Museums have not only written significant amounts of text, taken large numbers of digital photographs, created short films, audioscapes, and multimedia presentations, but they continue to do so. There are exhibit proposals, creative briefs, design sketches, internal discussions, interviews, peer reviews, material testing, storyboards, and all other parts of the exhibition development process that we produce every day. These items are compelling content that draws back the curtain on the exhibition process. When appropriately distributed, they can form the basis of a participatory exchange between the museum and a growing community of participants in web-based social media. What is more, many of the tools required to distribute this content are already developed and often free to use. What follows, then, is a survey of some of the most promising projects we have found to demonstrate our point. We recognize this survey is limited in scope, but believe these examples make clear the ways in which museums can maximize existing efforts while expanding not only the breadth of their audience but also the life and scope of their exhibitions.

SFMOMA and Pinterest

One such endeavor is found on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Pinterest page. This project enlivens web content through a variety of contextual cues, building exhibitions around particular themes such as "Friday the 13th," "It's Hip to Be Square," "Mothers put the MOM in SFMOMA." The titles provide minimal curatorial context, demonstrating on one level how little content is actually needed to create a story. But the project does not end there. Most entries include links to additional SFMOMA content. Some lead to articles written for the SFMOMA website, others to labels that share general information about the object and the artist, and for some pieces, an in-depth discussion of the work. By utilizing an existing social application, SFMOMA creates the opportunity to expand the reach of its collections and the life of its content. More importantly, by linking to existing materials, the museum is able to achieve this without a significant impact on the workload of content providers.

Connections at the Met

The web can also be a site to reimagine content and uncover new insights from existing resources. One project that we believe to be exceptional in this regard is *Connections*, produced by New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met). Like SFMOMA's Pinterest collections, *Connections* is organized by theme (e.g., pilgrimage, jewelry, light, city, etc.) but the content features a variety of staff sharing their personal interpretations of these themes as objects from the museum's collection appear on screen in elegant procession. There is a high level of quality and finish to this project,

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and the result is beautiful and personal storytelling.

We can glean a number of important lessons from the *Connections* project. First, the range of voices includes volunteers, conservators, security guards, and others. Offering their own object-supported narratives, this alone reduces the cultural hegemony of the lone, authoritative, curatorial voice, a goal of most 21st century museums. This democratization of curation, if you will, can reinvigorate a museum's collection with new insights and interpretation. Equally important, *Connections* reveals another layer of museum work to the public, introducing them to the various careers and specialized skills that exist in any large museum.

The People's Choice at the Autry National Center

To generate and repurpose content, museums can also look for opportunities to encourage public participation. One successful approach familiar to us has come in celebration of the Autry National Center's twenty-fifth anniversary. A competition on our website allows visitors to vote on a pre-selected assortment of artifacts. Additionally, we enable traditional visitors to do the same in our entry lobby. Three new objects appear each month, and visitors can see the results of the previous month's voting on the web. This November, the month of our anniversary, we will announce the "Top 25 Objects." The objects, selected by a range of Autry staff, are accompanied by a personal statement explaining why staff think they are important or meaningful. Included with this statement is the employee's name, title, and job description.

On first glance, the project is not unlike *Connections*, allowing a variety of staff to share their insights and introducing the public to roles of various employees. What makes the two projects significantly different is the inclusion of public participation. To date, the project has generated hundreds of votes each month, with a steady increase in participation from month to month.

Instagram and the Los Angeles Conservancy

Perhaps our favorite audience driven web project, *Curating the City*, comes from the Los Angeles Conservancy. This project quite literally turns a contest into a visitor curated exhibition. An advocacy group for the preservation and conservation of Los Angeles' architectural treasures, the Conservancy's educational programs have, in some sense, turned much of the City of Angels into a museum. While visitors participate in Conservancy tours, they are encouraged to post pictures of their favorite buildings on Instagram, tagging @laconservancy. To be sure, the Conservancy staff determines a winner of each phase of the project, thus exercising some curatorial control. Nevertheless, it is a heartening example of repurposing social media tools to share the curatorial voice with the public.

Documentary by Committee: KCET's Artbound

Perhaps the most complex and integrated project we encountered comes not from a museum, but from a public television station. In developing *Artbound*, KCET (an independent public television station) created a journalism project that utilizes social media, the web, social networks, crowdsourcing, competition,

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Curating the City...turns a contest into a visitor curated exhibition.

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and a broad array of content experts. In practice, the production of *Artbound* utilizes a stable of journalists and writers submitting articles on topics ranging from Architecture, to Cultural Politics, Literature, Music, and beyond. Weekly, the site pairs two extant articles—one with high levels of readership, the other chosen by *Artbound's* editorial team—and asks the public to vote on their favorite. The winning story then becomes a brief documentary, again shared online. Ultimately, a collection of documentaries are combined, adding introductions from the writers, to become a completed hour of broadcast television. The project offers a unique level of transparency by sharing ideas early in their development and allowing for public participation, then visibly measuring public interest before creating the final product.

To be clear, *Artbound* is not without its challenges. Its architecture fails to communicate clearly the purpose of the project. One can easily get lost in the array of stories or overlook the integration of content providers, editors and audience into one creative unit, and its voting tallies are fairly small, just a few hundred per competition, with no signs of progressive growth from project to project. Still, museums should take note of how the process leverages social networks of various content makers, thus expanding KCET's reach. Though votes matter a great deal, KCET maintains editorial control. Built-in metrics gauge public interest throughout the project, informing the final product well before final commitment. Most importantly, process itself becomes a product. *Artbound* recognizes that the energy employed in creating a product is of equal importance to the final broadcast piece.

Twitter, Kickstarter, Cowbird...

Still more tools exist to help us share information in new ways while bringing the audience into the process. National Geographic partnered with the web-based Cowbird to capture and share personal stories about life on the Pine Ridge reservation. The Architecture and Design Museum (A+D) in Los Angeles utilized Kickstarter to fund the exhibition *Never Built: Los Angeles*, gauging both public interest and commitment before engaging in the expensive and labor intensive work of exhibition development. The Getty Artists' Program recently worked with Sam Durant on What #isamuseum?, utilizing Twitter to gather data and share responses.

Aspects from any of these models can generate audience interest and measure response throughout the life of a project. Project proposals, object lists, narrative drafts, even design diagrams and inspirations—all offer opportunities to peek behind the museum walls and allow for public participation. Using social media tools, exhibition teams can expand the conversation with audiences while gauging public preferences and interest.

So What Would it Look Like?

Merely listing a range of possible tools can offer solutions to the complex and multilayered challenge of web exhibition. Far more challenging and salutary would be an effort on our part to articulate just how we might use these tools in our work at the Autry. We did ask for the opportunity to write this article so it is incumbent upon us to take on the challenge. What follows below is a thought experiment and perhaps a memo to our colleagues about how we might employ these techniques on an upcoming exhibition.

This exercise can help us prototype experiences while increasing awareness about the upcoming exhibition. In essence, marketing and evaluation efforts become one.

We have reached a milestone in the development process of a new ethnobotanical garden at the Autry. Repurposing an existing outdoor space, this exhibition will focus on ways in which the first peoples of California have used and continue to use plants and water. A narrative has been completed to complement a well-developed set of conceptual drawings. What if the discussions and activities we are about to embark on were to form the basis of several social media projects?

As drawings are further developed, we could share them on the Autry blog, accompanied by the exhibition narrative. Conversations with our Native consultants could accompany renderings on our Facebook page. Their statements on the natural environment, the growth of Los Angeles, and potential environmental threats have been valuable and on occasion even poetic. Using Twitter or Cowbird to share these comments would extend the life and influence of their words beyond the conference room and into the broader world. In fact, sharing this information is a core goal of our garden project. As we finalize our plant list, a Pinterest collection could share images, with plant names in a variety of Native languages and a bit of information about their uses.

By posing the right questions, site metrics and existing feedback tools can measure audience interest and responses. While

there are a range of considerations in this project, most notably our need to pay careful attention to the input and interests of our Native consultants, publicly sharing this information can help us better understand our potential audience and test how to best communicate information. Evaluating feedback can inform development as we experiment with label copy and test storytelling devices. This exercise can help us prototype experiences while increasing awareness about the upcoming exhibition. In essence, marketing and evaluation efforts become one.

The concept sounds simple. Content is gathered from our process and gets shared through existing resources. We simultaneously create feedback for and awareness of our projects. We recognize that we will encounter challenges. After all, pulling back the curtain and revealing the sometimes messy and contested work of exhibition creation is a little frightening. This is not a model museums traditionally employ, and we recognize that a few of our colleagues may resist its transparency. Still, this is an exciting opportunity to rethink the nature of exhibitions, the purpose of process, and even the role of the 21st century museum. We believe that this kind of engagement can attract new audiences, advance a new understanding of the importance of museums, and create true dialogue between museums and their publics. ✨

Sites Referenced:
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