



Meaning Making Matters: Communication, Consequences, and Exhibit Design

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Meaning making is not only a powerful theoretical concept. It has important consequences for museum practice, as well

Making meaning. The phrase just won't go away. "Man's search for meaning," described by Viktor Frankl in 1981, resonates nearly twenty years later. Throughout the '90's, Hillary Clinton discussed "the politics of meaning." Examining our possessions and household artifacts, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) documented "the meaning of things." Undeniably, the concept of meaning touches a huge societal nerve. It's no wonder that we've come to consider meaning for visitors in museums.

Despite the visceral recognition of a key concept of our times, it has been hard to put "meaning-making" into practice in museums. Some have written the idea off as an intellectual fad or trend, the latest in an unending line of "theoryspeak." Yet a close look at museum literature past and present, in light of changing beliefs about the nature of communication, suggests that meaning making *matters*. It is impacting our field in important ways. The ideas associated with meaning making have opened doors to new ways of thinking. Just where has it brought us? Why is its sketchiness worth grappling with? What concrete suggestions or lessons can it offer? And where might we go from here? Like many good stories, this one begins with a relationship: museums and communication.

A Good Fit: Museums and Communication

Since the museum is an institution devoted to the dissemination of expert information about artifacts, the literature of the museum profession has long reflected the concerns, beliefs, and language of the academic discipline of communication. Many museum professionals have described the relationship between visitors and museum media as a process of communication, and extolled the usefulness of communication theory for understanding the challenges, problems, and needs of museums (Cameron 1968; Ham 1983; Knez and Wright 1970; Sharpe 1976; Zuefle 1997). Since the post-war era, academic theories and beliefs about communication have been dominated by one major paradigm: the information perspective (Dahlgren 1998). Similarly, the past sixty years of museum studies literature reflects this view and its implications.

According to the information perspective, any process of communication involves the transmission of messages, or information, from a sender to a receiver. In addition to the sender, receiver, and message, the information paradigm has sought to understand the media, or means by which the message is presented, and the effects on or responses of the audience to a given message. From this perspective, the major research question has been, how does one most effectively convey information? This paradigm makes many assumptions, including the key belief—often called the "effects" perspective—that messages are received by receivers exactly as they are sent. Scholars who examined mass media explained that radio and tv viewers constituted a passive audience which was essentially "injected" with information by the sender (Lowery and De Fleur 1983). In later years, that perspective—and the concept of a passive viewer—was challenged. Closer examination of audience behavior with mass media suggested that the audience were in fact active, consciously and selectively making use of media to their own ends (Lowery and De Fleur 1983). Termed the "uses and gratifications" perspective, this development reflected a growing awareness of the importance of the audience in the communication process. Despite this shift, research from the information perspective continues to focus heavily on understanding exactly what variables and circumstances best facilitate the receipt of a message by a receiver as intended by the sender.

The information perspective on communication—including the "effects" and "uses and gratifications" views—pervades the literature of the museum profession. For example, in the 1920s the first visitor studies explored the basic issue of describing people's behavior in museums and explained how



various museum variables such as lighting and isolation of objects affected visitors' interest (Robinson 1928, 1930). In these studies, the audience was conceptualized as an undifferentiated mass, one which could be manipulated by museum variables, recalling the passive audience (Lowery and De Fleur 1983). In the 1940s and 50s, visitor studies began to conceptualize the audience as more active, applying a "uses and gratifications" approach. C. E. Cummings, director of the Buffalo Museum of Science, suggested testing the postulate that before an exhibit, a visitor is "Unconsciously pondering what there is in it for him personally, or in other words, is there anything in this that I myself will find of use or value?" (1940:141).

Relating what is seen to one's self, life, and relationships is a key feature of visitors' meanings in museums.

Neihoff (1959) was the first to ask visitors themselves why they came to museums. The results provided the first of many uses and gratifications typologies—with the largest percentage of his sample (55%)

reporting a visit to the museum for educational reasons, and the second largest (35%) for amusement or recreation.

In the 1960s the work of Marshall McLuhan inspired a brief explicit dialogue on the nature of the museum as a communications environment. During this time, some writers discussed the relationship between communicator, object, and visitors. For example, Cameron posited the artifact or object itself to be the carrier of the museum staff's "message," yet considered the labels and other interpretive materials to be important "media":

Once the exhibitor has determined the intended message, he selects the artifacts or kinifacts which he believes will carry his message effectively... The exhibitor knows, however, that his receivers, the museum visitors, do not share his specialized knowledge and that without some aids to translation...the decoded message will bear little resemblance to the intended message. The exhibitor therefore qualifies his non-verbal medium with subsidiary media which he can reasonably expect the visitor to understand. (1968:36)

Knez and Wright (1970:20) felt that the subsidiary media, rather than the objects, are in fact the principal conveyors of the exhibitor's message.

Despite subtle changes, the information perspective has dominated the museum literature to this day. Typically, exhibit evaluation focuses upon the efficacy of intended message transmission, as we still ask, "did the visitor get our message?" As museums continue to be defined primarily as educational institutions, wishing to convey painstakingly researched views, the dominance of the information perspective within the museum profession is

understandable. It is useful, and addresses issues that are key. However, it is against this backdrop that the paradigm of *meaning* cuts a strikingly different figure.

A Different Perspective: The Paradigm of Meaning

Increasingly, communication theorists could not ignore a major flaw in the fundamental assumption of the information paradigm. What ends up in people's heads is very often not identical to the sender's intention nor the message content. This truth opens the door to a different and compelling question: "What do audiences make of messages, and how?" Influenced by diverse fields, the early 1970s saw a major paradigm shift in thinking about communication: a shift in focus from message transmission to "meaning" (Dahlgren 1998).

The concept of "meaning" has been defined in a range of ways. A microcosm for the very paradigm itself, this lack of a singular definition has made the concept a slippery one to grasp. As Crosman (1980) usefully explains, the word "meaning" can stand for a speaker's intention, a particular understanding, or an individual's subjective valuing of something. And, as proponents of cultural studies point out, any given "meaning" carries ideologies (e.g. Fiske 1987).

How do audiences derive meaning? Making meaning is a basic human process, something we engage in all the time, in any setting. When we encounter information, we seek to make sense of it. While the meaning perspective on communication might suggest that an infinite number of "meanings" or interpretations of a given message are possible, the paradigm also emphasizes another critical factor typically ignored by the information paradigm: the role of culture. According to the meaning paradigm, the culture in which a communication act takes place will bound the range of potential meanings. Thus, the paradigm of meaning reflects a balanced view on the issue of "power" in communication. While the information perspective posits the audience as relatively passive recipients in a linear activity, the meaning perspective posits the creation of meaning as an interaction of producer, text or object, and reader, situated within a culture (e.g. Iser 1978). The communication process yields not just one, but a patterned yet limited number of possible meanings or readings of a particular message (e.g. Katz and Liebes 1986). Certain meanings are privileged over others, reflecting dominant ideologies.

The information paradigm and the meaning paradigm are not necessarily at odds, yet their different emphases yield different types of research. The meaning paradigm in communication has inspired at least three major strands of research: 1) *meaning-making*: studies that focus on processes of audience comprehension and understanding of "texts;" 2) *meaning*: studies that examine the different



meanings people make of a message, or a “text”; and 3) *consequence*: the outcome, value or broader significance of the communication experience. In studies of mass media audiences, these strands of research have often been combined. For example, in an extensive ethnographic study of families and television viewing, Lull (1980) examined the ways in which family members discussed and negotiated the meaning of television programs through conversation and interaction with each other, what those meanings were, and how those meanings and processes illustrated family television viewing as a valued experience of relationship maintenance and social learning.

Meaning and Museum Visitors

The meaning perspective on communication has significantly impacted recent thinking and writing about museums. In the last ten years, museum researchers have conducted studies that reflect all three major strands of meaning research in communication. In addition to empirical studies, others have written philosophical pieces that clearly reflect the meaning perspective in ways unlikely to have emerged if not for the paradigm shift. As is often the case when a paradigm shift first occurs, there is presently more writing available which addresses the theory or ideas surrounding the meaning paradigm rather than actual suggestions or practices which follow from the paradigm. While hopefully this issue of *Exhibitionist* makes a contribution to that gap, it is the work of all practitioners to wrestle with the meaning paradigm and the existing theoretical and philosophical work in order to translate these perspectives into practice. While a complete review of existing meaning-related literature is beyond the scope of this article, a sampling of relevant work suggests the food for thought available.

Meaning Making

How is meaning made in museums? What processes do visitors engage in when making meaning of artifacts and exhibits? If meaning emerges from the interaction of exhibit creator, exhibit itself (text), and visitor (reader), what occurs for the visitor?

Researchers seem to agree that the key feature of the meaning-making process is that visitors bring to bear particular frames of reference in museums (e.g. Silverman 1990; Perin 1992; Doering and Pekarik 1997). For example, borrowing a methodology from media audience studies, I examined the talk of visitor pairs in museums as reflective of their interpretive processes (1990). Regardless of museum type, visitors’ talk consists of distinct combinations of five basic interpretive moves: establishment (determining what something is); evaluation (expressing opinion or judgment); absolute object description (describing what is before you); relating special knowledge (about what is before you); and relating personal experience (connected to what is before you). Visitors

make meaning in museums by invoking particular combinations of these moves, or interpretive frames. Perin reached a similar conclusion in her study of adult museum visitors and their responses to the Native Americans Hall in the National Museum of Natural History. She described meaning as made by visitors through “repertoires of frames of reference that are constituted by systems of meanings, ideals, myths, beliefs, and prior understandings” (1992:195). Doering and Pekarik have termed visitors’ frames as “entrance narratives”—internal story lines consisting of three distinct components:

1. A basic framework, i.e., the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world;
2. Information about the given (exhibit) topic, organized according to that basic framework; and
3. Personal experiences, emotions and memories that verify and support this understanding. (1997:20)

In making meaning, visitors contribute a great deal of their own “raw material” to the construction of the text.

Meaning

What meaning do visitors make of museum artifacts and exhibits? What, if anything, explains differences in meanings made of the same text?

Perin (1992) examined the meanings visitors made of concepts such as “history,” “race,” and “tribes,” aspects of the exhibit “text” under study. She concluded that differences in meaning were a result of different “interpretive communities”—groups of people who share particular associations or ways of viewing an exhibit.

In my study of visitor pairs (1990), three major types of visitor meaning emerged among visitors: 1) *objective meaning*: the meaning intended by the exhibit designers, the artifact makers, or the artist; 2) *subjective meaning*: that in the realm of the personal, subjective, or associational; or 3) *combination meaning*: characterized by a concern for both objective and subjective meanings. Visitors with less formal education were more likely to make primarily-subjective meanings than those with higher education. Those with higher education were equally likely to display either primarily-objective meanings, or primarily combination-type meanings. While this split may be explained by the presence of absence of specialized knowledge often characterized by the distinction of “novice” versus “expert,” that does not tell the entire story. The study suggests that half of those who were highly educated still valued a combination approach to meaning—valuing equally the

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artist or museum's intentions, as well as their own personal meaning. Exercising a greater influence on meaning than education level was the nature of the visitor pair relationship, particularly gender configuration, and how long pair members knew each other. Whether or not one possesses expert knowledge, relating what is seen to one's self, life, and relationships is a key feature of visitors' meanings in museums.

A number of studies have sought to better understand the personal and affective responses of visitors. These studies suggest a growing interest in and respect for personal meanings as legitimate and important in and of themselves. Looking closely at affective response, Raphling and Serrell (1993) documented the importance of visitor reminiscence, imagination, and wonder as components of personal meaning. The prevalence and value of these types of personal meanings have been documented by others as well (e.g. Silverman 1990; Worts 1992).

Meaning making is a basic human process, something we engage in all the time.

Consequences

As Perin insightfully points out, the meaning paradigm "redefines such work of interpretive communities as invaluable consequences of museum visits, rather than as evidence of exhibition makers' failure" (1992).

What are the consequence(s) of making meaning of artifacts and exhibits? While studies of visitor motivations for museum visiting have long shown that museums are viewed as places for recreation, socializing, and relaxing, as well as for learning, the meaning paradigm provides new and strong evidence for a range of consequences of museum communication. Indeed, the contexts which visitors bring to bear can yield relationship building, identity expression, reflection, and much more.

Back in the 1970s, Sheldon Annis (1974), and later Nelson Graburn (1977), suggested that in museums, visitors seek and can find fulfillment of their needs for different experiences—particularly reverential, associational (or social), and educational experiences. Thanks largely to the meaning perspective, this idea has recently been embraced with renewed enthusiasm and understanding. The examination and categorization of visitor experience is currently a popular topic in museum literature. Once multiple perspectives and meanings are valued, it is the logical next step to value the multiplicity of consequences and experiences which result.

While disappointingly few of the recent writers have acknowledged the work of Annis or Graburn, inspiration for this direction has come in part from market research, a subfield of communication studies. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1999) have suggested that society is in a fourth stage in the progression of economic value, namely, the

experience economy. Rather than goods or services, consumers seek particular experiences, and museums can provide them. Kotler (1999) proposes that we've moved from education-centered museums to experience-centered museums, with recreation, sociability, learning, aesthetic, celebrative, and enchanting experiences among those that museums can fulfill. According to Doering (1999) it is social experiences, object experiences, cognitive experiences, and introspective experiences that visitors seek in museums. Doering points out the importance of understanding how the museum setting supports different types of experiences, and of "removing barriers or constraints that interfere with or detract from them" (p. 13). Research is needed to determine how exhibits in particular can do the same.

In the field of outdoor recreation, also concerned with effective exhibition and interpretation, writers have moved from a concern with experience to a focus upon *benefits* as the key consequences of communication (Riley and DeGraaf 1999). According to Bruns and colleagues (1994), experiences are outcomes for individuals, while benefits—which can follow from experiences—are changes which can occur at a broader scale, socially, economically, and environmentally. Wells and Loomis (1999) have recently discussed how these ideas can be applied to museums. A critical direction for future research will be understanding how different attributes of the museum setting, and of exhibitions, facilitate or impede particular meanings, experiences, and benefits for visitors.

In Sum

The full impact of the meaning paradigm on the theory, research, and practice of exhibit design continues to unfold. Yet one thing is clear. It is because of the meaning paradigm—and the posing of the question, what and how do visitors make of messages?—that the existence of a spectrum of meanings and consequences beyond information gain is now seen as fundamental to the present and future of museums.

Meaning-Making and Exhibit Design: Perspective into Practice

What do the ideas of the meaning paradigm suggest for the practice of exhibit design? What practical implications follow from all this? The meaning paradigm holds implications for many aspects of exhibit design, from exhibit objectives to evaluation. Here are ten points to ponder.

1. Think broadly and creatively about exhibit goals and objectives. Communication in museums yields a spectrum of possible consequences for visitors, including different types of experience, and benefits to individuals, groups, and societies. From reverential experience to the building of group identity, any consequence can serve as an explicit exhibit goal or objective. Design for social



interaction. Design for enchantment. Design for a better world.

2. Maintain your commitment to, and belief in the importance of providing excellent, well-researched interpretation. Visitors value their own personal meanings in addition to, not instead of, the meanings presented by museums. Don't doubt the centrality of the exhibit message to the visitor experience. No matter what the exhibit goals and objectives, expert interpretation matters.

3. Expect that visitors will make a variety of meanings in response to any exhibit. It's a given. Don't judge exhibit success on whether or not they "get the message." You're setting yourself up for disappointment, and doing yourself and your visitors a disservice.

4. Use front-end and formative evaluation to identify, explore, and understand visitors. Evaluation is key to learning what frames of reference visitors bring to bear on the exhibit subject matter you are addressing, what meanings they make and value. The meaning perspective shows why front-end and formative evaluation is essential to solid exhibit design. Only with understanding of visitors' interpretive frames and likely meanings can you effectively address and support multiple meanings.

5. Whenever possible, support multiple meanings. Research and experimentation is needed to understand what aspects, elements, and approaches to exhibit design best support multiple meanings. Exhibit text that presents differing views, opportunities for visitor input and feedback, and multimedia techniques are among the approaches that seem successful.

6. Whenever possible, support multiple consequences. Research and experimentation is needed here too, in order to understand what aspects, elements, and approaches to exhibit design best support multiple consequences. While some consequences seem incongruent (e.g., how do you make an exhibit that supports relaxation as well as excitement? Social interaction as well as personal reflection?), these are challenges we must address in order to meet diverse needs of visitors.

7. Engage different perspectives in the design and implementation of any exhibit. Each person who contributes to the design might represent yet another "interpretive community." Bring in people of all sorts to contribute their meanings, frames of reference, and ideas as the exhibit is created.

8. Be conscious and critical of choices and decisions. An exhibit cannot be all things to all people. Choices and decisions are required. Yet as they are made, consider the politics and implications. As Dahlgren (1998:56) notes of mass media, "current media formats...can be understood as fostering representation of certain things in certain ways, and deflecting others. The topics represented, the modes of address, the points of view, the narrative devices and dramaturgical strategies...all contribute." The same is true in museum exhibitry. What representations, meanings, and ideologies are being privileged through your choices? Over what others? Encourage all involved in exhibit design to be cognizant of, and responsible with their "power" as museum communicators.

9. Take informed risks. The best ways to support meaning making in museums may be through forms, approaches, and strategies we don't even know of as yet. The techniques that prove most effective at fostering different consequences and benefits may be unpopular, uncomfortable, or difficult at first, for visitors or exhibit designers. Change is difficult. It requires commitment, and a willingness to experiment. Read. Think. Try.

10. Evaluate your efforts and share the results. Whatever you do, evaluate both what you intended, as well as what happened for visitors to your exhibit. If at all possible, write about your efforts and the evaluation results in a museum magazine or journal, talk about it at professional conferences, discuss it with others. It is through such sharing that the body of professional knowledge will continue to grow, and with it, our understanding of meaning making in museums.

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