

Our Museum

Studying museum communication for citizen engagement

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Abstract: *Our Museum was initiated in 2016. It is a five-year Danish national research and development programme comprising seven university departments at five universities and eight museum partners. The project aims to facilitate new forms of citizen engagement and inclusion by developing and studying how museums communicate with audiences in innovative ways. In this text the background, aims, hypothesis and organization are presented.*

Keywords: Museum communication, citizen engagement, collaboratory research between university and museums.

Museums have always interacted with the world around them. Yet, it seems as if the scale and scope of interaction has increased in the past two decades. The almost universal presence of museums online is an indication of this development: an expansion of user-focused museum communication that is often policy-led and the visibility of museums in environments beyond the museum walls. The number of museums have doubled worldwide 1992–2012 (Temples 2013), and the new institutions are often heralded as beacons of tourism and as levers of local and regional cultural economies (Falk & Sheppard 2006). Not least private funding goes into the establishment of the new museums and into a transformation of existing museum sites and settings. All these trends put increasing emphasis on fostering new relations to actual and potential museum audiences.

However, while museums' interaction and communication practices with audiences gain in importance, the same cannot be said for systematic research on these practices.

Museums' own research priorities are still chiefly related to the substance of collections – be they art history or astronomy, archaeology, biology or history. An interest in audiences is chiefly expressed in surveys on visitor throughput, marketing efficacy or simple analytics of the number of online clicks. A similar situation is seen in museology departments and programs at universities. While museology and heritage studies have become established features of many universities, they develop remarkably little sustained research on the ways in which actual and potential audiences communicate with museums. Visitor studies remain the key inroad to theory-based studies of actual museum-goers whether it adheres to the traditional socio-cognitive approach (Bitgood & Shettel 1996, Falk & Dierking 2000, 2013) or to more recent trends focusing on visitors' meaning-making and learning practices (Hooper-Greenhill 2006, Bounia *et al.* 2012, Dodd 2012, Pierroux & Ludvigsen 2013).

Museums' introduction of digital tools online

and onsite has sparked research on usage of these tools, but both museums and universities primarily study the “digital turn” from a technology-led perspective, for example the application of iPads or the use of blogs (Cameron & Kenderdine 2010, Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014). In a Nordic context, two Danish surveys on universities’ museum research document that museum communication is now increasingly taken up, but mostly on a short-term basis, conducted by master or PhD students with individual museums and with little aggregate knowledge formation or sustained research development as a result (Villadsen & Drotner 2011, Gransgaard *et al.* 2014).

In other words, there currently exists a gap between considerable economic, political and practical developments in museum communication and research-based knowledge on these processes/progresses. This gap means that museum communication remains under-theorised, the societal impact of communication practices and projects remains under-documented, and innovation of museum communication remains too little based on systematic evidence.

WHY FOCUS ON CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT?

Taking note of this gap between practice and research in museum communication, Our Museum was initiated in 2016. It is a five-year national research and development programme comprising seven university departments at five Danish universities and eight Danish museum partners. The total budget is c. 6 million EUR. We aim to facilitate new forms of citizen engagement and inclusion by developing and studying how museums communicate with audiences in innovative ways.

Why focus on advancing citizen engagement and inclusion and not, for example, personalised

experience, learning outcomes or the use of digital technologies – all of which are often at the core of innovative communication practices? This is because we want to hold on to the fact that public museums are key catalysts in generating a society’s understanding of itself, both past and present. Museums are resources for people’s abilities to act in the world, and on the world, because museums offer people scripts to relate to the wider world. Still, as is well known, not all groups harness these democratic museum resources, and not all museums understand what it takes to involve new audience groups. To focus on museums’ citizen engagement offers a unique pathway to understand museums’ interaction with the wider world and, in more concrete ways, to develop evidence-based tools for advancing such interactions in democratic societies. Our Museum’s *overall aim*, then, is to help advance and widen citizen engagement through theory-driven empirical designs and studies of museum communication whose results have transfer value beyond the research and development programme.

Other studies, also in the Nordic countries of Europe, have focused on museums’ role for democratic participation and citizen engagement (Stuedahl 2011, Sattrup & Christensen 2013, Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014). Similar aspects have been addressed by networks such as the Nordic Research Network on Learning Across Contexts, directed by professor Ola Erstad at the University of Oslo (2011–14); by Culture Kick (2011–14), directed by professor Dagny Stuedahl, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, and by the ongoing Cultural Heritage Mediascapes, directed by professor Palmyre Pierroux at the University of Oslo. Our Museum helps advance these efforts in three capacities: we add a historical perspective, a

150 design perspective and a systematic evaluation perspective.

WHAT WE DO

International museum studies largely understand museums' interaction with their surroundings through a historical master narrative that takes us from an emphasis on citizen enlightenment, public education and betterment of the unruly masses in the early days of museum development on to a situation today when individual experience and consumer enrichment is at the core of museum communication (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Bennett 1995, Anderson 2004). While this trajectory may be correct on a discursive level, we want to explore museum practices, and we want to go beyond national museums and similar icons that are often referenced as documentation in the master narratives.

Our thesis is that museums' communication practices, both past and present, are marked by balancing enlightenment and experience as constant dimensions to be handled, rather than as elements to abandon or strive for. To this effect, our *key research questions* are as follows: Which dilemmas in handling dimensions of enlightenment and experience do we see in Danish museum communication in the past and today? And on that basis: How can museums' communication with audiences be designed, developed and evaluated so as to widen and advance museums' means of citizen engagement?

Based on these research questions, our research design encompasses a historical and a contemporary strand of research. Five projects study the history of Danish museum communication, adding depth and richness to existing histories (Floris & Vasström 1999, Larsen & Ingemann 2005). The projects are

selected to cover important nodes in this development and to cover the diversity of communication modes. For example, one project on antiquarianism illuminates pre-modern practices of communication and interaction, while another project hones in on open air museums and their performance of living history.

Eight projects study key areas of contemporary museum communication. The projects are selected based on an inclusive definition of what a museum is, since we surmise that such an approach best traces varieties in communication practices and organisational frameworks. So, art, natural and cultural history museums are partner museums as well as a planetarium. Also, projects are selected from around the country and including small as well as very large institutions. In this way, we are able to document institutional as well as substantive similarities and differences. In empirical terms, the projects follow a joint research ecology: from (co-)designing new communication initiatives, through documentation of their implementation, and on to evaluating the results of these initiatives. Many, but not all, projects involve the use of digital modes of communication such as augmented reality installations and smart phones. Since we are keen to understand how museums practice communication as a lever of citizen engagement, our focus is not on technological innovation as such, nor is it on museum communication as a form of marketing or branding.

WHO IS INVOLVED

Our Museum is funded by two Danish philanthropic foundations, the Nordea-fonden and the Velux Fonden, along with the universities involved. Partner museums contribute with

in-kind funding, which means that museum professionals grant time to the programme. Both foundations are major donors to Danish museums, with the Velux Fonden also funding research-based collaboration, while the Nordea-fonden supports cultural research for the first time with its grant to Our Museum. Interestingly, the foundation notes that it is time to help advance research-based evidence about museum communication, so that foundations may spend their money more wisely. From a university perspective, the Our Museum initiative is unique, since it is a researcher-driven programme organised by the arts and humanities and across regional boundaries at a time, when Danish research policy invites competition between universities, rather than collaboration, just as it prioritises strategic research within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas.

In addition to its 13 funded projects, Our Museum involves a number of associated projects conducted by one or more project partners. Taken together, about 40 people collaborate in the programme, making us be in a position to reach beyond the short-term and individual projects that have characterised Danish research and development studies on museum communication so far. Participants come from a range of professional backgrounds, from astrophysics and biology to education, art history, museology, history, performance studies, media and communication science and ICT studies. This diversity is in tune with our inclusive definition of museums, and with the demands made to study the complexities of museum communication in a historical as well as a contemporary perspective.

HOW DO WE COLLABORATE

Based on an overall research objective identified

by a group of senior scholars engaged with the Danish Centre on Museum Studies, the substance of the Our Museum programme has been developed jointly by the university and museum partners involved. The cases we study in the 13 projects are located and explored within particular museums. In the contemporary projects, cases are selected by partner museums, while research questions and theoretical and methodological approaches are drafted by university partners.

Each project involves a senior researcher and a junior researcher – 11 PhD students and two postdocs in all and 13 senior scholars. For the eight contemporary projects, a collaborator for each partner museum is also part of the project team. Here, junior researchers spend part time at the partner museum and part time at the university where they are appointed. This project organisation facilitates knowledge development and knowledge exchange on a day-to-day basis.

An executive board of four is an aid to the programme director in strategic programme development. The vice-director is chosen among the two museum members so as to balance the programme director's university affiliation. A coordinator manages the programme and is also key to implementing the programme's communication strategy. Naturally, a programme on museum audiences' engagements should practice modes of communication that further such engagements in addition to producing traditional academic output. As a modest beginning, all participants have been on a training course in video production so that we are able to communicate with a wider public during the course of the programme. Such process communication is important not least for local community involvement at our partner museums.

While the empirical basis of Our Museum is a national one, the wider context of the programme is, of course, of international relevance. We therefore have an international scientific advisory board which advises on programme organisation and development and offers critique where needed.

PROGRAMME CHALLENGES – AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM

A research and development programme of this size faces a number of challenges in terms of cohesion, progression and synergy. Key among these challenges is how to avoid 13 projects developing their own research agendas and focus points with the result that overall *programme cohesion* is lost. We have handled this challenge by having all partners agree to the programme's key research questions prior to receiving funding. While these questions remain very general, we have also identified *joint analytical dimensions* that all projects address: an organisational dimension (how do different types of museums handle dilemmas of enlightenment and experience?); a representation dimension (what is the substantive focus of audience communication in terms of balancing aspects of enlightenment and experience?); and a reception dimension (who are included and excluded by particular communication practices?). Still, Our Museum faces a dilemma of cohesion in terms of optimising insights gained in the historical and contemporary strands of research. Ideally, the historical projects would be conducted prior to the contemporary projects, so that the historical insights on balancing dimensions of enlightenment and experience would feed into the design of contemporary projects. In practical terms, this is not feasible. So, we try to alternate historical and contemporary

perspectives at our themed seminars (see below) and be mindful of the dynamic nature even of our key concepts *enlightenment* and *experience*. How empirical findings can be integrated across the two strands remains to be seen, as none of the projects have progressed that far.

Programme progression is optimised by having all projects contribute to overall programme milestones in terms of, for example, popular communication. Moreover, each project has defined milestones in terms of substance and impact. Many participants at Our Museum have considerable experience with, for example, EU funding where milestone demands are very detailed leaving little room for substantive modification and innovation. Based on these experiences, we have identified fewer milestones and they are chiefly of a substantive nature. In addition, senior researchers of each project organise regular project meetings addressing issues of organisation and tackling possible obstacles to planned developments. The programme director also makes visits to all museums to discuss work processes and organisation.

It is well known that overall *programme synergy* is the most decisive part of successful research and development processes, and often also the most difficult to obtain. Our museum is home to different organisations and different disciplines, both of which pose particular challenges in shaping and sustaining programme synergy. In terms of *organisation*, museums and universities are very different professional cultures, even when working in similar fields. Canadian museologist Élise Dubuc notes how “museology studies become detached from the museum as institution” so that the gap has widened between the two professional cultures (Dubuc 2011:500). Our museum is one among many recent

attempts to forge new professional alliances in museology across museums and universities. Time is key to developing organisational synergies in such alliances, since museums often operate within stricter time-frames than do universities. A PhD student may want to convey research results when his or her research process is almost complete for fear that not everything is covered and controlled prior to that. A museum, on the other hand, may find it useful that the PhD student shares also small insights and do so early on, for example insights culled from a focus-group interview or an intervention with a group of non-users. Based on previous experiences with directing collaboration across museums and universities, Our Museum regularly hosts knowledge-sharing sessions from our various projects at our partner museums. Such sessions have the added value of illuminating the museum's project involvement to the entire organisation and perhaps the local community, thus operating as a pathway to wider knowledge exchange.

In terms of discipline, Our Museum is host to a very wide range of fields, approaches and practices. Museums and universities exercise different knowledge formations and priorities of knowledge exchange. But equally important is to take note of different disciplinary approaches to what are seemingly identical issues and themes. It is adamant to form a joint knowledge base across these diversities while harnessing participants' respective resources. Again, time is of the essence. During the first two years of the programme, all participants meet very regularly for one- or two-day seminars. The seminars focus on particular themes based on input from participants, and they form the heartbeat of the programme. For example, museology and media and communication studies both apply the term "audience". But

the term is defined and understood very differently by the two traditions. So, during our seminar key terms are taken up, unpacked, discussed and exemplified to qualify overall programme synergy. In more mundane ways, we seek to advance synergy by having our partner institutions host programme seminars. In this way, all participants get a sense of ownership and they come to better understand organisational and substantive differences.

IMPLICATIONS

In organisational terms, Our Museum is a laboratory of collaboration facing differences in terms of institution, knowledge formation, discipline and generation. Our experience so far is that these differences are not only obstacles of collaboration, they are also options. This is because the programme has sufficient time to build a community of trust allowing learning trajectories to be explored within and across the interdisciplinary partnerships. As such, Our Museum can help strengthen the basis for new networks and modes of collaboration across such differences.

In substantive terms, a key to programme success is the quality of insights gained during the programme. It is our hope that our results can demonstrate the validity of researching museum communication as a lever to advance and widen citizen engagement. Such results may act as pathways to increased recognition of audience communication as a valid and important research area on a par with established disciplines of research in museums as well as universities. Moreover, it is our ambition to deliver examples of best practice that other cultural institutions can apply, thus widening their relevance for new groups of audiences.

Last but not least, increased knowledge about ways in which museums interact with

154 the world around them is a unique option for institutions to challenge their own identities and rationale of existence. This is because such interactions invite museums to see themselves from the outside, to critically examine what is often taken for granted, and hence invigorate museums' societal impact for the future.

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Our Museum – in brief

Programme duration: 2016–2020

Total budget: 6 million EUR.

Website: www.ourmuseum.dk

Museum partners

The Danish Castle Centre

The Historical Museum of Northern Jutland

Limfjordsmuseet

Natural History Museum of Denmark

RAGNAROCK: The Museum for Pop, Rock and Youth Culture

Randers Museum of Art

Skovgaard Museet

Tycho Brahe Planetarium

University partners

Roskilde University: Dept. of Communication and Arts
University of Copenhagen: Royal School of Library and

Information Science; Dept. of Science Education

University of Southern Denmark: Dept. of History;
Dept. for the Study of Culture – Media Studies

Aalborg University: Dept. of Communication and Psychology

Aarhus University: School of Communication and Culture.

Projects

- 1) Antiquarianism and private collections before the rise of museums: Transnational networks, mediation and erudition of Danish antiquarians, 1600–1750
- 2) Between centre and periphery: Museum development, 1850–1950
- 3) 100 years of living history at Danish museums
- 4) Generalist or specialist? Developing the museum profession since 1958
- 5) Digital museum communication in Denmark: Assessing implementation and impact
- 6) Experience design og evaluation as means of museum learning
- 7) Immersive digital experiences at unguarded exhibition sites
- 8) Art, dialogue and experiment: User participation as a social catalyst for museum communication
- 9) Old art and contemporary users: New ways of communicating the Skovgaard family's art and age
- 10) Astrophysics: Designing exhibitions for inclusion
- 11) Participatory and professional interchange in digital museum practice
- 12) The museum as a site for mediating experiences
- 13) Rethinking existing participatory practices: Options and obstacles for digital museum development.

Associate projects

- 14) Join or die! Design Museum Denmark between communication, practice and co-creation. University of Copenhagen: Dept. of Nordic Studies and Linguistics
- 15) The new museum experience: Dimensions of public engagement at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1958–98. University of Copenhagen: Dept. of Arts and Cultural Studies
- 16) Securing significant cultural heritage values in local communities: Between conservation and communication. Aalborg University: Dept. of Culture and Global Studies
- 17) Exploring production criteria for a transmedia exhibition. Aalborg University: Dept. of Communication and Psychology
- 18) 3D scanning, modeling and printing in the museum: The use of 3D technology in current museum communication. Aarhus University: School of Communication and Culture.

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