



A Case Study: Unfiltered User-Generated Content in the Newseum's New Media Gallery

by Paul Sparrow

Paul Sparrow is Senior Vice President at the Newseum in Washington, DC. He may be contacted at psparrow@newseum.org.

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“One of the most frequent concerns staff members voice about contributory platforms is the fear that visitors will create content that reflects poorly on the institution, either because it is hateful or inaccurate.” Nina Simon

Technology companies and social media networks have provided museums with new tools to engage their visitors. Museums are developing exhibitions that allow visitors to “curate” content (Kelly, 2012) and tours (Cleveland Museum of Art’s *Gallery One*); express their opinions (National Museum of American Jewish History’s *Tell Your Story*); and pledge future action (National Holocaust Museum’s *From Memory to Action*). Some of the new installations allow visitor comments to post immediately without a museum staffer reviewing them.

This practice has raised concerns about inappropriate and offensive content being displayed for anyone to see. Any museum professional who has witnessed a group of 8th graders rampaging through a gallery knows that they do not always make good choices. In *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon states,

One of the most frequent concerns staff members voice about contributory platforms is the fear that visitors will create content that reflects poorly on the institution, either because it is hateful or inaccurate. Fundamentally, this concern is about loss of control. When staff members don’t know what to expect from visitors, it’s easy to imagine the worst. (2012, p. 222)

But what exactly is the risk that they will post something inappropriate if given the opportunity? This will be a case study, but one with broad relevance.

It is difficult to weigh the pros and cons of unfiltered user-generated content if museum leaders don’t know the risks

(McLean, 2007). This article will examine one specific exhibition that allows visitors to post unmoderated text, and will provide data on the percentage of user-generated content that is inappropriate or offensive.

Background

In April 2012, the Newseum opened the HP New Media Gallery, a 2,500 square foot interactive exhibition on the evolution and impact of new media. The exhibit provides visitors the opportunity to participate in a range of interactive experiences:

- Check in and post photographs and comments;
- Explore digital milestones on two large touch walls;
- Build their own “news page” using live news content on three touch tables;
- Play a gesture-based trivia game;
- Tweet directly into the gallery or watch a multi-screen video on the history of new media.

Visitors are encouraged to post content directly to screens in the gallery and on the gallery’s website. Participation has been very significant, and the response overwhelmingly positive.

We believe this is one of the few exhibitions where both the content and the user experience are based on new media. Video of the gallery is available here. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvXkr_p_52E



The HP New Media Gallery. Courtesy Sam Kitner/Newseum.

All of the content in the gallery is displayed on electronic devices. There are no text panels, no printed photographs, and no artifacts.

Exhibition Design

The *HP New Media Gallery* was conceived as a nontraditional exhibition built to be changed and updated on a regular basis. Our research led us to define new media as any technology that influenced the transformation of the news media from a top-down, one-to-many, lecture-based system, to a more democratic, many-to-many conversation-based system. There were three primary goals in the design process:

- Immerse visitors in a media environment that teaches them about new media;
- Allow visitors to actively contribute to the content displayed in the gallery and online;
- Provide intuitive user interfaces that encourage visitors to engage with the content.

All of the content in the gallery is displayed on electronic devices. There are no text panels, no printed photographs, and no artifacts. The gallery was designed to provide three zones of engagement. The first zone, or the outer ring, is primarily passive. Visitors can see four upper screens where a video that explains the history of new media alternates with

photographs and comments generated by other visitors. They can adjust to the media rich environment and sort out the different experiences. In the second zone, they can watch other visitors engaging with the technology in that section. The third zone is the area of active engagement where visitors are creating content, exploring curated material or playing a game. While many younger visitors move directly into the third zone of active engagement, many older visitors need time to adjust and observe.

“Choose the News:” User-Generated Content

The curatorial process is focused on explaining the history and impact of new media through participation. We thought it was important to have participation in the gallery since it is one of the key components to all new media narratives. But we had many concerns about how to prevent inappropriate content from being included in the exhibition. We will examine a section of the gallery called “Choose The News.”

The “Choose the News” section of the exhibition provides for a carefully scaffolded experience with a clearly defined goal. It allows visitors to build their own “home page” using live content from a variety of news organizations. A

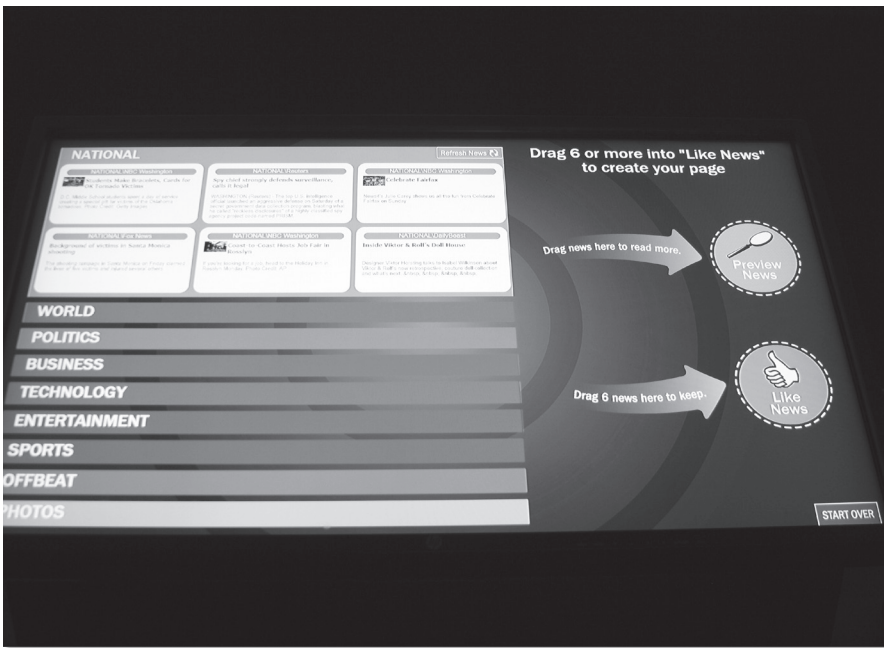


“Choose the News” exhibit. Courtesy Sam Kitner/Newseum.

and give it a thumbs-up, or discard it. The thumbs-up rating puts the story into their “Like News” circle. Once visitors have at least six stories in their “Like” circle, they can start building their own page.

They build the page by selecting one of three templates, then dragging a story into one of the available slots. If the story has a photo, they can size or crop the photo. Once they have filled all of the slots, they can select a color style and then name their page. The naming of the page is the unfiltered part of the user-generated content that we will be looking at in detail. There is a character string filter which prevents most common obscenities from being displayed (user is prompted to “choose another name.”)

When they hit the “Publish” button, the page will appear on the screen in front of them and on the website, where it is archived by date. They can then scroll through the “Review” screen showing other pages created by visitors and “like” them or flag them as inappropriate. If a page is flagged, then it is removed from the display in the gallery, but it is not removed from the website. This allows us to examine every page that is created to determine how often inappropriate titles are used, patterns of offensive comments, and the nature of those comments. It should be noted that while both visitors and staff may flag inappropriate content, we do not have a staff member assigned to this task. It is mostly visitors who flag inappropriate content.



“Build Your Page” screen. Courtesy Paul Sparrow.

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large rear-screen projection displays a combination of live professional news web pages and front pages created by visitors. Directly in front of the large screen, three touch tables make up the “creation stations.” The monitors display a menu of news stories that visitors can access. They can drag each story into a review box that lets them read the story on the “Build Your Page” screen. They can then “like” it

Results

We selected a six-week period from March 1, 2013, to April 15, 2013, a total of 46 days. During that period, the total

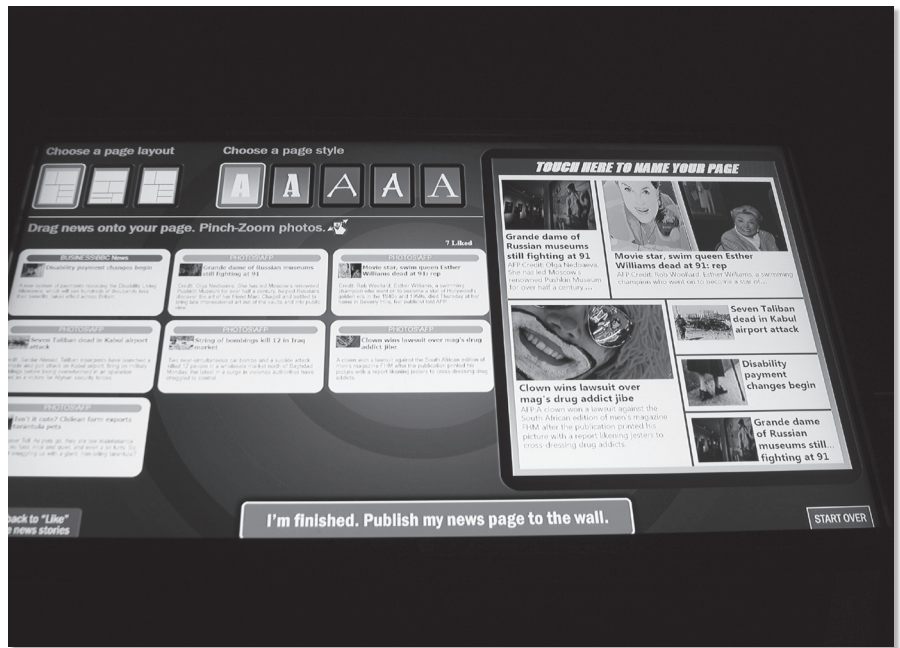
Newseum attendance was 108,872 people. The number of “Check-In” photographs posted to the HP New Media Gallery was 14,604 (13.4% of total visitors). The number of news pages created was 3,664 (3.4% of total visitors). The total number of inappropriate titles was 58 (1.58%).

On 25 of the 46 days (54%), no inappropriate content was posted to “Choose the News.” Nine days had more than one inappropriate comment. On the three worst days, which accounted for 26 of the 58 inappropriate comments (45%), the pages were created at about the same time and were probably created by a small group.

On the worst day (April 10), 14 inappropriate comments were posted. Nine of the posts appear together with several names appearing more than once. This one day represents 24% of the total number of inappropriate comments for the six-week period. The titles for the news pages were divided into four categories:

- Formal: A title that might be used in a real publication;
- Personal: Incorporating a person’s name;
- Jibberish: A string of characters that had no meaning;
- Inappropriate: Offensive, obscene, scatological, racial, or sexual.

All of these pages are available for review at <http://newmedia.newseum.org/find-your-news-page/#none>



“Titles and Styles” screen. Courtesy Paul Sparrow.



“Build Your Page” screen. Courtesy Paul Sparrow.

A sampling of the inappropriate titles: Your Daily Potty Post; Faggot; Rabies; F#ck bit cch; Fattazz times; SMEXINESS, look at me im naked; DILDO ENTERPRIZES; oh sh!t; square nipples; mr. nipples; your mom; tittie breath; Paulas dong is bigger than yurs; and wallstreetdickhole. One final note on the “Choose the News” process:

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it takes several minutes to scan through the many news stories, drag the selected stories into the "like" box, and then build the news page before visitors get to the point where they are prompted to create a title. So they have invested some time in the experience. On days when there are multiple inappropriate titles, those news pages were obviously created as fast as possible, ie. most just have the same article six times. So once visitors have decided to create a funny title, they no longer are sincerely engaging in the activity of building a news page.

Conclusions

The First Amendment is literally carved in stone on a 74-foot-high marble tablet on the front of the Newseum. We believe in freedom of speech. For us, the overwhelmingly positive response we have received from visitors regarding the *HP New Media Gallery* outweighs the few inappropriate comments that may have briefly offended some visitors. We believe more participation is better.

If museums wish to remain relevant to the cultural life of their communities, they must engage digital natives using tools that reflect their lives. Today's

technically savvy visitors want to be actively engaged, they want to be able to respond, comment, contribute and be taken seriously (Golbeck, 2013). At the same time, there will always be a certain percentage of people who will abuse the opportunity to contribute publicly. Based on the evidence collected at the Newseum, that number is less than 1.6%. Over an entire year it would probably be closer to 1.2%. Is that an acceptable ratio of good-to-bad content? Each institution needs to make that decision and weigh the positives and negatives of unmoderated user-generated content. There will never be universal agreement on the perfect balance between accurate, intelligent content provided by expert curators and personal, subjective, off-topic and possibly offensive content provided by visitors. But it is vitally important that museum leaders find ways to engage their visitors in a conversation, not just lecture to them. In most museums, the percentage of space allocated to user-generated content will be miniscule, a fraction of a percent of square footage. But the impact of enabling visitors to contribute so they feel connected and respected will be significant. ✨