

CREATING #CITIZENCURATORS: PUTTING TWITTER INTO MUSEUM SHOWCASES

Peter Ride, Department of English,
Linguistics and Cultural Studies,
University of Westminster, 309 Regent
Street, London, W1T3UW, UK

E-mail: p.e.ride@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract

This article is a case study of a Twitter project #citizencurators, which was jointly developed by the University of Westminster and the Museum of London to 'collect' Londoners' experience of the 2012 Olympic Games. The cross-disciplinary research explored how cultural institutions can use social media to extend and diversify their collecting methods. As such this project demonstrates how the use of social networking can empower the Museum.

Keywords: Social media; Twitter; crowdsourcing; museums; curating; Olympics; participation

The writer Gertrude Stein stated memorably "I like museums. I like to look out their windows." [1] Stein's cryptic quote can be read in many ways, but on one level she is describing the museum as being 'a window onto the world'. But to expand on Stein's metaphor, windows do not only offer transparency between spaces but also create ancillary spaces, or spaces of transition and connection. The metaphoric window presents the possibility that the museum can devise situations that augment the visitor's experience.

Museum discourse in recent decades has extended from emphasising collections, expertise and presentation to embracing public experience, engagement and interpretation [2]. A frequent point of discussion has been the change that has taken place in ways museums construct narratives. Rather than being authored and authorial, they are increasingly subjective and open to multiple readings and can allow the public voice into the museum [3].

Social media and museums

Social media in the museum has made an important contribution to visitor participation, by creating relationships that extend beyond the museum environment and by facilitating dialogues between the museum and its remote users [4]. It is also seen as an opportunity for curators and public to have a dialogue on the way that objects and collections are interpreted, and to debate how the meaning is constructed, through crowd sourcing and the use of user generated tags such as folksonomies [5].

These approaches to the use of social media in the museum can be described as building upon, and diversifying, existing museum displays, collections and activities. But an alternative approach could be to use social media to generate completely new material for the museum – to facilitate a "front-end" engagement. With this approach, social media could be used to enhance museum collecting by offering a new way to access material, to supplement traditional media. Furthermore, such an approach points to a new form of object that museums might focus upon: collectable, born digital, material produced by the public.

Within new media discourse there has been considerable coverage of the approach that art museums take to collecting and display concerning born digital material [6]. However the debate in non-art museums, such as social history museums, has had a different focus when the artefact is not seen in an arts context but as a unique evidence of social, scientific or ethnographic knowledge [7].

Research partners

The research partnership between the Museum of London and the University of Westminster had the following strategy/objective in mind: to collect the experience of social media users through the means of social media itself as the method of acquisition. The Museum of London is a leading international city museum and "tells the story of the world's greatest city and its people" [8]. Its collection contains over 2 million objects including the largest archaeological archive in Europe and the museum has a strong emphasis on social history and a commitment to contemporary collecting.

The project was developed as a joint research initiative between Dr Hilary Young, Digital Curator at the Museum of London, who had established a research plan to investigate collecting digital material and Peter Ride, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Westminster, who had an extensive background in curating digital arts projects [9].

The objective: collecting the Olympic experience

The Citizen curators project came out of a straightforward research provocation. How could the Museum record the experience of Londoners living in an Olympic city during the games? As a museum with a commitment to contemporary collecting there were many precedents to

collecting material that was associated with public events. However, recent events, such as the Occupy movement of 2011-12 and the London riots of 2011 raised issues about the difficulties associated with gathering material when events happened at speed and there were dramatic shifts in public mood. Indeed, in both these events, social networking had played an important role in mobilising participants and enabling members of the public to share up-to-date information.

The hosting of the Olympic Games in London was itself a contentious subject. The run-up to the Games had generated very mixed opinions among Londoners, with highly vocal opposition to government decisions about budgeting, resourcing, commercial interests and security, as well as public enthusiasm for the sporting events and the activities of the supporting Cultural Olympiad, all of which were debated on social media platforms.

Hilary Young, Digital Curator Museum Of London summed up the possibilities as: "It was expected that athletes, media and the public would Tweet voraciously about the Games. Of particular interest to our project team was the way Twitter would be used by some Londoners to communicate and gather immediate information, feelings and views around the Olympics instantaneously. But at the same time my internal museum curator voice was screaming 'can we collect this? 'what do we do with it?' and 'what is the object?'" [10].

Collecting through a small scale project

The opportunity to collect the Olympic experience of Londoners through social media presented both complications and possibilities. As far as the museum curators were aware, there were no obvious precedents of museums collecting social history content generated through social networks. However, the Museum of London had a substantial practice of collecting through oral histories and audio recordings of public events and worked on social history collection projects where community participants shared curatorial control with museum professionals.

What social media offered the Museum was not the content analysis available through studies of 'big data' [11]. Instead, the value of the project was that it could provide a small set of data with an emphasis on personal content, that spoke of people's lives and attitudes. It could be used to gather stories about the

'lived history' of London and how it was communicated between individuals and groups.

Project development and choice of Twitter

The way that the project progressed demonstrated how practicalities and pragmatics can shape research, as well as the curatorial and theoretical interests of the museum and the university partners. The initial proposition had been to use a variety of different platforms to give a sense of the breadth of social network activity, however it became obvious that Twitter was the only platform that could easily be employed for museum collecting. Because the museum would be collecting material to be held in perpetuity, complications around ownership or intellectual property would impede the acquisition processes. The IP issues associated with Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and other platforms meant that it would not be possible to collect material disseminated through these. However the Library of Congress had established a precedent through its agreement with Twitter to archive all tweets generated between 2006 and 2010, and the outcome of US legal actions against the Occupy Wall Street movement had asserted that tweets were in the public domain and were not private property.

Using Twitter also had limitations. Early on in the project it was realised that it would not be possible to collect tweeted photographs despite the important role that images had in networked culture, and that this would be an important part of the way the games were experienced and information shared. Images presented IP issues because once an image was tweeted or presented through a platform such as Instagram or Twipic it carried coding that meant it was no longer the exclusive IP of its creator. As a result the project could only collect the text of tweets and metadata. However, since this information contained the URL of any associated content the images could be seen online at a later point.

Working Methods

An important research objective as to define a method by which social networking could be collected. These questions were made complex by the fact that the material generated could be potentially boundless. Tweets would be created in the millions that used terms relating to the Olympics and any tweets

produced by Londoners could be said to reflect their experience at some level.

The researchers addressed these problems by choosing to examine and adapt other successful models of social media projects: community projects, marketing and brand awareness campaigns. As a result it was decided to develop the participation in the project one two levels. Firstly by recruiting a group of volunteers who could function as a core, dependable group of content providers and advocates. This enabled the research team to have a reliable relationship with a group of participants who could be briefed on the purpose of the project and its long-term outcomes and who could give feedback on the project as it progressed as well as generate content. The second level of participants would be the unrestricted and therefore open to any social media users who wished to engage with the project and the level of content from this group would be unpredictable and variable. Participation was encouraged through regular call-outs: "Anyone can take part by tweeting using the hashtag #citizencurators. All tweets will be collected by our software" [12]

Models of curating

Fundamentally, the participants operating at both levels would be taking on a curatorial function in determining what was collected into the archive, and they were doing so as citizens of London. Consequently the term 'citizen curators' was also coined to refer to them. In doing so the researchers were addressing the vogue in terming the organisation of online material as curating, as well as addressing museum collecting practices. This approach which was not without dissent from other curators within the museum and other members of the curatorial community. However, the researchers recognised that the way in which social media was being gathered required an open framework in which responsibilities were shared between different parties and that a desirable outcome of the project might also be further debate around the concept of digital curating.

Role of the core participants

After a social media and promotion twenty people were recruited as the core group of participants and asked to commit to making at least ten tweets a day. The advantages and limitations of this group-based approach were complex. Selecting a small number of people gave the project focus but also meant that its

breadth was reduced. The criteria for selection was that the individuals could demonstrate a commitment or interest in the project. This was advantageous in ensuring that they would generate content, however it also meant that a limited number of personal points of view would be emphasised. It also meant that although this approach could produce detailed conversations, it could mean that the manner in which 'trending' operated on social networking sites might not be reflected. But an additional benefit was that a small, defined group enabled the Museum to confirm that it had rights to reproduce any of the content produced by the participants.

Defining the hashtag

The key element to enable and encourage unrestricted public participation lay in the promotion of hashtag #citizencurators, which was done through social media and websites. The use of an easily recognisable term meant that it could be widely promoted and that the museum could collect from anyone who tweeted.

"Use the hashtag #citizencurators to tweet your point of view. A moment, an observation, an annoyance, something that made you laugh, something that speaks of what its like to be in London while the Olympics are on"[13].

It became obvious from early on in the project that although people would be tweeting using a wide range of tags and terms, it was best if participants had a tag which was unique and furthermore, that using it would signify that they intended a tweet to be included within the project. Using London2012 related terms, such as 'games' or 'Olympic', were not permitted under the regulations of the organising body of the Games established by UK legislation. #Citizencurators was a self-explanatory term, and one which was not being used elsewhere within Twitter.

However, the use of #citizencurators as a hashtag was not without problems as it contained fifteen characters –taking up nearly ten percent of a tweet's one hundred and forty characters. It also meant that participants wishing to use other trending hashtags needed to use multiple terms, otherwise their tweets would not be gathered.

Tweet Archiving

Tweets were gathered using an open source archiving software, 'Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheets' (TAGS), which allowed for the automatic collection of tweets around specific terms and

their compilation into a database [14]. This database contained the following data and meta-data: the user ID number; the user's name; text of the tweet; date stamp time; language; reply to (if relevant) user name and ID; URL of profile image; URL Tweet. The search terms were set exclusively to harvest tweets using the hashtag #citizen-curators, or the incidence of the word citizen-curators within the tweet's text.

Outcomes

The nature and the spread of the outcomes revealed a range of results. A base level of what would have given adequate material for the collection was set conservatively at 2,000, because it was recognised that there would be considerable competition for the attention of social media users. However, over the 2 weeks of the games, approximately 7000 tweets were gathered using the #citizen-curators hashtag. Of these, approximately 4000 were unique tweets and the remainder were re-tweets. Tweets came from approximately 600 unique Twitter accounts. As a result the project reached its objectives of having both a broad spread of public contribution and a dedicated and focused body of content. Because the tweets came from a relatively small sample of users compared to the population of London that regularly tweeted they provided highly individualized voices. Nevertheless, the threads that developed and the shifts in subject reflected interestingly upon the mood of Londoners.

The tweets provided diverse content and points of view on a range of issues and phenomena (or something like this), such as the resistance from communities that had been disrupted by the games support industries and security companies; the perspectives of people who enthusiastically followed the games; the protests against the government spending on the games in the face of massive cuts to welfare and education budgets; the experiences of people who participated in a wide range of games related activities who took two weeks off work to assist as volunteers; and the fact that people reported on their lives as normal, doing domestic chores, jobs and raising their families. The tweets demonstrated how social networking enabled simultaneous social connections, with pivotal moments during the sporting events, and how they linked people in the stadiums with those watching live tv or in the streets.

The tweets that were gathered also showed how Twitter topics developed and had their own trends even within such a small group. These trends indicated that (or something like this) support for athletes built across the two weeks; that there were constant reflections of the socially acceptable display of the British flag (often associated with the right wing); that people were concerned about sexism within the media coverage of sports; and that people were aware of the contributions made by the huge numbers of volunteers. Importantly it was evidence of the way that networked exchanges reflect changes in the mood of the city.

Tweets also demonstrated how Twitter could become a space for critique and subversion. A contentious issue in London was that goods producers or shopkeepers who used the Olympic rings in their designs could be prosecuted for breach of copyright. Social networks became a means to circulate images that playfully and resourcefully resisted or poked fun at this level of control.

Realising the goals of the project

The project also raised questions about the way that social networking can be archived and how an archive can operate. A core aim of the project had been to investigate how the museum could collect tweets and to define how they could be included in the museum collection. The single obvious item that resulted from the project was a database containing the tweets and metadata; a concise, duplicatable, set of data on a hard-drive. However, this did not present the tweets as they had been experienced, but were a partial record. But it was also enabled the tweets to also be viewed online so they could be placed within their context, not just treated as lines of text. Additionally this led to issues about the way that it could be shown in future – whether the tweets could be ‘recreated’ as a Twitter stream or if they should be abstracted from their context and shown as text [15].

Display

The question of display was approached in different ways. Over the period of the Games the project was displayed in the museum as a foyer display of a Twitter stream that represented a live environment. In addition the project team ran a blog¹⁵ and published daily edited highlights, using ‘Storify’ software, which offered a ‘curated’ selection managed by the students working on the project [16].

A year after the Games, in 2013, the Museum presented a exhibition ‘Opening The Olympics’ featuring objects that it had collected during the Games. The tweets were presented as overlying text on a video installation [17]. Even in a small display, the tweets provides evidence of a shared experience, and a direct sense of the way that people engage with materials and spaces in real time. This placed them in ‘the now’ rather than encouraging people to see them as things of the past.

As an additional project outcome, a selection of photographs and tweets created during the #citizen-curators project was exhibited at The Photographers’ Gallery London, August 2013, curated by Peter Ride. This display created the original tweets by extracting the URLs from the database and posting them to dedicated webserver that ran a simulating programme designed by Gordon Joly.

Ultimately, the project demonstrated the ways in which a Twitter archive can illustrate how social media changes the way people experience public events and how they relate to material culture. To return to Gertrude Stein’s quote, the #citizen-curators collection can provide a ‘museum window’ to look out of. It offers a bridge between the materiality of the museum object or display and the intangibility of social and personal knowledge. It adds to objects as a source of information by giving space for individual voices to provide additional meanings and to contest orthodoxies. Therefore, this project can be seen as exemplifying the way that social media can serve to augment the museum experience.

Notes

1. Gertrude Stein quoted in Sam Wright, *Koviashuvik* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
2. Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (New York: Open University Press, 2005); Graham Black *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005).
3. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010)
4. Elizabeth P Stewart, Dana Allen-Greil and Beck Tench, *Conversations with Visitors: Social Media and Museums*, (New York: Museumsetc, 2012).
5. John Stack, in Andrew Dewdney and Peter Ride, *The Digital Technologies Handbook* (London: Routledge 2013)
6. Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press., 2009); Christiane Paul, ed. (New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Modes

for Digital Art (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008).

7. Ross Parry, *Museums in a Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2009)

8. <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Corporate/About-us/Who> <accessed 20 June 2013>

9. The project team also included students working on the MA Museums, Galleries and Contemporary Culture: Eleni Tziourtzia, Xiao Song Liu, Jayacintha Danaswamy and Fliiss Hooten.

10. <http://citizencurators.com/2012/09/11/can-the-museum-collect-tweets> <accessed 20 June 2013>

11. A significant example of big data analysis of social networking during the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was the Emoto project by Future Everything.

<http://futureeverything.org/ongoing-projects/emoto-2> <accessed 20 June 2013>

12. Public call for participants posted at <http://citizencurators.com/2012/07/26/so-whats-it-like-for-you> <accessed 20 June 2013>

13. Public call for participants

14. TAGS was developed by Martin Hawksey <http://mashe.hawksey.info/2012/01/Twitter-archive-tagsv3> <accessed 20 June 2013>

15. The project blog was posted to by the project team, students and other curators at the Museum of London <http://citizencurators.com> <accessed 20 June 2013>

16. <http://storify.com/citizencurators> <accessed 20 June 2013>

17. Opening the Olympics 2013 <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/london-wall/Whats-on/Exhibitions-Displays/OpeningtheOlympics.htm> <accessed 20 June 2013>