

# DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Presenting Negative Stories  
to an International Audience

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A dramatic performance, or *Nukkad Natak*, near a market in Delhi, India, draws in an enthusiastic crowd to engage with how infectious diseases are becoming increasingly untreatable. Performances that encouraged interaction created positive engagement and relevance with a negative narrative.

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Museums are popularly assumed to be environments that celebrate cultural and societal achievements. As community spaces, they are sometimes tasked with presenting the potentially depressing struggles and failings of society. While there are many interpretive success stories of exhibitions that have connected visitors with tough subjects,<sup>1</sup> the task becomes more challenging when exhibitions showcase a warning of impending catastrophe.

To avoid being ignored while presenting pessimistic views of the future, it is essential that any exhibition tackling uncomfortable topics be culturally relevant and context-responsive for its host community. This becomes a doubly complex task when an exhibition goes on tour, as it will also need to respond to cultural change and how the perception of the topic changes.<sup>2</sup>

The museum field typically embraces the model of traveling exhibitions that sees the same displays packed and moved across borders and cultures. However, this formula can lack the examples and content that resonate with the experiences and different needs of local audiences, as subjects or messaging without meaning can easily be missed by the intended audience. It is essential that the connection to their lives be made unignorable. We believe that

adapting international traveling exhibitions on bristly subjects to suit the sensitivities of different cultures is critical to connecting with local audiences.

Using the example of our exhibition project, *Superbugs*, we will show how a templated exhibition – using a blueprint of narratives and key stories not directly connected to specific artifacts – could adapt and shift regionally according to the needs of each audience. We will explore how an exhibition carrying the negative and inescapable warning that certain drugs no longer work – a message that risked rattling visitors’ faith in modern medicine and science – was embraced by distinct cultures while in the midst of a global pandemic. This novel approach to a traveling exhibition shows the value of a display *created for* rather than *delivered to* each venue, one that is based

upon strong collaborative relationships with each host.

The Science Museum Group (SMG), the largest network of science museums in the United Kingdom, puts significant emphasis on the concept stages on formative audience research to assist the development of both single-location and traveling exhibitions. In our project, an exhibition called *Superbugs*, a close working relationship between the SMG curatorial team and the audience evaluation consultant was critical to informing the interpretation and content strategy, as each exhibition had to be appropriate to the experience of audiences in each of three host locations. The integrity of a consistent curatorial argument and interpretation structure had to be balanced with choosing specific case studies that would be most relevant to the audience. In addition, each audience's direct experience of the prevailing and volatile COVID-19 pandemic added further complexities and prompted evolving priorities and messaging.

This proactive partnership of curatorial and evaluation disciplines along with the accompanying collaborative contribution and territory knowledge of host venues ensured that SMG could confidently develop exhibitions surrounding a future health crisis that both adapted to specifics of location and that could also respond to the impact of the current pandemic. These unpredictable factors may have otherwise led to an early end to the project.

### Establishing *Superbugs*

*Superbugs* explores the looming crisis of bacteria evolving to become immune to antibiotics. As antibiotics lose their efficacy,

humanity in turn loses access to medical procedures that define modern medicine: organ transplants, dialysis, chemotherapy, hip and knee replacements, pacemaker surgeries, and many others. Every year, it is estimated that about 700,000 people die globally from antibiotic resistant infections, with this figure set to rise to 10 million by 2050, overtaking the current death toll of cancer, the number two cause of death.

The *Superbugs* exhibition narrative engages with the audience by using three interpretation and display zones explaining the issue in the context of scale. **In the microscopic world**, visitors engage with actual cultures of bacteria, see bacterial biology on its own terms, and appreciate the immense complexity of the invisible world around us. **At the human scale**, the audience is introduced to real people who are struggling in the battle against antibiotic resistant bacteria including healthcare professionals, patients, farmers, inventors, and legislators. **On a global scale**, the exhibition shows how networks of governments and scientists are collaborating to tackle antibiotic resistance as a united force. Our independent evaluations show that audiences overall leave the exhibition with a feeling of cautious optimism.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation plan formed the basis for the traveling exhibition “template”: establishing scale, framing content through an exciting though deadly challenge, and celebrating the issue as stemming from a beautiful concert of microorganisms worthy of respect. As the curator and audience evaluation consultant for *Superbugs*, we engaged with international partners to develop new versions of the exhibition that would be mounted at their own venues and would be sensitive to their audiences' particular needs.

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Funded by Wellcome, a global medical charity, *Superbugs* addresses a challenge to public faith in modern medicine. Due to unfortunate timing, *Superbugs* was on display in China and India during the COVID-19 crisis; both countries had been hit hard by the global pandemic. This exhibition therefore provides a case study for traveling exhibitions that are flexible in their approach by addressing multiple sensitivities in a single display. The Science Museum Group (in the United Kingdom) closely worked with its institutional partners, the Guangdong Science Center in China and the National Council of Science Museums in India, to create parallel exhibitions that were specifically conceptualized to suit international audiences, with tailored relevance to visitors in three host countries. The interpretation plan was carried across all three countries with a consistency of narrative and interpretation of content that employed the three scales previously mentioned. Key messaging and framing of the subject were also kept intact in order to achieve the same mood and tone across all versions of the exhibition. Throughout, culturally and personally relevant examples were used to connect with and engage visitors, particularly given the challenging subject. It was also essential to showcase local individuals and familiar situations to create accessible entry points and to ensure the topic felt close to home.

It was clear that the content of *Superbugs* had to be adaptable in order for the

interpretation plan and tone of voice to remain unchanged amidst three different cultures. As such, objects and narratives varied between iterations of the exhibitions, while the core messages and desired impression on audiences remained consistent (fig. 1). Our formative research in each host location employed intercept interviews with visitors and tracked behavior in museum spaces to understand the character and interests of existing audiences. For a more nuanced understanding specific to the concept of *Superbugs*, we conducted specially recruited focus groups in most locations (fig. 2). The close relationship between curatorial and interpretation teams and the audience evaluation consultant was essential to deliver an exhibition tailored to each location. Host destinations understand their audiences better than *Superbugs*' source institution. Therefore, a close collaborative relationship with each venue ensured we benefitted from their established knowledge and avoided unnecessary expenditure on bespoke research activity. While there were situations when our team commissioned research independently to gain a cultural perspective from "outside the institution," this was kept to a minimum. Throughout the project, a proactive working relationship with the host venues and organizations proved essential to understanding the needs of each audience.

### Addressing Cultural Differences

Initial audience research showed the dramatic differences between visitors in China, India, and the United Kingdom. Though we try to avoid sweeping assumptions regarding patterns of behavior, some consistent and dominant cultural traits emerged. Museumgoers to science



Fig. 1.

Similar narratives adapted across three regions: livestock farmers from (left to right) China, India, and the United Kingdom are shown reacting to issues unique to their country.



Fig. 2.

Audience research was central to engaging with host communities on their own terms. Focus groups in India allowed for a more nuanced understanding of public opinion, alerting curators about potential blind spots in the exhibition narrative.

centers in India are dominated by organized educational groups and young families, who prioritize learning opportunities. They tend to engage with all levels of interpretation, particularly valuing historic context and self-guided exploration. In comparison, science museums in China are popular destinations due to the fact that they offer an optimistic vision of the future. In China, visitors often participate in theme-focused guided tours led by an expert. By contrast, British audiences – typically comprised of a higher proportion of tourists and family groups on a leisurely day out – prefer to have topical issues explained with current and accessible examples. These three audiences had culturally ingrained emphases on historical context, the present, and a hopeful future which could not have been responsibly addressed using the same interpretive tools. This was reflected in the emphasis on the content of each exhibition: in India, a focus on historical objects; in the UK, a focus on current research; and in China, an exploration of potential futures.

Each culture also approaches medicine radically differently. Western medicines in both India and China are seen as quick-fix chemical cures; India's ayurvedic and Chinese traditional medicines are perceived as long-term holistic philosophies. Since this emphasis on traditional medicine would be a jarring omission if left unaddressed in content for the exhibitions in India and China, they include both. By contrast, if traditional medicine had been addressed at all in the UK, it would have impacted the perceived authority of the rest of the presented science. Through audience research, the curatorial teams were able to establish significant cultural access points that would guide how the content and interpretation would shift.

Each location necessitated a unique interpretation plan that was based on an appreciation of a specific context. In India, the financial pressures on the aspirational middle classes to quickly treat illness, along with ease of access to antibiotics – and lack of understanding about them – have contributed to their misuse and overuse. Virtually everyone involved in formative focus groups and surveys (including some pharmacists) could not recognize the labels and warnings on antibiotics available over the counter, a government initiative that we would have otherwise expected to be identified through recent media campaigns. In China, the same “quick-cure” associations of Western medicine were evident in our formative research, though many Chinese museumgoers did not understand any differentiation between antibiotics and any other treatment they may have received from a healthcare provider. There, the greater danger of resistance lies in antibiotic misuse in the food chain and river water pollution. The emphasis of exhibition content, therefore, had to be adapted to suit the vastly different issues facing each of the three regions.

These contextual findings were informed by curatorial studies, academic and public domain reports, and importantly made accessible and inclusive by combining data with qualitative insight. The close working relationship with collaborator-hosts was imperative to ensuring the robustness of these hypotheses and, above all, to ensuring the relevance of examples to different audiences.

The stories that exemplify the significance of antibiotic resistance are typically those of suffering and death on a massive scale. However, addressing a global problem with

statistics and overwhelming negativity would potentially reduce its impact. Research has shown that personal accounts, rather than standalone facts or statistics, can be more useful in encouraging audiences to identify with a sensitive or negative narrative,<sup>4</sup> so we placed a focus on human stories. The *Superbugs* template included “people profiles” of individuals on the forefront of antibiotic resistance, including a patient, a doctor, a nurse, a farmer, an environmental scientist, and others. The selection of individuals was modified in each location to reflect that culture’s perceptions of experts and testimonials. In the UK, audiences appreciate people that are deemed most approachable, while in China, the focus lay on academic qualifications and official recognition. In India, career success and celebrity status were typically sufficient to guarantee interest. The selection of examples also needed to be varied. In India, the educated middle classes were more likely to sidestep antibiotic resistance as a pandemic of the poor where unhygienic living conditions put them at higher risk; shifting the narrative to include all economic backgrounds encouraged personal attachment to the central themes of the exhibition.<sup>5</sup> In China, a similar regional divide was observed, so sourcing examples across the country geographically encouraged thinking of issues as more widespread.

When addressing a challenging story (like this crisis in healthcare), small-scale positive examples are valuable to counterbalance draining negativity.<sup>6</sup> We embraced this throughout the exhibition template by showing people working on solutions, even if those solutions seemed distant. By having these characters acknowledge the bleak outlooks while still showcasing innovative

approaches, a serious overarching subject could be discussed without becoming overly depressing. Ways that the layperson could respond in everyday life also prompted the visitors to take greater interest. Displaying small positive examples alongside the negative created a tone of cautious optimism in the face of a challenge.

Inescapably, the subject matter of antibiotic resistance is difficult for interpretation on its own: it is complex science, a problem to which there is no clear solution, and warns of disease and death. Finding more welcoming points of connection was therefore essential. While the interpretive tools we have outlined led to a positive response, another hugely positive point of exposure in India was interpreting the exhibition through events outside of the museum buildings. *Nukkad Natak* is a traditional Indian street performance that is typically energetic, musical, and encourages participation from its audiences. We commissioned one such performance series for *Superbugs*, using local practitioners to develop the script, choreography, and music under the guidance of local curators. The result was a 10-minute performance ([intro image](#)) appearing in subway stations, on street corners, and even in front of hospitals for audiences of families between visiting hours.

Based on the positive response to the *Nukkad Natak*, an otherwise overwhelmingly negative story of untreatable diseases had enthusiastic participation from commuters and passersby and allowed for a much stronger dialogue than a static museum exhibition. When addressing these negative narratives, we would encourage any museum to similarly challenge traditional notions of exhibition experiences.





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A radical review of interpretation naturally led to changes in design as well. For the London exhibition, we used muted and subtle artworks, such as images of hospital interiors and protest sites, to serve as stylized background illustrations that framed the content in a time and place and evoked a sense of atmosphere. This approach worked best for this audience, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the profiles presented to them and connect with hardships being faced by real people. By comparison, in India our design team created a fantastical visualization of the threat in the form of a rampant monster made from giant-sized, mock drugs, which served as a high-impact gateway object. Though this may not have been the first choice of the London curatorial team, the positive visitor response was a reminder of the hosts' superior knowledge of their own audience, which they knew would be more receptive to overt messaging that Western audiences may have confronted with suspicion.<sup>7</sup>

This trust in local knowledge and extensive formative research also allowed the project to meaningfully respond to the outbreak of COVID-19 globally. Using research already

done locally, project teams were able to create additional content in both China and India to address this new crisis organically without risking insensitivity to host audiences.

### Lessons Learned

It should be acknowledged that tailoring the exhibition to suit the needs of each host venue was more time-consuming for all project staff than our typical traveling exhibitions. However, building on a template – knowing which factors needed addressing based on the previous country's responses – also made each cultural adaptation less expensive. In addition, ensuring that each host venue took ownership of content assured a tailor-made outcome that did not need building from the ground up (with the happy benefit of also establishing new institutional partnerships). In terms of costs, the “adapted template” model required unique designs and visitor journeys, which meant that each host museum did its own exhibition fabrication. Despite having separate builds, this still proved to be about half the cost of shipping a traveling exhibition internationally and allowed for overlapping display periods

**Fig. 4.** The otherwise off-putting theme of failures in healthcare was still embraced by audiences in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. A flexible approach to content and interpretation allowed for changes in the exhibition to be made quickly and sensitively, maintaining relevance to visitors while not overwhelming them with negativity.

among venues. This also connects to dramatically reducing a carbon footprint, as there was no need for shipping containers and all transportation by truck took place within each country.

It has become a worn cliché of museology that we are all storytellers – however, we should remind ourselves that the essence of good storytelling is to be relevant and recognized by your audience. As a global problem with diverse cultural reactions, we believed that the story of antibiotic resistance was best explained using locally relevant examples; a turnkey exhibition, we felt, would be too limited when focusing on themes that had to prove their relevance to very different audiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has overtaken *Superbugs* in urgency and topicality, but in the process, it has exposed the value of having an adaptable exhibition. While delivering an exhibition about a healthcare crisis in the midst of a pandemic could have been a disaster, *Superbugs*' built-in ability to adapt and shift according to its audience's understood needs gave it strength (fig. 4). With challenging subjects increasingly on the agenda, museums are looking beyond the dominant status quo to seek inclusivity and sensitivity to issues and audiences – when presenting challenging themes such as rapid climate change, racial prejudice, the legacy and scars of empire, or the questioning of sourcing and ownership of collections – exhibition audiences increasingly need to be convinced that a message is appropriate to their direct experience and cultural beliefs. The ability to deliver unwelcome messaging is increasingly relevant, as is the need to tailor messages to be relevant to each audience.

Traveling exhibitions should, at their core, create institutional partnerships. Host venues seized this particular opportunity to make the exhibition their own and were integral to the creative process. *Superbugs* was a concept exhibition that told its story according to location and audience; no two articulations of the concept were the same. As a case study, it attests to the benefits of close collaboration and provides an example of how tailored traveling exhibitions are uniquely positioned to play increasingly greater roles in museums' responses to an ever-shifting world. ■

1 Emilie S. Arnold, "The Wound is Fresh: Exhibiting Orlando's LGBTQ History in the Shadow of the Pulse Nightclub Massacre," *Exhibition* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 26–35.

2 Rose Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore, "(Re)Frame: The Case for New Language in the 21st-Century Museum," *Exhibition* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 56–63.

3 Formative research had confirmed suspicions that audiences were likely to dismiss exhibition messaging about failures that lacked the redemption of a scientific success story.

4 Julie Packard, "Effective (and Ineffective) Engagement: Lessons Learned from Exhibitions & Programs with a Conservation Message," *Exhibition* 39, vol. 1 (Spring 2020): 22–35.

5 Using specificity as an entry point with an assumption for broader implications is explored in Laura Bassett, "Global Issues, Local Stories, Real Issues," *Exhibition* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 72–75.

6 "How to Talk About Climate Change and the Ocean," Frameworks Institute, updated September 2015, [www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/climatechangeandtheocean\\_mm\\_final\\_2015.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/climatechangeandtheocean_mm_final_2015.pdf).

7 Consulting with any host community should be a norm and has shown positive response elsewhere. See Darcie Fohrman and Janeen Bryant, "Radical Collaboration: Building to a WE in Exhibition Design: Essential Elements for Confronting Social Issues with Community," *Exhibition* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 52–62.