

## **The mediated museum understood as a site of complex ‘interactivity’**

Dr. Jenny Kidd, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

[Kiddjc2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:Kiddjc2@cardiff.ac.uk), [www.jennykidd.org](http://www.jennykidd.org)

‘The museum’ in 2013 is a complex of definitional, representational, philosophical, ethical, and recently even economical, dilemmas. It is a fascinating case for the study of culture, and of ‘cultures’ variously defined. My areas of research interest in this field relate broadly to museum technologies, exploring the ways in which digital technologies can frustrate, and sometimes even *become*, forms of museological power. Across the museums sector in the past ten years, both in the UK and beyond, we have seen something of a colonization of the online environment; increasingly dynamic web portals and associated content, digital archives, social networks, blogs, and online games. But that activity has rarely been understood within (or informed by) discourses from media/communication studies.

Cultural managers and arts professionals daily find themselves immersed in the rhetorics of democracy, empowerment, co-production and interactivity that have accompanied that shift, and react with varying levels of enthusiasm, creativity, efficiency and reflexivity. There has been little theoretical or practical attention given to the framing of this increase in participatory endeavour, the assumptions that underpin it, or the impact that it might be having. My current book project seeks to take such an approach, critically examining the way in which audience/visitor/community participation are being framed, enacted, and experienced within museums.

Since 2002 I have been researching audience participation in various diverse online and offline contexts, from digital storytelling initiatives at the BBC, to participatory performances and social media. I’ve been involved in many forms of digital content creation as a practitioner and user, and used a variety of methodological approaches to begin to explore the nuances of participatory endeavor for both constituencies. During this time, I have found critiques of ‘interactivity’ and ‘participation’ from media studies invaluable for articulating the nature and use-value of participatory endeavour in more nuanced ways (eg Cover, 2006).

Museums seldom take ownership of the political, philosophical and ideological implications of their roles as ‘mediators’. They do however increasingly recognise that their representations and the experiences they offer are themselves mediatized; as they become more ‘participatory’ spaces there is a concurrent shift to digital. As Sonia Livingstone has said, ‘audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation is ever more mediated’ (Livingstone, 2013: 25). This is true of the museums sector where the attendant rhetoric of

‘community’, ‘democracy’ and ‘empowerment’ provides a backdrop in the race to ‘prove’ public worth, impact and relevance.

We might note that in the museum, the term ‘visitor’ is increasingly problematic; instead, those accessing museum services (sometimes exclusively online) might be more readily understood as audiences, users and co-producers of heritage narratives. This is intensely challenging to the traditional ordered, authored and pre-scripted understanding of the museum and what Tony Bennett has called the ‘exhibitionary complex’ (Bennett 1995).

So, in my research I aim to unpack and explore a number of dichotomies that underpin participatory work in the museum: professional knowledge vs local knowledge; morally ‘good’ grassroots participation vs morally ‘bad’ top-down programming; the powerful vs. the powerless; ‘the institution’ vs. ‘the community’ and activity vs. passivity. I question assumptions about what constitutes ‘legitimate’, ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ participation. In current participatory practice it seems, the perceived end (empowerment, openness, democracy) always justifies the means.

In the current book, for the first time, questions about the museum as media are framed within literatures from a number of discrete areas of study; from development studies<sup>1</sup>, museum studies<sup>2</sup>, museum informatics<sup>3</sup>, performance studies<sup>4</sup>, art history<sup>5</sup>, gaming literature<sup>6</sup>, media studies<sup>7</sup> and the study of digital media in particular.<sup>8</sup>

According to Stogner two larger trends are emerging in the museum. Firstly, onsite experiences that are increasingly mediatised. Secondly, offsite experiences that are increasingly media-driven (Stogner 2009: 388). I wish to argue that both of these phenomena can be better understood by looking to audience research from media and cultural studies, and the experiences of media practitioners who (in the case of public service broadcasters in particular), have encountered similar debates about the use value of participation, how best to define and conceive of ‘interactivity’, what the representational issues associated with the new media might be, and how to define success in such a landscape. I wish not to suggest that broadcasters and print media are spearheading an exclusively ethical or desirable way forward within that complex and challenging media ecology, rather, that there are surely lessons to be learned, and certainly insights to be gleaned, from the wealth of academic research that has been carried out in that field.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cooke & Kothary 2001 and community studies

<sup>2</sup> Simon 2010, Adair et al 2011, Jones-Garmil 1997, Bennett 1995, Cameron & Kelly 2010, Kidd et al 2013, Marstine 2011, Message 2006, Henning 2006, Rees Leahy 2012

<sup>3</sup> Hornecker, 2008, Hsi, 2003, Talon and Walker, 2008, vom Lehn & Heath 2003 2005, Parry 2007, Giaccardi 2012

<sup>4</sup> Turner 1982, Goffman 1974, Schechner 1973, Jackson & Kidd 2011, Kidd 2011 2012,

<sup>5</sup> Ranciere, 2009, Bourriaud, 1997, Bishop 2006

<sup>6</sup> McGonigal 2011, Bogost 2011, Zimmerman 2004, Salen & Zimmerman 2004

<sup>7</sup> Hall’s Encoding/Decoding 1980, Fiske’s ‘audiencing’ 1992, Livingstone 2009 2013, Thumim 2012, Carpentier, 2011, Garde-hansen 2011

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins et al. 2013, Gere 1997

Paper for ICA pre-conference Audiences, Elsewhere, June 17 2013, Leicester University

If the study of museum audiences can learn much from media scholarship, I wish also to suggest that audience researchers in media/communications (and perhaps elsewhere) might learn from the increasingly sophisticated discourse around the *ethics* of participation in museum contexts. If media and communications scholarship gives us a language for talking about ‘participation’, ‘interactivity’ and ‘user-generated content’, then the museums sector can help us to scale up our investigation of the ethics of participatory practice within a global ‘market’ for content and experience. Collaborative, open and dynamic projects by the British Museum, the Smithsonian, the Rijksmuseum, or the Louvre (for example) offer us insight into: the international dimensions of participatory work (on a scale perhaps only matched by the BBC); the capacity for digital culture to engender diplomacy or a global cultural public sphere; how to represent the polysemous, contested and diverse nature of individuals, communities and nations; the affordances of digital media for education; or their capacity for conflict resolution and social justice. And I contend that these are no small outcomes.