

The Future of Public Institutions: New Media, The Press and The Museum
Symposium Chairs: Mike Ananny and Kate Hennessy

ABSTRACT

Successful public institutions reflect their communities' moral tensions. That is, they serve their societies most effectively and humanely when they have the creative capacity to break away from the administrative application of policies and traditions, and instead publicly imagine and realize new social arrangements. They take risks, invent programs, challenge constituents and – mostly importantly – find ways to ensure that they remain dynamic and responsive to the publics they serve.

Today we can see such dynamics in how two public cultural institutions – The Press and The Museum – adopt and adapt new media. Both institutions have historically shaped and reflected our collective identities with journalists and curators telling us what's new, what's old and why it matters. Increasingly, though, new media are challenging these dynamics – radically redefining how “experts” tell “us” what's “new”, what's “old” and what's meaningful as public consultations are replaced with collaborative, technology-supported practices.

This symposium asks what kind of social arrangements emerge from such practices, what values they instantiate, what power constituencies have to influence professional traditions, and what elements of such traditions we want and need to survive the contemporary challenges of new media. The Press, The Museum and their engagement with New Media are, in essence, generative case studies that let us better understand how to reconcile professional expertise and public participation. By creating institutions that balance such tensions we might ensure that we – both representatives of public culture and their increasingly empowered constituents – have the critical and creative capacities we need to realize the practices and technologies that reflect our imagined societies.

INTRODUCTION

The Press and Museums are public, cultural institutions that shape and reflect our collective identities. That is, their legitimacy and value as public organizations derives from their professionals' abilities to make expert judgments that respect and engender public participation. The quality of the conversations they have traditionally created has depended upon how well they have tempered their professional judgments with public consultations. We argue that, today, new media are fundamentally altering these judgments and consultations – recasting curatorial and editorial decisions as tensions between professional expertise and public participation. The tempered, private and purely professional decision-making that has traditionally defined public institutions is slowly being eclipsed: “public consultations” are being replaced with “collaborative practices.” By engaging and shaping these practices we have an opportunity to re-design and re-signify our public institutions.

The general goal of this symposium is to explore the relationship between new media and public institutions in imagining, structuring, and reproducing our social and political lives. While one perspective views new media as powerful '*political*' tools with which traditional public institutions and actors (e.g., museums, politicians, journalists, lobbyists, religious leaders) can communicate information, access voters, raise funds, build coalitions, and consult constituents, another perspective sees in new media a kind of genuine contemporary '*cultural*' life seldom reflected in mainstream public institutions. In essence, it is in the new rituals of content-creation and communication (e.g., personal blogs, community-based research networks, social networking

sites) that we see people constructing for themselves the resources, relationships and norms that best reflect the felt quality of their private identities and public obligations.

Underlying these two views is a tension between '*expertise*' and '*participation*'. In the political view, public experts – e.g., politicians, journalists, lobbyists, and museum curators, among others, enjoy privileged positions moderated by official regulations, social expectations, and professional norms. New media make it possible for them to fulfill their existing public duties in more responsive, ethical, and deliberative ways. In contrast, private participants in the cultural public spheres created through new media are largely free to act without limiting traditions or metrics. New media let them create and critique public communication with evolving and uncertain models of the rights and responsibilities such communication carries among non-professionals and subaltern communities.

In this symposium we use The Press and The Museum as case studies of public cultural institutions that are simultaneously redesigning themselves and our notions of public goods. Our claim is that as these institutions craft their cultural products (e.g., museum exhibits and news stories) they make professional judgments about the nature of public knowledge, authority, inclusion, truth and objectivity. We see curators, museum practitioners, journalists and editors as linked through a set of knowledge-creating practices that attempt simultaneously to reflect and represent publics. Our aim in this workshop is to explore the exact nature of these practices, seeing them as sites of evidence where cultural professionals – intentionally or not – leave clues about their institutionalized values. In essence, we might best understand how contemporary public institutions enact their ideals – engendering public participation while practising professional expertise – if we examine how their cultural work shapes and reflects new media environments.

Some questions we will explore in this symposium: how are the curatorial judgments of museum practitioners influenced by aboriginal new media producers? How are the news and business judgments of journalists and editors affected by bloggers? How are these two kinds of indigenous knowledge producers – aboriginal communities and bloggers – both working within and challenging the traditional structures of museums and newspapers? How is such indigenous knowledge production reshaping what we consider to be “public goods” and who we believe has the authority to make and manage such goods? Finally, recalling Benedict Anderson's assertion that public institutions shape how we imagine our communities, how can we ensure that the design and use of new media in museums and newspapers reflect the values that we want to underpin our nation? How does this technology-supported tension between expertise and participation contribute to understandings of citizenship, multiculturalism, and colonialism? How are new media helping us re-imagine the Nation?

Most generally, what can we learn about public institutions by examining the impact of new media on these two organizational fields? What are the limits of this kind of examination and what open questions demand further investigation?

SESSION ABSTRACTS**SESSION #1: 9:15 – 10:45****The Press and New Media**

Chair: Mike Ananny

That journalism is in transition is nothing new. What is new is the speed and scale of the challenges mainstream, traditional media companies face as they respond to, engage with, and design new media in ways that preserve their roles as economically sound, public-serving institutions.

Such pressures take economic, social and professional forms that go beyond simple translations from "old" to "new" media. As media companies create new revenue streams, newsroom cultures and professional practices they reveal how they intend to reshape journalism. It is in reflecting on processes such as these that we can best understand the future that journalism envisions for itself as a public, technology-supported institution.

In this panel we focus on understanding dimensions of this transition asking: what special roles and responsibilities do publicly-owned media organizations have in this new context? How do media companies reflect their understandings of multiculturalism and federalism in the design and use new media? What elements of new media policies most significantly impact Canadian media companies as they have transitioned into online environments? How do elite decision-makers (e.g., business leaders and politicians) understand and respond to the press differently in the wake of its transition to online environments? What, if any, particularly Canadian approaches to notions of objectivity, expertise and participation are reflected in how media companies are responding to bloggers and other new media content creators?

SESSION #2: 1:15 –2:45
New Media and the Museum

Chair: Kate Hennessy

The Museum as an institution is being transformed in design and practice by the use of new media. As diverse collections are digitized and accessed through virtual exhibitions, hand-held tour devices, and on-line databases, museums are able to provide the public with more contextualizing information for objects than ever thought possible in an analogue world. New media in the museum “should be understood as a complex interpretation of objects that forces us to rethink the tangible and intangible imprints of our cultural history” (Müller 2003:23). It is a generating site of tensions between curatorial expertise and public participation, as museums are challenged by an informed public to re-think established interpretations of national histories and cultures. In the Canadian context, tensions are amplified by the fact that museum “publics” increasingly include the Aboriginal communities represented in collections on display. The Museum, which became the visible evidence of an indigenous world expected to disappear, must now contend with the ways in which originating communities are engaging digital technologies to challenge Eurocentric meta-narratives of Aboriginal and national histories.

In considering the role new media in the museum, we might ask some of the following questions: What does collaboration with originating communities do to challenge institutional and academic power structures that have limited indigenous participation in public representation of their cultures with Eurocentric definitions of expertise? How do new media change our understanding of museum collections and the nature of their relationship to their audiences? What do new definitions of “audience” and “public” in the museum context say about our understanding of Canadian citizenship? How do shifting definitions of expertise facilitate increased participation in the creation of national histories and imaginaries? What is the future of the Museum as a public institution?

SESSION #3: 3:15- 4:45
Making Connections

In her account of the early history of electronic media, Carolyn Marvin observes that we miss the point when we focus communication history on artifacts and technical efficiencies and should instead see media as a “series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed.” (Marvin, 1988: 4) We need to take a similar tack in our conversations around new media and public institutions, understanding them beyond their technological forms to their role in the social construction of public communication. We might best be able to construct and critique democracy – its institutions and rituals – when we see new media artifacts and practices as evidence of how our political and cultural public communication is changing – how powerful their thoughtful combination can be.

Seen in this light, instead of asking what “effect” new media have on our public institutions we might better ask: how do new media support and reflect our balances between cultural participation and communication expertise – in essence, how are we crafting *public literacies* with and in response to new media?

How have professional journalists and curators have had their authority, expertise or objectivity challenged by new media community interpreters? How can Museums, the Press and new media be more reflective of the *dynamic* conditions of citizenship? That is, if part of imagining “the nation” is about imagining the nations within, how are new media impacting the abilities of “internal nations” to represent themselves and connect with others to construct a larger, national community? What resources (*e.g.*, literacies, technologies, social positions, political power) are required to support participatory community interpretations, who does/doesn't have access to such resources and what are the implications for the kind of communities that can be imagined?