

Institution: The University of Salford

Unit of Assessment: D36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

Title of case study: Social Interpretation: Broadening and diversifying audience reach through bringing new voices to the interpretation of museum collections

1. Summary of the impact

'Social Interpretation' is focused on developing new systems to enable the interpretation, discussion, collection and sharing of cultural experiences with, and between, museum visitors, demonstrating the following impact:

- Understanding the factors which engage more diverse audiences with museums and galleries by;
 - Supporting mechanisms for visitors to develop personal and cultural memories and biographies, and to practice forms of reminiscence through using social media technologies; and
 - Enhancing the capacity of museums to facilitate social interpretation, increasing audience engagement and reach, and developing models for re-balancing the audience/authority relationship.

2. Underpinning research

The key researchers and positions they held at the institution at the time of the research are as follows: Dr Gaynor Bagnall, (from 2006), Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Culture, Professor Ben Light (from 2008) Professor of Digital Media, Dr Garry Crawford (from 2006), Professor in Cultural Sociology, Dr Victoria Gosling (from 2007), Lecturer in Sociology, School of Humanities, Law and Social Sciences.

This case study focuses on the findings of a 12-month collaborative research project led by the University of Salford in partnership with MTM London into IWM's development and implementation of the Social Interpretation (SI) project at two of its branches: IWM London, and IWM North, as part of the joint Digital R&D Fund for Arts and Culture, operated by Nesta, Arts Council England and the AHRC. The University of Salford and MTM London received funding from the programme (£37,686) to act as researchers on the Social Interpretation (SI) project led by the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and their technical partners, The Centre for Digital Humanities, University College London, Knowledge Integration, and *Gooii*, between October 2011 and October 2012.

- The appeal of museums is connected to the materiality of their objects and the ways in which they function not as static and reified relics, but as active producers of meaning (Bagnall and Rowland, 2010). They allow visitors to connect to personal and cultural memories and biographies, and to practise and perform forms of reminiscence. The appeal of certain objects is the emotional impact they evoke and the feelings they mobilise.
- The aim of the project was to apply social media models, to provide new frameworks for audience engagement and social interpretation, making social objects out of museum objects. The aspiration was to create a service that encouraged people to respond to IWM's themes and collections through several forms of digital interaction and participation, both in the gallery and via mobile and online platforms.
- To enable this digital interaction and participation IWM and its technical partners developed and installed 'comment and information' kiosks, placed QR codes next to exhibits and artworks, developed a bespoke mobile application called 'IWM Scan and Share' and added social interpretation elements to its website. This allowed social interpretation on and across all of the IWM digital platforms and outputs, and facilitated and supported the type of social interaction usually associated with social media, including the ability to like, comment, discuss, collect, and share things.
- The research team aimed to explore how new technologies can be used to broaden, deepen and diversify audience reach, and whether social moderation is an effective

response to the challenges posed by representing public comment and discussions in physical and digital cultural spaces, identifying three broad areas of research inquiry:

- How and if social media models enable social interpretation and encourage audience/s to engage with the Imperial War Museum in different ways
- What are the challenges and risks of the use of social interpretation and the representation of public discussions in physical and digital cultural spaces?
- Whether the use of social media models facilitates a re-balancing of the audience/authority relationship.
- Research was undertaken at both IWM London and IWM North, before and after the installation of the SI technology, and both quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analysed at both sites. Methods used included on-site visitor walking interviews, visitor focus groups, a visitor survey, staff interviews, and content and textual analysis of the visitor comments and the technology interfaces. The research investigated the potential for, and risks in applying social media models to cultural collections, to facilitate social interpretation, increase audience engagement and reach, and to re-balance the audience/authority relationship.

3. References to the research

Key outputs:

1. University of Salford and MTM London 2013, The Imperial War Museum's Social Interpretation Project, Digital R&D Fund for the Arts. [URL](#)
2. Bagnall, G. and Rowland, A. (2010) *The Imperial War Museum North: A Twenty-first Century Museum?* In Kilby, J. and Rowland, A. (Eds) 'The Future of Memory.' Oxford: Berghahn. [URL](#)

Key grant:

3. (2011- 2012) [digital R&D fund for arts and culture](#), a groundbreaking three-way collaboration between [Nesta](#), Arts Council England, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council ([AHRC](#)): £37,686

4. Details of the impact

Context: Recent data from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) indicates that between 2005/06 and 2011/2012, the proportion of people who had visited a museum or gallery in the last year increased from 42.3 per cent to 51.3 per cent. However, it was people in higher ACORN groups who had the highest attendance rates. One way of engaging more diverse groups with museums and galleries is to bring the arts into people's everyday lives, public spaces, local communities, and find new ways to develop a greater sense of public ownership of the arts; to make the arts more relevant to their lives. This case study is based on research which was funded as part of the pilot for the Digital R & D fund for arts and culture. One of 8 funded projects from 493 applications, *Social interpretation* addresses the need to engage more people in arts attendance, particularly where social status may militate against this by;

- Producing data about engagement by diverse audiences with museums and galleries of value to other arts and cultural organisations in diversifying attendance;
- Developing new products/services that could be used by other organisations, and
- Developing innovative and ground-breaking R & D partnerships between arts and cultural organisations, technology providers and researchers around widening participation.
- By drawing on social media models that encourage participation, the IWM's aim was to use the SI project to engage diverse audiences and to extend its reach into their everyday lives. The intention was to make collections more relevant, accessible and democratic, helping more diverse groups feel more engaged and offering a greater sense of ownership, connection and participation.

- The research was undertaken at both IWM London and IWM North, before and after the installation of the SI technology. Bagnall et al employed a range of research methods, including interviews, focus groups, a visitor survey, in gallery observation, and textual and interface analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analysed at both sites. Using a mixed method approach enabled visitors' stated views and preferences to be captured, but also allowed the opportunity to observe and gain insight into actual audience behaviour.
- There were a total of 20,130 visitor contributions to or social interactions with the chosen objects. Of these 12313 were in IWM London (April-November 2012) and 7817 in IWM North (July-November). A further 373 comments were made on the website, supporting the IWM in developing a new system to enable the interpretation, discussion, collection and sharing of cultural experiences with, and between, museum visitors.
- Analysis indicated that the technology was encouraging users to feel more connected with the museum motivated by a desire to share one's personal experiences or knowledge with other visitors. Social interpretation formed a significant proportion of this interaction (43 per cent), complementing rather than replacing the other types of social interaction taking place around the exhibits. The SI kiosks facilitated sharing and interpretation, and augmented museum experiences, for many of those who used them.
- Working with technology, cultural and artistic organisations was beneficial as it enabled the testing and application of ideas and theories, as well as providing new inspiration and direction for further research and collaborations. Through such collaborations, research propositions and models were tested in real world, 'living lab', scenarios, which have enabled the development of new ideas; built on real world practice and needs, in the form of 'grounded theory'. In particular, limitations of many previous studies are their specific focus either on, audiences or technology; rarely linking or understanding both. This project facilitated a multidisciplinary approach, which understands technology, technological and cultural providers, and users in a way that was beneficial to industry.
- Insights from the research both in terms of findings, and in relation to the practices and process of this innovative collaborative research project fed into, shaped, and led to the scaled up fund of £7million which Nesta, the Arts Council England, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council have made available for projects from 2012-2014/5. Bagnall (PI) & Crawford secured further funding in June 2013 from this call to work on *The Culture Experiences Project* in partnership with CultureLabel.com, Cambridge Judge Business School, Fusion Research + Analytics, Design Museum, Barbican Centre, ENO, Whitechapel Gallery and Dulwich Picture Gallery. The project will identify then leverage common, untapped cultural assets across the group of partner organisations, such as exhibitions, curatorial expertise, education programmes and events, which will be developed to engage new consumer segments including gift, corporate and tourist markets.
- Learning from the project was also used in the development of The Digital Research and Development Fund for Arts and Culture, Scotland, a partnership between Creative Scotland, Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Nesta, (2012/13) and The Digital Research and Development Fund for the Arts in Wales a partnership between the Arts Council of Wales, Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Nesta (2013/14)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- a) Guardian article: Innovation in arts and culture: sounding the horn for R&D:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2012/apr/03/innovation-arts-culture-nesta-fund?newsfeed=true>

- b) Nesta resources on the project:
http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/creative_economy/digital_rnd/assets/features/social_interpretation
- c) Digital R&D Fund for the Arts: <http://www.artsdigitalrnd.org.uk/content/case-studies-0>
- d) Arts Council England <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/our-investment/funding-programmes/digital-randd-fund-for-arts-and-culture/>
- e) Corroboration of the IWM project from Head of Digital Media, Imperial War Museums