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Museum 2.0:

A study into the culture of expertise within the museum blogosphere

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Abstract

While studies on popular culture have a more vast understanding of the impact of the participatory culture on experts and expertise, there is a dearth of literature on the impact of Web 2.0 on museums, which are established authorities within the cultural field. We aim to answer the following research question here: who are the experts and what is the nature of their expertise in the museum blogosphere? In addition, we look at the spatial culture on these museum blogs and its role in shaping expertise. We address this question by conducting a content analysis on a sample of the top ten ranked museum blogs, and find that new experts have entered the playing field and expertise is constructed in the personal and social context of an entertainment-oriented blogosphere.

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1. Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies have increasingly found their way into the museum field, creating new ways to engage with visitors and enhance their museum experience. Significant investments have been made in the development of these digital technologies, resulting in unique and surprising applications. One example is the website of *Ask a Curator* [1] which allows users to pose their questions directly on Twitter to a broad array of curators specialized in art, history or science. National collections also receive help from the public through social tagging, such as in the *Your Paintings* project, initiated by the BBC [2], or the new *Rijksstudio* by the Dutch Rijksmuseum [3], where users can tag paintings in order to enhance its descriptions and improve public access. Many museums are currently investing time and effort in their fanpages on Facebook, their Twitter feed and blog accounts. There is no denying that social media are here to stay, especially when considering the future generations of digital natives (Prensky, 2001) that museums will need to attract. This pressures museums to adapt to a new media environment and to reinvent and reposition themselves accordingly in the field of curating, interacting with their audiences and their means of knowledge dissemination (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). However, this shift towards the 'participatory culture' of Web 2.0 (Jenkins, 2006) also gives rise to a peculiar paradox: the traditional barriers of entry of museums, which hold a large capital of expertise, are potentially undermined as knowledge production becomes increasingly "external to the institution, in an individually or socially defined context" (Trant, 2008, p. 277). Now that these online platforms for public discussion and engagement exist, does this really lead to the questioning of museum expertise? As museums are confronted with the realities of Web 2.0, this question will increasingly come up; therefore, a better understanding of the Web 2.0 impact on traditional expertise is required.

Although a critical body of literature exists on this debate around the contemporary nature of the authority of museums , these studies are largely institution-centric, ignoring the role of other actors such as bloggers active on the museum blogosphere. Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical work on the impact of social media on traditional expertise in the museum field , limiting the discussion to the observation that the traditional assets of museums as hierarchical and static are in tension with the inherently democratic and evolving nature of the Web (Simon, 2007). On the other hand, studies on popular culture are more diverse, empirical and elaborate. In recent years, the consequences of the networking of knowledge on the relationship between experts and non-experts has been further investigated in among others online reviews of consumer and media goods. This literature provides a comparative framework for museums about the impact of the digital age on their traditional gatekeeping function.

At the heart of this discussion about museums and Web 2.0 lies the issue of authority: is traditional expertise obsolete in this new media era? In this paper, we aim to address the following research question: *who are the experts and what is the nature of their expertise in the museum blogosphere?* In addition, we look at the spatial culture of the museum blogosphere and its role in shaping expertise. Have museums been able to extend their authority to the blogosphere, or are age-old power relations shifting outwards? We target these questions by a content analysis on the top ten ranked museum blogs, delineating the current 'experts' or benchmarks on the Web.

First of all, we will situate the changes in contemporary museums within the historical development of museum experts and expertise, making use of the literature available in museum and communication studies. Secondly, we juxtapose this traditional expertise within the museum world to that of the museum blogosphere to gauge the extent

to which conventional actors continues to hold their sway within these novel digital museum platforms. Following the methodology, the results will be comprehensibly discussed in the fifth section arguing that new experts have entered the playing field and expertise is constructed and asserted in a distinctly different context, concluding that museums need to reposition themselves within a less hierarchical and entertainment-oriented museum blogosphere.

2. Literature review

To understand the current debate surrounding Web 2.0 and the authority of museums, most studies start with the historical roots of museum experts and their formation of expertise, which we will address in our first section. Following that, we will look into two main discussions surrounding Museum 2.0, starting with the literature on the potential redefinition of the relationship between amateurs and experts, followed by a review of the novel spatial aspects of the museum blogosphere.

Traditional museum expertise

Museums have long been our cultural gatekeepers whose main task it is to select, collect, preserve and valorize cultural objects, and arguably continue to be key actors in the process of establishing these canons. This logic was originally born out of the ideas of the Enlightenment era, where museums were endowed with the moral obligation to elevate the people and where reason took center-stage in the construction of knowledge by developing the “grand narratives (metanarratives) [...] that stood as valid outside the context of the site from which they were spoken” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 13). Curators perform the role of power brokers here by determining what is on display and in what context it should be

interpreted. They are identified as experts because they hold a lot of experience, are certified in their field, are identified by their peers as such, and are able to reach consensus in this field in the production of new knowledge (Shanteau *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, their institutional linkage largely adds to their expert status (Arora & Vermeulen, 2012). The available media technologies, such as catalogues or the signs near the object on exhibition, are important power tools in this respect as they present curators with the means to contextualize objects and communicate this knowledge to the visitors, and can thus be consciously or unconsciously manipulated in order to establish and protect their expert position (Silverstone, 1994). This one-to-many communication model is rather straightforward, as it impedes the possibility of evaluation and feedback. Expertise is contained in exclusive circles where knowledge is mainly discussed and negotiated between curators and their peers. This traditional practice of museum curators pervaded well into the twentieth century.

In the late 70's and 80's however, the museum field was increasingly facing more competition from a booming leisure industry, as well as shifting cultural policies and reduced funding (Burton and Scott, 2003). Against this background, the ideas of 'the new museology' were promoted, which included a paradigm shift from object-oriented to consumer-oriented museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In short, the idea grew that knowledge about the collection should not only come from the museum staff of experts, but should constitute multiple narratives from different perspectives, emphasizing the educational side of the museum. This was supported by the introduction of new media technologies, headed by the rise of museum websites in the 90's, which changed the approach to communication, enabling new connections between the museum and the public. No longer the curator is the sole driving force behind the museum, but now has to

share this position with a number of new museum professionals, such as the educator, the marketing officer and the information professional, who were attracted to cater to the needs of the visitors and engage with the community. Although museums come in all varieties and sizes, from science museums to art museums, from children museums to historical museums, what they all have in common nowadays is their educational mission (Cairns, 2013). However, while the age-old power relations has shifted to the education and marketing department, museums still try to control information over their collections. As Srinivasan *et al.* (2009) argue: “[t]he extension of the new museology into museums, over the past 30 years, has introduced a regime where the educator and the marketing manager control the voices of the museum’s presentations for a relatively narrow, selective view of ‘public’ interest” (p. 267). The museum as ‘academic gatekeeper’ has thus given way to the museum as an ‘educational gatekeeper’, but maintains its authority nonetheless. Despite efforts to give the audience more voice, museum staff still consist of ‘expert elites’, containing museum knowledge largely within their walls in order to maintain their legitimacy.

Museum 2.0

In recent years, museums have seen a spectacular rise in social media which have significantly expanded their range of opportunities for deepening the relationship with their audiences. Popular social media such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter are now part of common practice within museums (Russo, 2012). Kidd (2010) analyzed the applications of social media in museum communication and found three organizing frames. First of all, museums predominantly use their social media in a marketing frame with the aim to promote the museum and engage the audience. Secondly, they use these tools for building

and sustaining a community of interest around the institution, which is called the inclusivity frame. Besides as a tool for engagement and participation, the most creative use of social media is encouraging the public to co-create museum narratives in the collaborative frame.

Through this process of stimulating participation by social media, new cultural processes are created within museums. This has two major complications for the contemporary museum, which are the topic of study in this paper. First of all, the nature of expertise within museums is being called into question as the relationship between experts and laypersons are being redefined in the online space. In this 'mutualization' of museum information, where traditional experts and the public act as partners, museums are challenged to rethink their position as a traditional gatekeeper in the production, preservation and distribution of knowledge and to further consider the role of these contributors (Cairns, 2013). Secondly, the global access to and large production of online content on social media shifts the traditional museum to a new institution consisting of digital heritage. In other words, Web 2.0 technologies enable audiences to access and interpret museum information in their own time and on their own terms and to add their personal stories and memories to this body of knowledge, liberating collections from their academic and institutional context in the traditional museum space. Both of these aspects, on expertise and culture of the museum space in the context of Web 2.0, have received critical discussion in the literature and are addressed below.

Expertise 2.0

Since the eighteenth century, museums have gained an exclusive position as key intermediaries of knowledge. Over the recent decades however, experts and traditional notions of expertise have increasingly come under siege. This questioning of the authority of

institutions is not immediately a consequence of the rise of Web 2.0, but is rooted in the sociological criticism in the post-modern tradition. Lichtenstein (2009) names several reasons for what can be called a 'crisis in expertise'. First of all, the public expects certainty in expert decisions and consensus within institutions of expertise. However, this is not always the case, as some issues still are a heated topic of debate within their field. Secondly, experts may be subject to an ideological bias, in which their personal ideas gain more weight in the evaluation process. This leads the public to disapprove or to distrust experts. Finally, experts are increasingly recognized as belonging to an 'elite', prohibiting democratic debate and even suspected of using their status to acquire and maintain privilege (Lichtenstein, 2009). Collins and Evans (2002) further argue that this 'problem of legitimacy' is being replaced by a 'problem of extension', i.e. the dissolving of boundaries between experts and the general public so that everyone can partake in the evaluative decision. In the days of Web 2.0, both media producers and consumers have become "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Social theory on expertise often draws on this concept of 'participatory culture' and the collective knowledge of laypersons which can be distributed on social media nowadays.

At the crux of the problem here is that it is essential for museums to provide high quality information online, which might be threatened by the low quality of user content where the social web is being engulfed with. Keen (2007) is one of the main articulators of this problem. He argues that the democratization enabled by Web 2.0 calls the old experts and the nature of their expertise into question, as it "is undermining truth, souring civic discourse and belittling expertise, experience and talent" (p. 45). Museum scholars are taking this to heart when they argue that institutions need to redefine their process of

producing and distributing knowledge, such as Trant (1998) who promotes the view that museums should act as 'trusted cultural networks' online. However, studies suggest that curators are not really willing to give up on their authority and to accept user contributions (Schweibenz, 2011). Even though the increasing importance of social media in everyday life urges museums to open up and share their knowledge with a global public, many museums still seem to depend on their traditional 'unassailable voice' (Walsh, 1997) and one-to-many communication model.

Against this background of institutional reluctance and uncertainty with Web 2.0, there are the grassroots initiatives from within and outside the museum community. These new intermediaries seize the opportunity of the social Web to disseminate their own views, beliefs and knowledge to the extent that their collective wisdom may be equal to or even better than that from traditional experts in providing a guide to information seekers (Surowiecki, 2004; Arora and Vermeulen, 2012). Other than this 'wisdom of the crowds' proposition, Sunstein (2006) poses that with deliberation, i.e. the careful balancing of arguments and opinions prior to making a decision, any group, whether they are laypersons or experts of sorts, can arrive at the right outcome given the appropriate circumstances. These are two rather utopian claims to what happens when people are given the right social tools for organizing, acting and collaborating with each other online (Shirky, 2008). However, as is shown in many studies in for example online reviews of consumption or media products, there is still much debate about the quality of information online and many answers lie between a utopian and dystopian view on the democratic potential of Web 2.0 (cfr. Papacharissi, 2002).

In the 'information overload' that is Web 2.0, it is crucial for information consumers to identify the credible sources. Marlow (2004) argues that in an informal organization like a

blogging community, individuals actively seek for positions as opinion leaders, gatekeepers or mavens, i.e. roles which give them a sense of authority and status (see also Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). If they make it to the top of this online hierarchy, they can act as highly-influential 'experts' for others. In their study of the impact of the Internet on the Swedish music industry, Baym and Burnett (2009) find that these 'amateur experts' mainly are dedicated fans of Swedish independent music who act as important expert filters on the global Internet scene. Instead of feeling 'exploited', they see themselves as enthusiastic music lovers and peers of their favorite bands, and/or believe that they invest in their future by their currently altruistic work. On the other side of this online production and mediation system of knowledge lays the consumption of this fan culture and the question on how consumers use and rate these Internet reviewers within the range of other experts. Verboord (2010) finds here that institutional critics are not rated less, only find more competition from lay critics on the Web, especially when consumers have a broad taste in cultural products as books. In this sense, amateur experts constitute just another layer in value attributions and are complementary platforms to expert institutions.

Several studies have looked into the arsenal of strategies and tactics authors use to position themselves in such a competitive field. One example is the study by Park (2009) on prominent political bloggers and the 'discursive strategies' they used early-on to cast themselves as authoritative and credible commentators in the American political field. Discursive strategies are defined here as ways in which current topics and events are selected, commented upon and presented to the public as the 'truth'. Park's main finding is that these bloggers predominantly asserted their expertise by positioning themselves away from the institutional discourses and thus declaring their independence from mainstream journalism. This technique is called a 'double-break', a concept from Pierre Bourdieu (1990),

as opposite to a 'single-break' where experts claim a distance from laypeople on the basis of their expert knowledge. Within online reviews of consumption goods, Mackiewicz (2010) finds that reviewers incorporate any relevant expertise in their review, which may not only relate to the sort of qualification they bring, for example experience or any formal training, but also to the specialized discourse they use. Furthermore, Otterbacher (2011) argues that the most prominent reviews in the online community feature more words, use an appropriate writing style with correct punctuation and grammar, and make more persuasive appeals.

Given the public and interactive nature of social media, the emphasis is less laid upon the formal qualifications and institutional affiliations of the author and more on the quality of their writing and thoughts. In such an environment, the museum voice becomes just one out of many within the blogosphere, which urges museums to position themselves as an authoritative but credible information source online. On the other hand, amateur experts, either alone or together, are motivated to create cultural content and engage in the museum dialogue as well, redefining the relationship between traditional museum experts and the audience.

Space 2.0

Museums are inherently social spaces which are historically and culturally embedded within society. The culture within these spaces is in turn produced and reproduced by their participants, whose practices and performances are therefore subject to much sociological research, especially within the field of the sociology of art and art institutions. According to Fyfe (2011), the traditional museum space can be perceived from three sociological perspectives: the museum as calculated space, as contested space and as collective space.

As these spaces move virtual, their social functions are now subject to a thorough review which may potentially affect the audience perception of these museum spaces. The 'closed' space of the museum – with their white walls and quiet visitors – seems at odds with the participatory culture and open space of Web 2.0. Critics generally argue that the popularization and commercialization of the Web tends to desecrate and commodify the austere spaces in these high-end establishments. However, within the era of Web 2.0, museums are urged to open up and to transfer the emotional and affective aspects of their exhibited objects to the online space.

Through the increasing adoption of Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, the public are now allowed to take a peak 'behind-the-scenes', making the daily work of creating, handling and disseminating knowledge more transparent. This has also enabled the exchange of museum experiences between different groups of interest, which marks a distinct shift from the traditional one-way communication forms towards two-way communication, as advocated by supporters of the 'new museology'. However, "they remain spaces of definitive representation, with aspects of individual classification and comment" (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2009, p. 268). Whereas the real museum space is mainly inhabited by signs, pamphlets and catalogues which communicate the 'calculated' academic view of the traditional experts, the virtual museum is predominantly a space of play, where online visitors can share experiences and stroll around like a tourist or *flaneur* (Arora, 2012). Collections now move beyond museum walls and are experienced and valued in different contexts on a global scale. This potential loss of authenticity or 'aura' of the object when digitalized has received much critique within the literature, an issue which can be traced back to Walter Benjamin and his work on art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In Benjamin's interpretation, authenticity is attached to the real object or site, while the aura

transcends the object and focuses on the experience or engagement with the tradition and rituals related to such an object (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Although digital reproduction may attribute more 'exhibition value' to collections and endow new social functions and practices onto the virtual museum, it also reduces the 'aura' or the sentimental value of the art works by the detachment from the museum context. This dematerialization of 'the real thing' explains the great deal of hesitance among many cultural organizations in going digital because it challenges the fundamental role of the museum as exhibitors and educators of the authentic (Trant, 1998).

Public museums in the nineteenth century were designed in order to reflect a collective space, a space where visitors from every social strata could enjoy their local and national heritage. However, visitor studies from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards have shown that museum audiences are generally from the upper strata and thus unrepresentative of the wider population (cfr. DiMaggio, 1996), turning it into a space where power is contested. Despite these conflicts, museums show what a population has in common and thus represent 'imagined communities' (Fyfe, 2011). The new possibilities of Web 2.0 may further this original communal function, for example by personalizing the museum experience online in order to facilitate stronger ties between communities of interest and the museum (Aroyo et al., 2007). Furthermore, Lin, Fernandez and Gregor (2010) studied the informal and intrinsic needs of users of museum websites to find out what makes for enjoyable learning and experiences online. One of the conclusions was that Web 2.0 features like blogs and forums are able to engage and elicit affections among end users towards the organization. The sociotechnical design and architecture of online museum spaces thus become a crucial aspect of the museum experience, but just as important is the safeguarding of a sharing culture on these online platforms. Effective

knowledge sharing in an online community stands and falls upon the presence of a culture of fairness and trust, feelings of affiliation and tolerance, and openness (Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Yu *et al.*, 2010). However, these values are not born out of explicit guidelines and rules of conduct, but arise from within the community and their members (Wei, 2004). In effect, the web developer takes in an important role in the museum experience as a new kind of curator, who among other things is responsible for organizing the online community around an institution (cfr. Schlatter, 2010).

To summarize, in the current Web 2.0 environment, museums are urged to adopt a different attitude towards their audience. Historically speaking, these shifting relations with the public are not new, as some thirty years ago the academic gatekeepers made way for the educational gatekeepers in the new museology tradition. Simultaneously, the expertise of these old and new elites are being questioned within the sociological discourse. This has set in motion the advent of new hierarchies within the interactive nature of Web 2.0, which is changing the nature of expertise and the culture in which expertise is shaped. The question remains though whether these new possibilities for personal framing and the dissemination of museum information will eventually bring cultural democratization online, or rather reproduce and complement traditional practices.

3. Method

Museum blogs have received little empirical and systematic analysis so far, even though blogging had slowly started to pervade the museum field since 2002, gaining momentum in 2006. Our sample consists of the top ten ranked museum blogs in order to see whether museums have extended their authority online and what their strategies of exercising

expertise are on this novel platform (see Table 1). They represent established digital spaces which reach a vast audience within the blogosphere and so this sample may already tell us something about a possible leveling of the playing field.

Instead of the more popular ranking sites as Alexa and Technorati, we chose for the ranking on Blog Rank [4] because of two main advantages: 1) it incorporates twenty different factors into its ranking algorithm; and 2) it makes use of categories, such as museum blogs. Furthermore, specific museum blog directories as Museum Blogs [5] don't exist anymore, which makes a detailed selection of museum blogs quite impossible (or expensive). The Blog Rank system was launched in May 2009, starting out with a sample of 20.000 blogs which were by then manually categorized into 50 topics. Blog Rank now mainly depends upon visitor contributions to the database, as well as their judgments on the relevant category or categories the blog should be filed under. Daily updates assures accurate data, though they may lead to fluctuations in the ranking as new blogs are added to the system and blog data changes over time. Despite certain limitations of the system, such as missing or incomplete data and a lack of transparency in how the site scores are calculated, the ranking clearly shows those museum blogs that have achieved high visibility and legitimacy within the blogosphere and thus can be considered as important benchmarks.

We first conducted a qualitative content analysis on all of these ten blogs in order to identify the main actors, which encompasses an overall indexation of the blog's history, owner(s), explicit purpose, target audiences, activity, level of moderation and design. Later, we made a smaller sample of three blogs for a more in-depth study of the expertise on these blogs, and to analyze the specific culture of these web spaces. Per blog, we selected a total of twenty posts on the basis of interest, e.g. led by the category or tag, or accumulating

from the hyperlinks given in posts which were formerly selected. This resulted in a sample of blog spans spanning a period between March 2006 and May 2012. The blog posts were then separately analyzed using content and discourse analysis, and the emerging patterns and themes per blog in this small sample were noted down. The overlapping patterns will be discussed next.

4. Results and discussion

The preliminary analysis revealed three different kinds of blogs, namely five institutional museum blogs, three individual blogs and two community blogs.

The institutional blogs represent one children museum (*Bay Area Discovery Museum Blog*), two art museums (*Indianapolis Museum of Art Blog* and *bloggers@brooklynmuseum*) and two scientific (medical) museums (*Medical Museion* and *A Repository for Bottled Monsters*). The institutional museum blogosphere thus parallels the pluralistic dimension of the museum field. The purposes of these blogs vary from providing an online record of activities or a platform for discussion, engaging with the public and enhancing the visitor experience, to an educational platform for the exchange of news and facts.

The individual blogs are created by single bloggers who are professionals in their respective fields, namely an arts journalist (*CultureGrrl*), an exhibition designer (*ExhibiTricks*) and an ICT professional (*electronic museum*). Their overall aim is to disseminate critical thoughts and provide useful information on their field of interest.

Lastly, two community blogs were identified which are open to all users, either for professionals in a certain domain or to a community of 'fans'. The first one is *Museums and the Web*, a blog targeted at museum informatics professionals and aimed at creating a collaborative space for the exchange of knowledge. The second one is *Yesterday.sg*, whose

main purpose is to provide a community platform for sharing personal thoughts and memories about any heritage, both tangible as intangible, within the nation of Singapore.

These ten blogs form the playing ground for a variety of 'experts' and different types of expertise, as well as create a distinctive culture within their interactive space.

New types of experts

Three types of experts could be identified within our sample of the top blogs in the museum blogosphere. First of all, there are the traditional museum experts who can mainly be found blogging on institutional blogs, such as the blogging community of the Brooklyn Museum or the Danish *Medical Museion* blog. These blogs are all hosted by a diverse team of staff members (except for *Repository of Bottled Monsters*, which was initiated and maintained by one employee before his retirement from the museum) and ranging from across the museum actors such as the department of curators, to the educators and marketing professionals, and even to the people on the work floor, such as the museum guides and the maintainers of the buildings and gardens. This allows for a more three-dimensional and authentic perspective of the museum domain, as a range of topics are being addressed on these institutional blogs, creating great heterogeneity in the online museum public, not only in terms of interests, but also in terms of the level of knowledge (cfr. Grabill *et al.*, 2009). Since the 'old' experts – the curators – employ specialist terminology to disseminate their knowledge, our finding that blog posts from the 'new' museum professionals, such as the ICT specialist and marketing professional are more popular and receive more comments and 'likes' is hardly surprising.

These latter 'museum professionals' therefore constitute our second type of experts. They often create the majority of online content on the blog, which challenges the

organizational hierarchies of expertise in museums on the blogosphere. Instead of the traditional experts building trust online, the mainstream discourse is being counteracted by a contraflow of knowledge from museum bloggers from other domains. However, it is yet to be seen to what extent the traditional power relations are shifting towards a situation where the actors that usually stand at the periphery of the institution may be able to make changes in museum policies and practices. We cannot deny though that new media professionals now hold more power as they play an increasingly important role in today's museums in designing their online platforms (Marty, 2007). They are not only found within the institutional museum blogs in our sample, but also on the community blog *Museums and the Web*.

Finally, there are the 'amateur experts', who are "un-paid but not 'amateur' in the old-fashioned sense" (Russo, 2012, p. 147). They are the new museum 'rock stars' [6] as they are able to climb the hierarchy single-handedly by making effective use of the opportunities offered to them by social media. In that sense, their social-media savviness may endow them with expert knowledge on what constitutes as good online hosting and help them in creating a unique cultural space within the blogosphere that compels online visitors to inhabit, sustain and foster their interest in the blog. In addition, these amateur experts gain an expert position by emphasizing their independence from any institution in expressing their views and opinions online, for example by stating that "[this blog] is not sponsored by, affiliated to, hosted by, paid for, influenced by, in debt to or generally attached to any organisation or professional body" (*electronic museum*). Their autonomy gives them more leverage in providing critique and disclosure on museum practices. At the same time, it urges them to promote themselves and their expertise by asserting their experience in the field, their domain knowledge and even behavioral characteristics (e.g.

'hands-on mentality'). Self-disclosure is therefore an important feature on these blogs; it instills trust in their audience and enables them to articulate their 'expert' status within the saturated arena of Web 2.0. Individual bloggers thus spend a great deal of time and effort to upkeep their profile online, despite the low extrinsic incentives they may receive with their blog. These amateur experts regard their work as a 'labor of love' much in line with the motivation of the amateur experts in Baym and Burnett's study (2009). *CultureGrrl*, in a blog post where she is pondering about quitting with her blog, formulates it as follows: "(...) [N]o one 'exploited' me. I freely (perhaps foolishly) chose to do this, and it did bring me some speaking gigs and broadcast exposure that I would not otherwise have enjoyed. It raised my profile and made me semi-famous to a niche group of art aficionados. What's more, for the most part, I enjoyed doing it" [7].

In this analysis of the main actors in the museum blogosphere, we perceive that the common dichotomy between amateurs and experts slowly seem to blur online. None of the top ranked museum bloggers are 'amateurs', but rather form a range of new experts entering the conventionally fortified museum sphere. What constitutes as an 'amateur' thus needs to be reconstituted in the case of the museum blogosphere. Interested individuals as well as interest groups are now able to define their expertise in a public space, while the gatekeepers of old also enter these popular platforms from within their institution. However, these power relations are not only redefined between the inner and the outer circles of the museum field, but also from within as new museum professionals are starting to take the lead on these insitutional blogs.

Social context of expertise

Just as the range of experts has extended online, the nature of expertise has also changed with the advent of Web 2.0, which is especially apparent in the presence of collective authorship online. Collective authorship can mainly be found on community blogs, where the objective is to arrive at collective expertise or collective memories by establishing consensus and constructing a social environment. However, contrary to the institutional museum blogs, expertise does not depend here on the institutional linkage to a museum, but on the social acclamation of the group. In other words, the domain decides who is an expert in the group, although this may lead to a 'popularity effect' where a person that is better known to the peer group is more likely to be identified as an expert than a person who stands outside this group (Shanteau *et al.*, 2002). *Museums and the Web* for example provides a free and open space to "all working in the field [broadly defined], or studying museum/cultural informatics" [8]. No distinction is made here between professionals and non-professionals, as everyone is free to share their thoughts. In other words, it is not who says it, but rather what is said that counts.

Within such an online cultural democracy, a cacophony of voices can quickly give rise to new interpretations and valuations of cultural products. This is especially pronounced on the blog *Yesterday.sg*, which is a grassroots initiative of heritage enthusiasts and supported by the National Heritage Board of the government of Singapore. This community blog attempts to co-construct narratives about and to reach consensus on the most important heritage of Singapore. In the rapidly changing and growing urban environment of Singapore, many of the older sites are removed and leave national memory. The site is an attempt to save and disseminate some of the stories about and memories of these places: "We invite all of you to contribute through a blog post or join in our friendly discussions and share your thoughts and [your] sentiments on just about any heritage, history, the arts or museum-

related topic. You can also share your pictures or perhaps you have a home movie of a heritage site you have visited with your loved ones. You can send it to us too and share it with the world! Thanks for the memories!" [9].

Since its foundation in late October 2005, the blog has become very popular among Singaporean youth. The blog collects and documents the nation's popular memory and local knowledge, ranging from someone's favorite candy and food markets to someone telling a story about why s/he is so proud of the nation of Singapore. For this, the site builds on an open and inquiring online culture where 'amateur capital' (personal accounts of users) is equally or even more appreciated than official authoritative sources, which is for example shown in the accepted use of 'amateur' knowledge bases as Wikipedia. While we argued earlier that the notion of an 'amateur' is inadequate in evaluating the top museum bloggers as they all hold expert knowledge, these community bloggers pose an interesting perspective on the amateur debate online. Viewed as a community of amateurs as a whole, they can constitute as an 'expert' through their communal wisdom. However, we cannot assume that these amateur communities lead to high quality information, because reaching consensus in a large group is a difficult and iterative process, necessitating some hierarchy in order to arrive at knowledge production.

In conclusion, the national landscape of Singapore revives online through the personal gaze of its citizens. However, by putting national heritage in the context of personal narratives, the very definition of heritage is changing to a more democratic and ubiquitous level and subject to constant renegotiation. Instead of being solely defined by institutions and experts within regulated canons of taste, the heritage of the 'special' kind makes way for the 'ordinary' kind: social media, such as blogs like *Yesterday.sg*, are able to bring the everyday within the museum (Fairclough, 2012).

Personalization of authority

A quote by Ed Rodley of the Museum of Science in Boston – found in one of the analyzed blog posts – best summarizes one of the main patterns here [10]: “Participatory culture doesn’t do away with the need for authority, but it will privilege a different kind of authority, a more transparent, more engaged one. I believe people still want a trusted voice they can listen to, particularly in the digital realm. ... [Museums] must be less like the Great Oz, hiding behind our artifice and erudition. That doesn’t mean that we abandon our position, but it means we have make being questioned, being challenged, being called out, even being heckled part of what it means to be a museum. To be an authority in the current century will require a level of engagement that we can scarcely imagine.” This ‘personal touch’ or the use of popular appeal to their readers, for example in the use of humor in their writing, by calling readers their ‘art-lings’ (*CultureGrrl*) and talking about personal interests, can often be found in all museum blogs in our sample. This is a common tactic in asserting expertise online; the political bloggers of Park (2009) for example talked about their family or holidays and CEO’s use internal blogs to share stories about their hobbies or pets (cfr. Kelleher and Miller, 2006).

The boundaries between the blogger and the reader are becoming more porous online, as bloggers legitimize their position by identifying themselves with their audience, thus moving away from traditional top-down information flows. This is especially apparent on the individual blogs, like *CultureGrrl* who says: “[t]hanks, art-lings, for your intelligence, insights and appreciation, and for all our time together!” [11]. Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2011) have argued that readers can significantly contribute to the image of the blog and the blogger through their input. This input may take the form of comments or

encouragements, but also financial incentives, for example by pressing the 'Donate Now' button which can be found on most individual blogs. It may even provide them with offline job opportunities, such as the arts journalist and blogger *CultureGrrl* who landed various speaking gigs and broadcast exposure via her personal blog. In this way, a circle of legitimization is created between the readers and the bloggers.

Institutional museum blogs readily equip themselves with this personal tactic in order to elicit more engagement among their readers with the museum. In fact, the staff bloggers spend more effort on personalizing the online space and less so on constructing and enforcing authority. Their profile is usually accompanied by a detailed description of their personal interests, listing their favorite movies, music and food, while their job tag rather forms the background of their story. These two aspects of blogging by museum staff members (representing a museum while expressing personal ideas) lay somewhat uncomfortably with each other, which is reflected in common disclosures as: "[T]he views they express here (and elsewhere) are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [institution] or its staff". Although these institutional blogs hold an important function as a learning platform, previously institutionalized discourses are put in a more open and popular context online. Expert knowledge about the collection is overtly represented on these blogs, but they do not invite as much dialogue as to the extent as a 'So You Think You Can Blog' competition (*Indianapolis Art Museum Blog*), which elicited many personal comments from readers expressing their gratitude for the opportunity to become a guest blogger and complimenting others on their attempt. On these blogs, legitimacy is rather implied and their task as 'trusted cultural networks' irrevocably assumed.

Entertainment-oriented blog spaces

The final pattern discussed here is merely a consequence of the changes the museum field have gone through over the past thirty to forty years, where increasing leisure time and the boom in the entertainment industry led to fiercer competition in the sector. Museum blogs are a product of this shift in focus as they are now predominantly used in a marketing frame. However, this endows a difficult task upon them, as the characteristics of online visitors in general, which are mainly from a web-savvy younger generation, deviate significantly from the general characteristics of common museum visitors, certainly so in the creation of content. Museums that decide to launch a social media platform thus aim to reach and engage new audiences online, turning the space into a promotional vehicle mainly orientated to 'edutainment': "[i]f you are in the area before Andy Warhol Enterprises closes on January 2nd, (and if you haven't seen the show, you really should add a trip to the IMA to your holiday to-do list) stop by Star Studio, and add your voice to the conversation" [12].

Blogs are thus seen as attractive marketing platforms, not only for the museum, but also for the city and the country. In our analysis, we see that the relatively smaller, local museums are highly ranked in the museum blogosphere, instead of the more established and renowned museums. This is remarkable, but can be explained to a certain extent by their larger flexibility in applying new technologies in new modes of marketing and their potentially large (online) community. By entering the blogosphere and gaining effective visibility on the Internet, these museums try to reposition themselves in the competitive museum field. In the case of the community blog *Yesterday.sg*, this blog is used in an innovative way in order to promote cultural tourism to the country. This is not only made explicitly clear by a link to TripAdvisor on the site's homepage, but also by comments of visitors, who are either grateful for the promotion of their nation or express their

willingness to visit the place one day (“Wow, these are some great looking places. I will be definitely trying to visit them one day” [13]).

By transferring experiences of a museum visit or a site of local or national importance to the online space, these museum blogs are arguably turned into tourist sites. Tourists look for the ‘symbolic authenticity’ of places, which is highly embedded in the intangible heritage of traditions and rituals, but which is also open to multiple interpretations. The authenticity of place and the aura of the experience is recontextualized within the collective narratives and personal experiences of online visitors (cfr. Rickly-Boyd, 2012). In other words, museum blogs are becoming part of the tourism industry, just as their brick-and-mortar counterparts did decades ago in the context of privatization and their merger with the leisure industry. However, while museums focus on the authenticity of their *objects*, museum blogs provide authenticity in personal *memories* of these objects and transfers the experience to a mediated space which is inherently oriented to entertainment. Although the online space may not substitute for the real experience, it may play a complementary role in constructing and disseminating the ‘symbolic authenticity’ or uniqueness of the museum or site visit.

To summarize, we found three operational models within the top ranked museum blogs, namely institutional blogs maintained by a team of staff members of small, local museums, individual blogs maintained by professionals within domains related to the museum field and community blogs. Traditional museum experts, like the curators, are found blogging on the blogs of their institution, but a clear shift can be seen within the museum blogosphere towards a presence of actors who historically stood at the periphery of power and who now have a more transparent position as museum bloggers. However, these new actors are in no

sense 'amateurs', but are experts within their domain and have a clear link with the conventional museum field. While this questions the definition of 'amateurs' in the museum blogosphere, the increasing importance of the social context of expertise we perceived on these blogs has an interesting impact on the amateur-expert debate. Collective authorship as celebrated on the *Yesterday.sg* blog can have a profound impact on the definition of heritage canons, as this is constantly subject to renegotiation within a community of amateurs. Also, the personal gaze and a popular tone of voice is common practice within the 'participatory culture' of the blogosphere, which is turning the museum blog into a platform for both education and entertainment. As an increasingly important marketing platform, museum blogs are seen as complementing the experience of the visitor and the tourist.

5. Conclusion

Historically, museum information was contained within museum walls and handled, researched and communicated within the expert hands of academic historians and scientists. However, with the political, economic, social and cultural changes over the recent years, these traditional experts had to give way to educational gatekeepers, who opened the doors to the audience. Today, museums still assert their authority, albeit in a different, more personal tone of voice, which may put pressures on their previously 'unassailable voice'. In addition, they now have to deal with a less hierarchical space of Web 2.0 where institutional experts co-exist with motivated individuals and interested communities who produce museum knowledge in an individually or socially defined context, as is shown in our analysis of the museum blogosphere.

Within this context, the boundaries between experts and amateurs are being redefined. Expertise is not necessarily linked to institutional linkages and can be asserted in distinct ways online. This not only asks for a reconceptualization of the definition of ‘amateurs’ or even ‘amateur experts’, but also has interesting consequences for the definition of canons, which in the personal, social and entertainment-oriented space of the blogosphere is being renegotiated between museums and these new voices. It is worth researching to what extent this “museumification” has an impact on the interpretation of local and national heritage and popular culture in the online space. Further research is needed on these community blogs in terms of how knowledge is constructed on these spaces, and how consensus can be reached and conflicts managed.

Furthermore, our data suggest that smaller museums are more social media-savvy and take precedence over more established museums as they manage to gain a high presence in the museum blogosphere. More comparative work needs to be done on the difference in the usage of Web 2.0 between small and large museums in order to understand how small, local museums are able to make it to the top of the online hierarchy. Since we also found that the museum blogosphere has become an extension of the tourism industry, it would be interesting to see what impact their blogs have in terms of increased tourism to museums or sites. These are interesting points which we could not address due the scope of this exploratory paper, but which will put more light on the amateur-expert debate within the closed and highly authoritative museum field.

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Notes

1. <http://www.askacurator.com/home.html>
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/>
3. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>
4. <http://www.invesp.com/blog-rank>
5. <http://museumblogs.org/>
6. <http://www.imamuseum.org/blog/2011/10/11/please-chime-in-the-challenges-and-opportunities-of-participatory-culture/>
7. http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2012/01/valedictory_post_thanks_from_c.html
8. <http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/about>
9. <http://yesterday.sg/about-us/>
10. <http://www.imamuseum.org/blog/2011/10/11/please-chime-in-the-challenges-and-opportunities-of-participatory-culture/>
11. http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2012/01/valedictory_post_thanks_from_c.html
12. <http://www.imamuseum.org/blog/2010/12/16/slow-motion-conversation/>
13. <http://yesterday.sg/news/six-new-national-monuments-gazetted/>

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Table 1: Top 10 museum blogs in the Ultimate BlogRank by Invesp

#	Blog title	RSS membership	Unique montly visitors	Alexa rank	Number of incoming links (via Bing)	Google PR	Site Score
1st	Bay Area Discovery Museum Blog	n/a	162.143	608.594	34	6	100
2nd	CultureGrrl	n/a	n/a	n/a	8	7	99.17
3rd	museumsandtheweb.com	n/a	n/a	1.990.031	18	6	98.49
4th	Yesterday.sg	n/a	n/a	344.571	33	6	97.56
5th	Indianapolis Museum of Art Blog	104	n/a	n/a	5	6	97.53
6th	bloggers@brooklynmuseum	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	6	97.32
7th	ExhibiTricks	989	n/a	n/a	1	5	96.97
8th	Medical Museion	n/a	n/a	n/a	4	6	96.37
9th	electronic museum	n/a	n/a	7.387.982	3	5	96.17
10th	A Repository for Bottled Monsters	n/a	n/a	9.118.284	1	5	95.87

Source: <http://www.invesp.com/blog-rank/Museums>

Consulted on 16 March 2012; updated to current titles