Chapter 1

Social Network Sites (SNS) and Digital Culture: Developing the Online Strategy of the Panama Viejo Museum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims at building an analytical framework that expands the current scholarship on Social Network Sites (SNS) to the domain of museums. SNS are web-based services that allow their users to create public or semi-public profiles and use these to create lists of other users with whom they share a connection, with the possibility to make their networks visible to themselves and also to make these networks visible at various degrees of public access (boyd & Ellison 2008, 211). These technologies also allow for communication between members of a network within various degrees of control and privacy. The emergence and growing popularity of SNS, with examples of general public services such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, niche versions such as those allowed by the Ning platform, and the current trend of including SNS capabilities in media sharing services such as YouTube and Flickr, has brought to museums new opportunities and challenges to engage in dialogue and connect with a variety of publics. The chapter discusses ongoing research into the role online activities play in the communications and branding strategies of museums, and how theory and technology might be applied to develop an analytical framework for a specific case, the Panama Viejo Museum. The main question that the chapter addresses is how to measure the degree the use of Social Network Sites and their impact in the online practices of museums, and proposes as response a framework for museum SNS analytics.

INTRODUCTION

The development of communication channels between museums and their various stakeholders has been a major concern for museums in the last few decades, as these institutions move away from a focus on the conservation of material culture towards a focus on their role as forums for the dissemination and negotiation of knowledge1. Museums are being encouraged to take on new
roles, seek new audiences and become sites of debate and discussion even allowing multiple interpretations of the objects they hold. This process, however, is not without conflict and debate within the museum community. Although the use of Social Network Sites (SNS), web-based services that allow their users to create public or semi-public profiles and use these to create lists of other users with whom they share a connection (boyd & Ellison 2008, 211), to disseminate knowledge about collections, engage new users, and enhance dialogue and participation has begun in museums around the world², not all museums consider it worthwhile³: concerns are being raised about intellectual property and security, issues of authority, and cost (time) vs. benefits of using SNS. This is understandable, as at the moment, the tools museums have to assess their online activities, including their use of SNS, provide limited information, and have not been conceived from analytical frameworks adequate to the needs of museums and other cultural institutions. The extent and rapidity with which the use of SNS is being incorporated into everyday life at a global scale and in particular amongst young people, however, makes the study of SNS of high relevance for museum practice and for the dissemination of digital culture online.

This chapter presents a framework for the assessment of SNS use and impact in museum communication, and collection dissemination practices. The chapter wishes to contribute to existing knowledge on SNS by exploring their potential use as a means to increase participation in museums. Given the identity building and preservation role of museums, research into how sensitive materials such as museum collections can be disseminated through SNS can provide insight into the intricacies of dealing with other culturally and socially sensitive types of information.

At the moment, museums and other institutions face increasing pressure to release their materials online. The levels of vulnerability of different collections and existing frameworks for preservation need to be carefully considered when trying to meet the informational needs of diverse audiences online. Concerns with issues of gender, ethnicity, class and power in social structures that are already driving a great amount of recent scholarship on museums need to be addressed in evaluations of the impact of a museum’s online activities and its use of new technologies such as SNS, as this has great implications with the democracy build-up function of museums.

This chapter presents a framework for Social Network Site analytics that will be applied to develop the online communication strategy of the Panama Viejo Museum. The project that the framework is related to is part of a larger project on museum SNS that I am currently developing in collaboration with Prof. Katherine Goodnow and Heng Wu at Infomedia, UiB. The chapter focuses in particular in the design phase of SNS analytics, as the implementation phase at the Panama Viejo Museum will begin in January 2010.

BACKGROUND

SNS are currently being adopted by several major museums, such as the Museum of London, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Questions arise, however, as to how to understand the dialogue and connections that SNS are affording museums in regards to networked publics and mediated environments, and in relation to the take-up of dialogue as the preferred form of communication for museums⁴. In relationship to scholarship in the area of Social Network Sites (SNS) at international and national levels, while SNS have been around since the late 1990s, and began to receive massive attention by traditional media since 2003 (boyd & Ellison 2008, 216.), scholarship about SNS and museums is still limited. This has, however, begun to change. In 2008, NaMU, a series of conferences on National Museums in Europe, included a session at Leices-
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