THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: NEW MEDIA, THE PRESS & THE MUSEUM

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

Mike Ananny is a Ph.D. candidate (Communication) at Stanford University and a 2006 Trudeau Scholar.
Kate Hennessy is a Ph.D. candidate (Anthropology) at the University of British Columbia and a 2006 Trudeau Scholar.

As newspapers and museums adopt and adapt emerging technologies they shape and reflect our collective identities in new ways. Public consultations, focus groups, editorial pages and community journalisms are being replaced with collaborative, distributive practices that make possible – but do not ensure – new relationships between two competing democratic principles: the *professional expertise* of public stewards responsible for making decisions about how to manage public goods, versus the *participation* of publics in the activities offered to them by public professional communicators like editors, technology designers and curators.

To better understand how The Press and The Museum are changing, we organized and chaired a symposium investigating how emerging technologies that make possible the collaborative construction of knowledge (*e.g.,* online social networks, web-based relational databases, digital image archives, collaborative hand-held and mobile devices, "folksonomies" and socially constructed indexes, individual and collaborative blogs) are impacting the public institutions we use to imagine, enact and reproduce our social and political lives.[1]

The questions that guided the symposium included: how are the curatorial and editorial judgments of museum practitioners influenced by these emerging technologies? How are two knowledge producers in particular – aboriginal communities and bloggers – working within and challenging the traditional structures of museums and newspapers? How is such knowledge production reshaping what we consider to be "public goods" and who we believe has the authority to make and manage them? Finally, recalling Benedict Anderson's argument that public institutions shape how we imagine our communities, how might we design and use technologies in museums and newspapers to reflect the values that we want in our various collectives?

Each symposium speaker spoke from particular theoretical and methodological perspectives but all attendees worked to discover hybrid themes that intersect The Press, The Museum and emerging technologies. Seven conceptual areas emerged.

1. LANGUAGE MATTERS

Curators and editors signal to visitors and readers what information they think is important and why. Museum collections are classified in ways that both describe and signify – stating an object's characteristics while suggesting its broader aesthetic or historical meanings. Similarly, journalists and editors regularly signal both facts and interpretations, *e.g.,* writing with inverted pyramid structures to highlight the lead or juxtaposing contrasting quotations as a way of claiming objectivity. Both professions simultaneously inform and interpret, stating not only *what* matters but also signaling personal and institutional judgments about *why* it matters. As curators and journalists use new technologies to decentralize their practices and include non-specialists – *e.g.,* asking communities to generate object metadata or publishing citizen journalism – the language of stories and metadata may reveal tensions between professionals' judgments and public participation.

2. PUBLIC PRACTICES

New technologies also make it possible to see professionals at work. At the Museum of Anthropology (UBC) we saw a glass-walled studio in which curators create and archive high-resolution digital images of objects in open view of visitors passing by. We also heard about the power of a different kind of "passing by" – as measured by webpage visits and comments on feedback forums – to influence which stories and issues journalists pursue. Although emerging technologies seem to make museum and news practices increasingly transparent to public viewing, these moves toward openness beg several questions: on what terms are the public allowed to see how a story or exhibit is produced and how are these terms negotiated? How does such transparency in the press and museums impact professional decision-making and, normatively, when *should* their judgments be influenced by publics? Does this new transparency imply a different kind of professional accountability? Do publics have obligations to watch in particular ways, looking out for practices that represent their values and those of people not interested in or able to observe critically?

3. THE NATURE OF SPACE & ATTENTION

Economics and human attention mean that traditional museums and newspapers are, and can be, only so big. But as

museums digitize collections and move them online and as newspapers shift to web-based publication and "citizen journalism", it becomes possible to vastly increase the number of exhibits and stories. What happens to design and publication standards when journalists and curators create more exhibits and publish more stories online? Do they create a surfeit and shift the work of selecting information and interpreting significance to their publics? Should they expand their notions of their professional community, effectively enlarging their staffs by letting non-specialists design exhibits and write stories for them? New technologies may help museums and newspapers expand their offerings and enlarge their audiences, but it is unclear exactly how such growth will or should change professional practices and values.

4. AUTHORITY OF CONVENING

Journalists and curators lack the formal, state-sanctioned credentials that authorize other public-facing professionals (*e.g.,* doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects) to act in the public interest. Instead of official licenses, another kind of authority exists in museums and newsrooms especially important in online environments: the power and responsibility of convening. That is, if a journalist or curator can attract a large, diverse and influential audience, she can claim authority and autonomy from her ability to identify and communicate in ways that interest publics. This kind of authority – earned by garnering the attention of mass publics in online environments and not necessarily from the critical acclaim of peers – suggests that new technologies might make it easier to evaluate professionals according to their public popularity as distinct from the reputations they earn with colleagues or through professional affiliations and awards.

5. ROLE OF THE BACK STORY

Another challenge for journalists and curators is the extent to which they can or should acknowledge the personal and professional contexts in which they work. Should journalists and curators reveal aspects of themselves and their institutions (personal histories, political affiliations, social relationships, business partnerships, economic investments) that might help publics appreciate potential biases? Given how easy it often is to discover an individual's multifaceted identities (through search engines, social networks and blogs), should such information be linked to a curator's exhibit or a reporter's story? How much of the process of preparing a story or exhibit should be made available to readers and visitors? Such transparency might help citizens better appreciate how professionals interpret events and collections, letting non-specialists learn how to participate in the professional rituals of museums and newsrooms. But too much public scrutiny or too many personal revelations may prevent these professionals from feeling like autonomous practitioners acting on a trusting public's behalf.

6. QUESTIONING MOTIVATIONS

People visit museums and read newspapers for different reasons. Part of being a journalist or curator is understanding how to attract readers and visitors – in both online and material contexts. It means knowing not just how many people visit a website or where they come from, but understanding *why* they arrive and how these motivations relate to an institution's goals. Should journalists and curators respond to what readers and visitors *want* to see, accepting that economic viability and popular appeal are essential aspects of competition? Or should they resist market-oriented pressures and focus on what they think publics should know, writing stories and designing exhibits that might not have mass appeal but that they think *should* be made public? And, especially relevant in online contexts where consumers can customize information according to personal interests, how do journalists and curators prevent against the growth of echo chambers in which people only hear what they want to hear? How should journalists and curators write and design for serendipity, helping people stumble upon perspectives online that they might not choose but that they would perhaps encounter while casually flipping through a newspaper or strolling through a museum?

7. MEANINGS OF LOCALITY

Museums and newspapers often serve both local communities and broader audiences. In an effort to support community groups, recognize originating peoples, attract local visitors and differentiate their programs, curators often build collections that focus on regional cultures, histories and languages. Similarly, many newspapers cover local events, people and issues to spur community discourse, attract local advertising and distinguish their product from newspapers focused on larger, more dispersed audiences. How should museums and newspapers retain these senses of locality in online environments? How should they navigate between the interests and demands of their traditional, local communities and those of their new online visitors, many of whom may live elsewhere? How will their practices and values change if they derive more revenue from an international audience than a local one? Will publicly-funded virtual museums and news websites be considered community spheres with public, state-sponsored mandates, even though they may be populated by people who are citizens of a different state?

CONCLUSION

Underlying these tensions – between the professional identities of reporters, editors, publishers, curators, archivists,

administrators and the inclusion of the publics they aim to serve – is a crisis in the very idea of participation.

In his symposium keynote, Darin Barney asked us what we do when we "invest our political hopes in a value like participation, or its various analogues?" He suggested that under "the conditions provided by emerging media technologies, the norms of publicity – participation, communication, interactivity, collaboration, and access to information – obscure or compromise the very ends that we might otherwise want public institutions, like the press and the museum, to serve… In other words, what if publicity undermines itself?"

Barney's question is a rich and provocative way of continuing the conversation our symposium aimed to start. It rightly sees technologies as conditions of our making that reflect the values we both consciously and unknowingly use to design and manage our public spheres. To critique the idea that participation is always just, always educational, and always empowering does not mean rejecting the emancipatory potential of emerging technologies. Rather, such a critical perspective actually *salvages* the idea of participation, protecting it from being narcotized by celebratory rhetoric. To reject the notion that unfettered participation of the kind promised by new technologies colonizing public institutions is essentially, incontestably good is to keep the idea of participation alive – to rescue it from its uncritical supporters and to ensure that it might survive today's understandings of technology, professionalism and public institutions.

REFERENCES

[1] The symposium was held at the University of British Columbia from May 2-3, 2008 and was sponsored by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, The Liu Institute for Global Issues, and The Association for Canadian Studies. It began with a public conversation at the Museum of Anthropology between Professor Darin Barney (Canada Research Chair in Technology & Citizenship, McGill University) and David Bearman (President of Archives and Museum Informatics) and moderated by journalist and UBC Journalism School Professor Kathryn Gretsinger. The next day involved a tour of the Museum of Anthropology's Renewal Project and Digitization Studio and three working sessions: "The Press & New Media" with Professor Alfred Hermida (University of British Columbia), Professor Adrienne Russell (University of Denver) and Senior Producer Tim Richards (CBC News); "New Media & The Museum" with Professor Sue Rowley (University of British Columbia), Professor Kimberly Christen (Washington State University) and Dr. George MacDonald (Bill Reid Foundation); and a final session called "Making Connections" in which Professor Arthur Kroker (University of Victoria) reflected upon the symposium's themes and talks. The authors especially wish to thank the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation's Dr. Bettina Cenerelli for her help organizing the conference.

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