

Exploring Social Media for Front-End Evaluation

by Bliss Jensen and Lynda Kelly



Museums are increasingly seeking ways to involve audiences in their exhibitions and programs through giving them a voice. Visitors too are seeking more engagement and two-way interaction with museums, as they find them interesting and exciting places to visit. A series of Kids' Colleges (full day consultations with students aged five to 18 about aspects of the Museum's work) held at the Australian Museum in 2006-2008, found that kids were keenly interested in the exhibition development process. They asked questions such as why certain topics were chosen, how themes were selected and developed, and how exhibitions were actually physically built (Kelly and Groundwater-Smith, 2009). Coupled with this is a movement generally away from exhibitions and programs based on collections and taxonomic displays to contextualised presentations that emphasise ideas. More and more, museums are being provocative and encouraging active participation in dealing with contested and timely issues such as climate change. The emergence of Web 2.0¹ and social media/social networking provides opportunities for joint and reciprocal communication where exhibition project teams can become co-creators with their audiences. What then, are social media and how can they be used to engage with museum audiences?

"*Social media* is a term for the tools and platforms people use to publish, converse and share content online. The tools include blogs, wikis, podcasts, and sites to share photos and bookmarks."² An important component of social media is the idea of social networking,³ which refers to "... online places where users can create a profile for themselves, and then socialise with others using a range of social media tools including blogs, video,

images, tagging, lists of friends, forums and messaging."⁴ Examples of social networking activities and sites include:⁵

- Creating profiles or descriptions of yourself on Facebook, LinkedIn, and eBay
- Blogging on Blogger and Wordpress
- Video sharing on YouTube
- Photo sharing on Flickr and Google Images
- Saving your favourite websites (ie bookmarking) on Delicious and Digg
- Microblogging on Twitter
- "Living" in virtual worlds such as Second Life and Habbo Hotel through creating a virtual identity
- Instant messaging (IM) or chat features on most social network sites including MSN, Facebook and ning.

Social media offer greater scope for collaboration, enabling museums to respond to changing demographics and psychographic characteristics of the public. Significantly, the tools of social media also provide new ways to learn about audiences through interacting with them directly, where curatorial and exhibition development staff can act as stimulators and facilitators. Audiences can invest in and contribute their ideas, with the subsequent interactions informing and shaping their exhibition experiences. However, the challenge for the museum sector is the patchy uptake of these tools and many reservations about what social media actually offer. A range of museums has been actively experimenting with social media, with many having established a strong online presence both on their own websites and in other spaces (Bernstein, 2008; Russo et al, 2008); however, to date, little exploration has been undertaken into how these tools may work in developing exhibition content.

Given these challenges, how can a greater

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involvement of audiences in developing exhibitions actually be achieved? This paper outlines a case study using social media as a front-end evaluation tool to revise or redevelop content and themes for an exhibition at the Australian Museum, Sydney, on the topic of evil. As there are still many reservations museums have about Web 2.0 and social media (Russo et al, 2008), the study also looked at the time investment and the outcomes achieved through the use of social media compared with undertaking a front-end study in a more traditional way.

Background: The Exhibition Idea

The *All About Evil* exhibition concept came to the Australian Museum from the Royal Tropical Institute (Tropenmuseum) Amsterdam after the success of their exhibition displayed in 2006. The exhibition was built from the Tropenmuseum's cultural collections and included over 900 items, including loans from European collections and private lenders. Historical artifacts were supplemented with contemporary/popular-culture content to cover three main themes: Origins of Evil, Images of Evil and Protection from Evil, drawing together stories about the concept of evil throughout human experience. While an interesting topic, it is a controversial one with provocative connotations and potentially graphic subject matter. With this in mind the Australian Museum did some preliminary work with audiences to gauge reactions to the overall topic, as well as gain feedback about some of the material that might be displayed. Early focus groups showed that there was more interest in fact in the contemporary relevance of evil played out in society than in the historical 'brown statues' displays of the Tropenmuseum exhibition. The exhibition is now being

considered for showing in a 'redeveloped' form at the Australian Museum.

Visitor evaluations conducted on past cultural exhibitions at the Australian Museum have shown that visitors think the exhibitions are 'worthy,' yet they don't necessarily engage with them. Exceptions to this were the past popular exhibitions *Punkulture* (1997), *Body Art* (2000), and *death: the last taboo* (2003). These exhibitions included an element of risk taking for the Museum, being specifically aimed at adult, younger, and niche audiences, while drawing on the Museum's cultural collections. A study of non-visitors to the Australian Museum in 2006 found that there was still a perception of the Museum as boring, looking tired and dark or 'old and dusty', unchanging, not contemporary, and conservative rather than provoking exploration (Colmar Brunton, 2006). Therefore, the *All About Evil* exhibition offers a chance for the Museum to address some of those stereotypes and to be more provocative around a topic that resonates with a wide range of human experiences. There is also an opportunity to tap into the wealth of the Museum's cultural collections, not just those from Australia, but other significant areas that are rarely on display including the Asian, Pacific, African, Inuit and South American collections. In addition, the topic provides opportunities to add contemporary content to make *All About Evil* a modern show that will resonate with current and new audiences. As part of the planning for the exhibition a front-end evaluation was conducted with three key audience segments (boys aged 10 and 15; girls aged 12-13; parents and young adults in their early 20s) using a focus group format. The aim was to test out the concept of "evil" and its suitability for Australian audiences, as well as

seek feedback on the Tropenmuseum's approach to the exhibition. This proved to be interesting as the study found that the word "evil" had powerful and strong human connotations, with evil taking on a contemporary meaning that is inextricably linked to human behavior, as opposed to mythology or theology. It was also found that a key potential audience for the exhibition was young adults interested in arts and contemporary culture (Vivid, 2008). To unpack these findings further a staff workshop was held to explore the ideas that emerged from the focus groups and to identify a range of possible themes and stories which were then to be researched with audiences more broadly. The decision was made to use social media to undertake this further testing as this would allow the Museum's exhibition project manager and audience researcher to consult potential audiences about the topic in their own spaces, in their own language and on their own terms, while also enabling them to interact with each other.

**Using social media in audience research:
Blogger and Facebook**

Audience research has a long history in museum practice. From Gilman's studies in the early twentieth century through the psychology movement of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and more recently the focus on the visitor as learner, museums have long demonstrated an interest in their audiences (Kelly, 2004). In the past, front-end evaluation studies would have been time-consuming, costly, and rather limited in the number and types of audiences that could be researched, especially when using a focus group approach. Now, however, museums have the opportunity to use tools provided by social media to interact more directly with a range of audiences on their own terms in a more equal,

two-way relationship.

Initially an exhibition development blog was established in January 2009 using Blogger, a free online blogging tool.⁶ We wanted to engage with potential audiences to invite feedback and workshop exhibition themes and stories further. We sent emails to a wide range of colleagues, friends, and friends of friends (as a snowball sample) asking them to read and contribute to the blog. We decided to make the blog unmoderated and to not host it on the Australian Museum's website. This was risky but we assumed that in being "removed" from the Museum respondents could be freer in their comments and participation and, to date, there have been no inappropriate comments posted.

Both the exhibition project manager and audience researcher wrote a series of posts and gradually added to the blog in order to start the discussions. We found that the blog seemed to be more of a static interface which was slightly depressing at first until Google Analytics (an online statistical tool counting site visitation) was added. The figures demonstrated a surprising level of activity—people were reading the blog even if they didn't contribute. For example, during June 2009 there were 261 visitors from 34 countries with 395 page views. However, of those who did comment, there were some passionate responses to the discussion board "What is Evil?" with contributors taking a serious angle and having quite a bit to say. As of 30 September the blog had 25 followers, 10 posts, and 33 comments. We envision that the blog and Facebook group will continue during the life of exhibition planning, development and showing, and we will continue to monitor interactions and feedback.

The challenge for the museum sector is the patchy uptake of these tools and many reservations about what social media actually offer.

“Today I'm thinking about evil and music! The history of rock 'n roll - from Robert Johnson's Me and the Devil Blues, to the 1960s shakin' hips and "voodoo music"... what have been the defining moments, artists and songs associated with the work of the devil?” Facebook comment

“Certainly the Inquisition was all about terrifying people into submission. Similarities between our modern media and the fear generation. Great topic. Evil is within us all.” Facebook comment

In February 2009 an *All About Evil* Facebook group was created,⁷ in part to address the frustrations of little two-way activity on the blog, but also to test whether Facebook would provide a better vehicle for discussion on themes and possible content for a target audience of young people. The group proved to be popular, gaining 218 members in the first three weeks and generating a great deal of activity and discussion between the Museum and members, as well as among members themselves. As of 30 September 2009 there were 347 members with 10 discussion topics, 106 comments, 52 wall posts, 54 photos uploaded and 28 links to other sites posted by members.

The audience certainly embraced the tools of Facebook, even contributing photographs and tagging photos uploaded by Museum staff. Through the Facebook group we found that there was some consistency with the contemporary themes identified in the focus groups and staff workshops. In addition, it demonstrated that this dialogue can help shape the exhibition content. Although this has been an experiment of sorts there have been interesting results so far and some people are also having fun on the group, illustrating that moments of light relief will be needed to pace the physical exhibition.

In comparing the blog and Facebook sites the blog seemed to be more of a reader space rather than a commenting space, with Facebook providing more discussion and interaction. There could be a number of reasons for this. First is the nature of the subject matter. Evil may be a “sexier” topic for a Facebook audience that tends to be aged around 20-30 years. Second, although

an attempt was made to make the blog as conversational as possible, it still seemed to have a (somewhat) authoritative voice. In the Facebook environment discussions seem more free flowing and casual. People are able to drop a few lines in a chatty way or write paragraphs if they really have something to say. Finally, we speculate that the lesser amount of activity on the blog could be technologically-related. Signing up to use a blog is not necessarily easy. Participants need to have a Google login name and password and subscribe to an RSS feed to keep updated. These could be barriers to participation, especially if people aren't familiar with using online blogging applications such as Blogger or Wordpress.

If you build it will they come? Building an online community

Although it took little time to actually set up the blog and Facebook group (around 10 minutes in total!) it still takes time to build and maintain the community. The group was persistently marketed to friends, friends of friends, colleagues and on other sites/networks such as Rhizome, Evil Inside blog and the H-Net mail lists of the Pop Culture Association in USA. There was a need to continually hyperlink between spaces, cross-linking a new blog post to Facebook and adding a Facebook link from the blog to encourage readers in both directions. The analytics statistics showed visible spikes in activity after sending monthly reminders to current members and invitations to new ones. During the communication it was also important not to assume everyone knew how to navigate social media. In the initial stages some users sought help from the exhibition developer on how to use Facebook, so a hands-on approach was adopted with the entire group in subsequent communications.

Educating members on technical aspects, media language, and site structure can be as simple as including a few step by step instructions. By incorporating a 'how to' language, and being literal in explanations such as 'follow the link,' and 'upload here' Facebook members built confidence in contributing and interacting. Hyperlinking to specific discussion posts wherever possible ensured people used the group page rather than simply replying to email. This also reinforced the live Facebook pages as a central repository for information rather a discussion in several private emails. Communication with members about navigation and ways of contributing is an ongoing role to make the interactions from the members as easy and freeflowing as possible.

Three Stages

From this work to date, we suggest that there are three stages in building a community when using social media for exhibition development. The first is to invite people to join, make it personal, actively market to a range of professional and personal networks, and continually encourage others to pass the information on. Overall, there is a need to "populate the web", not leaving it to one tool or place to do this. One idea that worked well was to ask members what content areas they were interested in and then to take them further through posting additional questions, links and comments. Tapping into current, established communities that seemingly have no connection (such as the rock band All About Evil who have their own Facebook fan page) also helped spread the word and encouraged diverse membership. The second stage in maintaining the community is to keep posting ideas, especially in the form of questions, as that invites more dialogue than just straight

text. The final stage is to use the community to actively contribute content such as photographs, objects, feedback on text, copyright clearances and so on, which will occur once the exhibition has been finally slotted in to the Museum's schedule.

Issues for Further Research

When comparing using social media tools to traditional front-end studies some issues emerged that warrant further research and thought. One was around sampling—what are the backgrounds of those participating? Are they a representative sample? What could be done about minimising potential bias? Another was to do with copyright and intellectual property—who "owns" the ideas proposed? Finally, what might happen if for some reason the physical exhibition does not go ahead? Have expectations been set up which may have negative implications for the Museum's relationship with this particular community? These issues don't arise when doing a front-end study in a traditional way as participants only have a fleeting relationship with the museum. However, even given these constraints using social media tools proved to be an easy and efficient way to elicit feedback and dialogue at no actual cost apart from a maximum time investment of two hours per week.

One unintended outcome was that disciplined blogging helped curatorial thought, information gathering, and writing. Writing blog posts and responding to Facebook forced the exhibition developer to continue reading and research, which in turn, now forms part of a valuable body of work that can be used in developing exhibition content and text. From this experiment, the idea of "write once, reuse many times across a range of mediums" is suggested

"I am not sure I agree with people that evil has moved on—I think the marketers of religion have moved on but the core message is still the same: other=evil."
Facebook comment

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as a way to demonstrate how social media can assist with museum program development (as shown in Figure 1).



This diagram illustrates the ways in which working with social media can support museum program development. Courtesy of the authors.

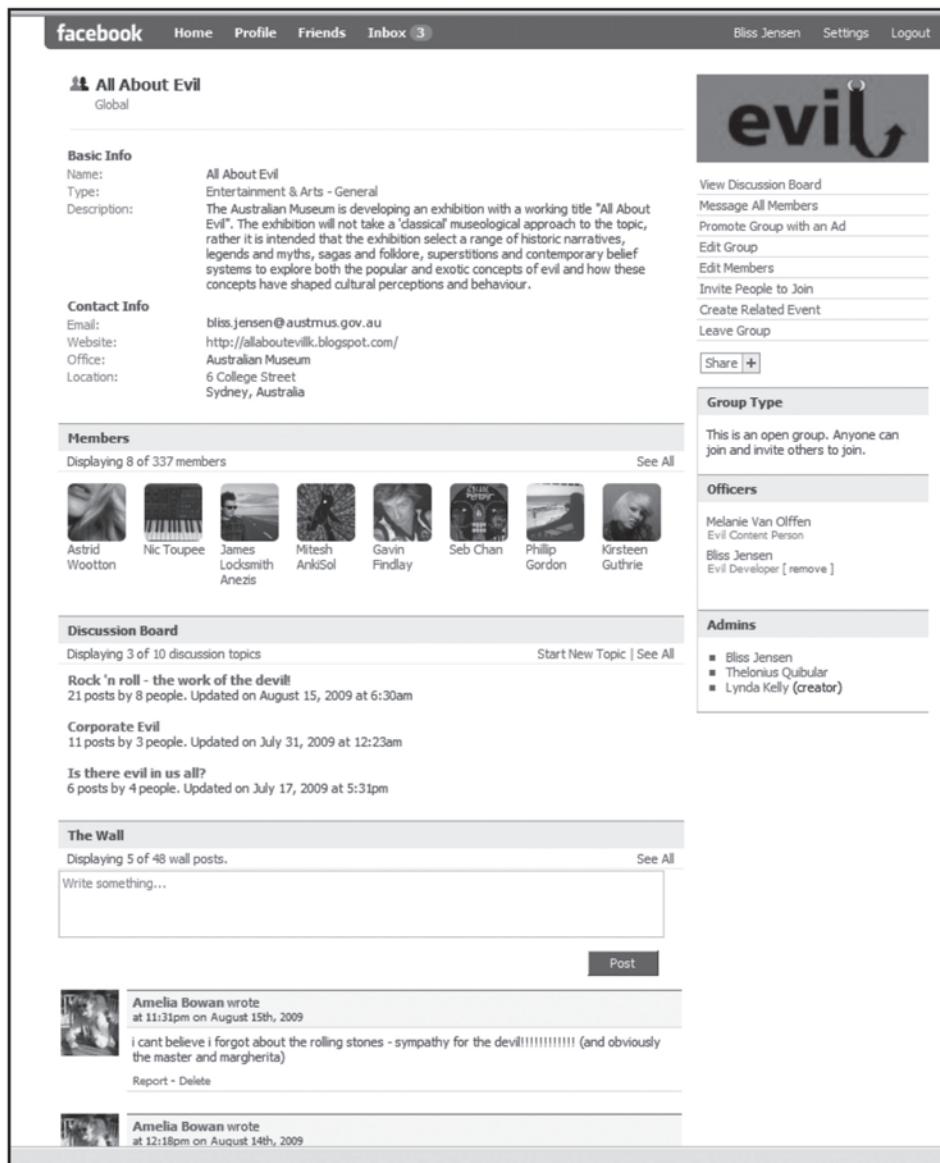
A second unintended outcome arose from the 'format' of Facebook. It is a catalogue of sorts. Through the structure of the discussion boards and the ability for people to link to other web resources, Facebook has become a central repository for all sorts of reference material as the exhibition concept has developed. While most discussion posts are instigated by the project developer, the subsequent interactions by group members are uncontrolled and uninhibited. By analysing the popular

discussion posts, comment threads, images and specific web- hyperlinks we are developing a general hierarchy of themes and stories, as "endorsed" by the members themselves.

Conclusion

By using social networking sites museums can develop much richer relationships with their communities, for example in providing an open forum for discussion and feedback in space occupied by both current and potential audiences. From this project we have learned a great deal about engaging our audiences using online tools that expose the process of exhibition development and make the Museum's practices transparent. We have been able to reach out to our audiences and get new people involved, especially younger people and those who would not necessarily either visit the Museum or imagine that we would have an exhibition on such a topic. Even though we can't necessarily control what people do with our information on the web, it can be managed through continually maintaining, supporting, and checking back in with the community.

Using social media will not replace the need for more traditional front-end evaluation studies. Yet sites such as Blogger and Facebook offer a new approach to engage audiences in the actual development of exhibitions and offer a fast and efficient way to seek immediate feedback about ideas and content at minimal cost. Social media provide another platform and avenue for audience engagement and should be seriously considered when designing a front-end study, especially if time and funding are limited. ✨



In February 2009 a Facebook page was created for **All About Evil**.

Endnotes:

¹Web 2.0 is defined as "... a second generation of web development and web design. It is characterised as facilitating communication, information sharing ... and collaboration on the world wide web. It has led to the development and evolution of web-based communities." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0.

²<http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/ShortAZ>

³In this paper the term social media will be used to encompass the concepts of Web 2.0 and social networking.

⁴<http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/ShortAZ>

⁵Adapted from Australian Communications and Media Authority Quick Guide Personal and peer safety: Safe social networking (<http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/HOMEPAGE/pc=HOME>).

⁶<http://allaboutevillk.blogspot.com/>

⁷<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?ref=home#/group.php?gid=63750884739>

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