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Museum Social Media Practices: In need of Repair?

Cassandra Kist¹[0000-0001-9960-2236]

¹University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK
Cassandra.kist@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract. Within the museum sector, research and associated theories on technology can often lead to rhetoric on progression that results in the idealization of the new or the emergent. However, if we approach technologies with a sensitivity towards their fragility, we see it is not always progression that is most interesting, but processes of repair. Social media, it can be argued, is an outdated technology which has lost its excitement and like the larger ideals associated with digital in the cultural heritage sector, is perceived with skepticism. Yet, with the rise of the museum's social role, museums have an ethical responsibility to understand the factors that shape how social media practices are enacted. In this paper I take on perspective of repair to explore the intersection between social media and organizational structures through an in-depth ethnographic case study of Glasgow Museums Services (Glasgow, UK). The analysis provides essential insights into the (dis)-connections between museum social media practices and museum infrastructure. It suggests that the desire for more participatory social media practices overlooks the underpinning and incompatible elements of the museum institution.

Keywords: Museum, Social Media, Infrastructure, Repair

1 Introduction

Museum literature often emphasizes the potential of social media for democratizing heritage, increasing access, enabling new social connections and for allowing new voices to be heard [1-2]. Thus, it might seem odd to apply a framework of 'repair' to the use of these platforms. However, it is the critics in opposition to this idealization, who argue museums on social media often fail to fulfill their participatory promise which calls for a lens of repair [3]. Instances of discrepancy between the espoused potential of social media and museum practice are apparent by the surmounting evidence that many institutions prioritize marketing and broadcasting motivations for social media use over engagement, participation and associated social goals [4-6]. The reason for these critiques has been investigated in different ways, often through surveys of museum staff and interviews [4-6]. Few researchers have studied the intersection between context and staff's social media practices through an in-depth ethnographic case study, with notable exceptions [7]. To further nuance existing knowledge of museum social media work, I take on a perspective of repair grounded in Science and Technology Studies, to understand the use of social media as a fragile

practice – which could be heavily impacted by the structures of museum institutions and social platforms.

Repair according to Nemer and Chirumamilla [8] is a process of “sustained engagement”, it is making do with what one has and contending with states of “neglect” or “decay” (p. 221). Previous research has investigated the repair of physical components of technology such as ships [9], but this paper pays attention to practice and its intersection with museum infrastructure building off previous researchers that use this analytical lens [10-11]. To do so, this paper draws on a wide range of data from an in-depth case study of Glasgow Museums, which is complimented by seven interviews with external social media professionals, from diverse cultural heritage institutions in Scotland. The paper argues that staff’s practices of repair at Glasgow Museums exposes tensions between social media use and elements of museum infrastructure. In doing so, it also highlights the structures and spaces that may support staff’s social media work.

2 Literature Review

According to a recent tweet from a MuseWeb conference “[s]ocial media is a dead topic...”. This sentiment closely aligns with several publications that accuse museums of focusing on marketing, overlooking the participatory potential of social media and associated social intentions [5,7,12,13]. Yet, social media is recognised as a medium through which museums amongst other institutions can increase accessibility, reach broader audiences and perhaps in a small way fulfill social goals [2]. This is partly due to the definition of social media as encompassing both a “culture and subset of networked digital media”, which carries “connotations of democratizing the media landscape and societies in various ways” ([2], p. 282). Indeed, there are increasing examples of museums using social media for social goals by sparking discussions across staff and organization, on contemporary issues through hashtags such as, #MuseumWorkersSpeak and through associations such as Museum Detox [14]. Museums can also use social media to advocate for social justice by providing an alternative perspective on historical events and thus, the present [15]. Further, there is recognition of the potential for users to feedback into the institution and change practices [16] and to hold institutions accountable by calling publicly for change [17]. Together, these publications suggest that the museum field is not ready to accept social media as a dead topic.

However, due to persisting critiques of museum social media as prioritizing marketing over social initiatives, many academics have been quick to investigate musocial¹. Previous investigations considered the ‘success’ of museums’ online activity by correlating the genre or frame of museum social media posts to such things

¹ ‘Musocial’ is a term commonly used in the cultural heritage sector to refer to museum social media work and is frequently used as a hashtag on Twitter to enable discussions in the field.

as user likes, reposts, inspiration or popularity [18-19]. Other researchers point to elements of museum structures and culture as impacting and shaping social media work. For example, some have taken a closer look at social media practices in terms of motivation and barriers through staff surveys and interview, noting that institutions lack strategies, goals, resources, and digital literacies [5]. Further, that social media engagement raises critical questions about sustainability, values, and ethics [20]. Museum staff have also published on their personal experiences, calling for change in the sector to recognize the undervalued skillset of musosocial professionals which often leads to burnout [21-22]. Such calls for investment may be connected to long-standing concerns regarding the adoption of social media for its impacts on the authenticity of objects, control of its use and context, authorship or copyright concerns, and institutional image [23]. These factors which may shape and limit social media speaks to the concept of infrastructures.

Infrastructures are often considered to be invisible systems – the “substrate” from which “substance” takes place ([24], p. 5). Infrastructure enables life to continue normally and includes not only the tangible material or brick and mortar of vital structures such as roadways but also existing values and norms. Infrastructure connects people and things and draws attention to the “ways in which technical systems connect to other structures and social practices across different sites” ([25], p. 215). The museum here is acknowledged to operate on infrastructures composed of the organization of staff and work, institutional priorities, and norms [25] which are directly connected to practice [26]. In other words, infrastructure serves as the foundation or base from which activities and practices can occur. The above-mentioned concerns regarding social media in the museum field might suggest in part, infrastructural limitations to social media practices. Understanding infrastructure’s relation to musosocial practices could be extended beyond previous research through greater attention to its operation within a specific context.

In particular, the concept of repair is used in this study to draw closer attention to the impact of infrastructure on museum social media practices. As Graziano and Trogal [10] suggest, repair draws attention to the “interaction between humans, machines and materials”, but also “refers to the necessity of maintaining systems of social relations in institutional practices” ([10], p. 203). When we think of repair, it can suggest the fixing of broken things, but as a concept, repair has been applied in various ways to materials, objects, organizations, and even activist movements. Building on organizational studies, Henke [27] describes repair practices as “negotiating order in contexts where heterogeneous elements come together to create complex social and technical systems” (p. 257). While repair can relate to achieving a fix, it can also be perceived as maintenance. Maintenance encompasses both staff practices and micro-frustrations that consistently contend and engage with breakdown which could provide insight into the infrastructural elements that cause disjuncture in social media practices [8]. In doing so, repair could also enable future organizational change by pointing to the spaces, structures, or skills that support staff’s social media work.

Therefore, to further understand the relation between museum infrastructure and social media work, this paper takes a unique approach by being embedded in Glasgow Museums.

3 Methodology

This research takes on the form of an in-depth case study which aims to understand a phenomenon in relation to context. In this case, the phenomenon is the frequently critiqued marketing frame of social media use in comparison to its potentials for inclusivity and social goals. The research questions investigated in this paper which stem from a portion of my larger thesis research include: What are the infrastructural factors that intersect with and shape staff's social media practices? What can staff's micro-frustrations and acts of maintenance tell us about how staff contend with infrastructure? As part of this case study, I undertook a year-long social media ethnography (Sept. 2019 – Sept. 2020) of and within Glasgow Museums Service (GM)², based at the Open Museum (OM), an outreach team and one of the 11 institutions under the branch of GM. Glasgow Museums is known for its long history of social inclusion policy statements and strategy documents [28], which is reflected in co-created community projects and exhibitions, often led by the Open Museum staff [29].

Postill and Pink [30] define social media ethnography as focused on the intersection of online and offline contexts and practices. As such, it could be conceptualized as an internet-based ethnography rather than an internet ethnography. Due to social media ethnography's focus on the relations between social media practices and context, it aligns with central research questions by pointing to its intersection with local histories, political structures or in this paper, institutional infrastructures. The social media ethnography involved attending several staff meetings and volunteering for OM activities which enabled my understanding of the relation between staff practices and museum infrastructure. I also immersed myself in social media practices by cocreating a social media strategy with OM staff and helping to create and coordinate Instagram posts. In this process I tried to maintain an active reflexivity in my involvement with staff and the institution. As a result, the research relied on a variety of data sources including, Glasgow Museums' social media meeting notes, ethnographic notes and 23 semi-structured interviews with staff who contribute to the social media channels across the institutions. These forms of data were stored and analyzed on the software MAXQDA using a thematic analysis following an iterative approach to data collection and analysis [31]. Due to some comments being sensitive, all staff here are anonymous and cited as 'GM staff'. The field work at Glasgow Museums was further complimented by seven semi-structured interviews with

² Glasgow Museums is the largest museum service in the UK outside London, consisting of 11 venues which is managed by the charity Glasgow Life - an institution that supports activities related to culture, sports, and learning.

external social media professionals, from diverse cultural heritage institutions in Scotland.

4 Analysis and Results

As proposed by Nemer and Chirumamilla [8] repair can be conceptualized as “sustained encounters” in which infrastructural conditions are contended with, placing emphasis on “making do” over progression (p. 221). However, processes of making do can also reveal the reasons for a perceived disconnection in media practices [8]. During my placement, Glasgow Museum staff frequently suggested a negative perception of their social media practices, describing it as “haphazard” (GM Staff B), “dis-jointed” (GM staff D), “patch-work” (GM staff M) and “not very organized...” (GM Staff V). They also often referred to the social media of the institution as “boring” (GM Staff X) and “needing some work” (GM Staff H). Such descriptors imply a lack of consistency across social media work and therefore might suggest a perception of practices as ‘broken’.

When probed further, staff cite a variety of evidence such as a tendency to “broadcast messages”, “relay essential information” or simply “putting things out there” as proof of their inadequate practices (GM Staff A; GM Staff X; GM Staff H) and they explicitly and implicitly state that this is due to digital and institutional infrastructures. This holds meaningful lessons in relation to the connection between the museum’s infrastructure and its impact on staff’s social media practices. By putting social media practices forward into the ongoing entanglements of agency, daily work, and interests, the relations of value and order that structures the social media work within Glasgow Museums began to become apparent [9]. Specifically, these infrastructural elements include the division of responsibilities and associated content, hierarchal control, and risk aversion.

4.1 Balancing Responsibilities

It is increasingly acknowledged in museum literature that there tends to be an over-use of social media for marketing or broadcasting rather than engagement, let alone engagement aimed towards social change [5, 12-13]. According to a digital staff member at a Scottish museum (personal communication, 2019) and a marketing staff member at a Scottish library (personal communication, 2019) social media is its own thing that encompasses cross departmental content and concerns, including: customer service, marketing, curatorial, research and engagement. As a result, these social media professionals suggest that social media work requires an active effort to continuously balance content and forms of use. The process of finding that balance may take years, as the Scottish library staff member suggests when they started at their institution social media was a “poor man’s marketing channel” and today its privileged for how it can enable engagement. Further, the staff member explains in

their experiences, no institution has social media in the same place/department or approaches it in the same way.

As evident in the discussion below, this balancing process of social media responsibilities and expectations at Glasgow Museums, manifests as an ongoing tension between staff responsibilities, priorities, and content. At Glasgow Museums there is no clear agreement on where social media should sit in the larger institution and by whom or how it should be run. There are three main Glasgow Museums digital staff members: One staff member, a Digital and New Media Manager leads digital initiatives across 10 Glasgow Museum venues in conjunction with a Digital Curator, while a second Digital Media Manager manages digital interpretation for the Burrell Renaissance big capital project. Both the Digital and New Media Manager and Digital Curator always have their hands full with high demand for their work and input across the 10 institutions. As a result, the upkeep of the institution's social media channels (over 28 accounts encompassing Facebook, Instagram and Twitter amongst others) is often passed between the digital team, the other museum staff members and Glasgow Life's marketing department³. Due to these shared responsibilities, staff comment that it is unclear who is leading social media, critically asking "who is the person who is really in charge of public messaging and who do you listen to?" (GM staff V).

Others have observed that "no one has really taken the reigns of social media..." (GM Staff G). In discussing other institutions one staff member reflected, "I feel like here, they don't even know themselves where it goes, you know is it marketing, is it something else – what is it?" (GM Staff V). In addition to this uncertainty, staff critique the channels as being filled with too much marketing content which drowns out staff voices and engagement. As one staff member reflected, "[f]rom a personal perspective, when you lose that identity of engagement within a social media channel - kind of what's the point?" (GM Staff F). As a result, some staff referenced pushing marketing to "let up" for their voices to be heard and not lost amongst the marketing stream (GM staff G). Such critical observations regarding the shared nature of social media work are also coupled by staff being occasionally referred to as digital "representatives" and a "team against marketing", encouraging a sort of staff alliance in trying to expand the balance of social media responsibilities (GM staff I; GM staff G).

The uncertainty of where social media goes and tension between a shared social media responsibility may also be caused by a lack of standards or guidelines for best practice. Compared to other digital positions, social media at Glasgow Museums has been described as "oddly structured" due to gaps in guidance (GM Staff R) and an absence of clear standards (GM Staff W). External social media professionals suggested in finding that 'balance' between content and responsibilities, social media

³ Glasgow Life's marketing team is responsible for Glasgow Museum's marketing capacities

guidelines and institutional direction could be empowering (Social media staff member, personal communication, 2020; Marketing staff member, personal communications, 2019). In comparison, several staff at Glasgow Museums, when queried if strategies or goals exist for the social media platforms stated, they simply “do the best they can” (GM Staff M; GM Staff F; GM Staff G). These common reflections of doing their best within constraints speaks to the idea of staff practices of repair as an ongoing maintenance.

4.2 Working Around Hierarchical Control

Frequent references to making do or doing their best suggests a continuous effort on the part of GM staff regarding the maintenance of social media use within an infrastructural backdrop of neglect. Staff’s maintenance practices and micro-frustrations point to not only the reason for breakages but also factors that support staff’s ability to carry-on. For instance, around 2012 digital staff members set up a monthly meeting for staff who contribute to social media to address any concerns, discuss upcoming events, and talk about things that worked or failed at their respective institution. During these meetings staff shared and reflected with their colleagues on content and forms of engagement they had experimented with, from mystery objects at the Riverside Museum to April Fool’s Day across the institutions. The monthly meetings exemplified that experimenting with content and approaches is possible and desired by staff on the ground, taking place to different extents even amid uncertainty.

However, it was clear these meetings were also a space to express concerns or even fears regarding ideas for content, campaigns, or projects. For instance, staff reflected on their lack of participation in museum meme day due to fear of being inappropriate or taking it too far (Social media meeting) and in making suggestions for April Fool’s Day questioned if management and marketing would be “onboard” (Social media meeting). These reflections and hesitations on the part of staff may be related to social media restrictions and censorship by the marketing team. Although staff’s expressions of uncertainty highlight the institutional restrictions, they also expose the importance of staff support and spaces for sharing their fears and triumphs. As one staff member emphasized, the social media meetings were useful for discussion and felt it provided a “network of support”, insinuating the importance of colleagues for social media work within constraints (GM Staff C).

Indeed, during my placement the actions of marketing appeared to be based on uncertainty in the use of these publicly visible channels for institutional identity. Restrictions were mainly evident in staff’s expressions of disappointment in relation to not having direct access to social media profiles, complaints about being told a change in passwords for Sprout Social at the last minute or being audited for the content they post, as was expressed in interviews (GM Staff M; GM Staff D; GM staff R; GM staff N) but also several social media meetings. Sprout Social is a collaborative social media scheduling tool through which staff members can create and schedule

posts and is a central source of stress and complaints. Sprout allows upper management and marketing to schedule and oversee social media content. As a result of these controls, some staff find workarounds by not using Sprout or relying on personal mobile devices to work with the platform more easily. On the other hand, several staff prefer to use their own accounts even when associated with their work and museum related content. Similar experiences were also recounted in external interviews, with musocial staff stating that responding to critiques or comments required getting approval from a long chain of command, which was at odds with the on-demand nature of social media.

4.3 Rebellious or Exerting Caution in Response to Risk aversion

While infrastructural restrictions were evident though everyday GM staff work, several disruptive events also caused these restrictions to increase exponentially impacting staff's practices. For instance, during the challenging period of Covid-19, marketing was put in control of gatekeeping the social media posts due to a fear of insensitive messaging. Frustration during this period was tangible as staff expressed more desire than usual to test out different forms of engagement on social media. Several channels were initially cut, and differential access was created as prioritization was placed on keeping up the main channels or those of the larger institutions. One GM staff member speaking from a smaller institution critically suggested that "the lack of access to social media, in the early days of lockdown showed us in a very poor light" (GM Staff L). As a result, several staff resorted to using personal social media accounts, even creating new ones to keep in touch with community groups, until controls on the institution's channels were loosened.

Due to these reactions GM staff express a certain antagonism towards marketing and upper management associated with a lack of personal agency or empowerment in using their institution's social media accounts. In fact, projects associated with social media were also occasionally referred to as being "rebellious", "subversive" or "going rogue" (GM Staff F; GM Staff G; GM staff K; GM Staff X). However, I noticed that these projects were often supported and celebrated by other colleagues in informal conversations and meetings - creating a feeling of congeniality amongst conspirators. On the other hand, in comparison to instances of rebelling or experimenting many Glasgow Museum staff members are also in a precarious position within which they may be averse to altering the status quo or taking part in risky behavior. This is due to several staff working on a contract basis, as institutional funding is not guaranteed over the next several years; Glasgow Museums is currently in a major deficit due to the financial status of Glasgow Life, which is predicted to be short 38 million pounds [32].

Therefore, staff who are not guaranteed permanent work, may feel limited in their ability to experiment with content, tone of voice and personality, especially since the

museums operate at arms-length to the city council. As one staff member explained, they feel restricted in their experimentation stating, “there is a certain level of reputation to uphold” (GM Staff M). Another staff member expressed a need to exert caution in their practices and avoid “stepping on toes and pushing the boundaries” (GM Staff X). According to a previous study on social media use by memory institutions in New Zealand, Liew et al. [33] similarly found that museum staff felt “obliged to monitor their use of social media to prevent the broadcast of opinions or content that council communications teams would deem unpalatable” (p. 100). As a result, GM staff check in with their colleagues to look over their posts: “[t]here’s no guidance really, we just try to negotiate responses together – like does this look okay?” and or as discussed above, share their ideas within social media meetings for feedback. Thus, staff’s precarious positions are further propagated by restrictions such as those imposed by Sprout Social, resulting in staff having to exert caution.

In turn, staff believe that upper management attributes less value to the use of social media as an engagement tool. Such a position is evident by staff who suggest management sees it as a secondary activity or an “after-thought” (GM staff G). This lack of value is in part ascribed to a paucity of resources and investment into the social media use of staff. For example, one staff member complained, echoing many others, that “there is no time or budget” (GM Staff P), and this according to another colleague, forces staff to choose between “community engagement or social media work” (GM Staff C). To work around time limitations some staff try to schedule months ahead, but in doing so, may negate the reactionary nature of social media. Thus, staff argue that the institution has yet to attribute a realistic value to digital media in general, in comparison to other museum institutions (GM Staff F). A lack of investment in social media for staff may thus, insinuate that management does not attribute value to social media work and propels staff’s disregard over acts of maintenance.

5 Discussion: Maintenance Work and Future Infrastructures

Nemer and Chirumamilla [8] argue that “it is this small-scale frustration...that provides us with a more poignant and meaningful window into thinking about what technology does to us, and what we can do with it” (p. 237). In this study, GM staff’s everyday frustrations and acts of maintenance highlights contradictions between the use of social media which demands an ongoing reflexivity [34] with elements of museum infrastructure. Social media practices can cause tension with a hierarchical organization, an institution’s risk aversion and the balancing of cross-departmental content and responsibilities. The instances of GM staff’s micro-frustrations, expressions of disappointment, “doing the best they can” and perceived subversions, not only highlight the existing tensions but also the spaces and factors that enable ongoing social media work.

Certainly, the infrastructural factors discussed in this paper are not necessarily new, as research on social and digital media adoption already in the early 2000s pointed to associated barriers of resources, institutional image, and the relinquishing of control [35]. However, this study by taking an ethnographic approach highlights not only the persistency of these factors, years after social media adoption, but also how staff contend with these limitations. GM staff employed a variety of tactics to ensure the maintenance of social media, including the subversion of hierarchical controls by using their own social media accounts or mobile devices and mitigating a lack of time by using opportune moments to schedule content in advance. Further, some staff maintained their social media practices by exerting caution while others pushed forward with projects in perceived acts of rebellion. Cutting across the limitations posed by museum infrastructure was also staff's reliance on colleague support, this was offered through the social media meetings and everyday work encounters which enabled staff to keep-up social media work. This suggests that investing in additional mediums to create spaces for informal staff sharing and support such as online chat groups could be beneficial. An online chat or Slack group that bridges staff who contribute to social media across institutions could assist staff in balancing social responsibilities and accessing peer support on a frequent basis⁴.

While cultivating staff networks of support are important factors in the maintenance of social media, a critical question looms regarding infrastructural change. What is likely needed considering the tensions discussed, is a shared social media mission with clear responsibilities to allow a balance of content to form including and beyond marketing. This is supported by Culture24 a social and digital media consultancy charity, who suggests social and digital media practices must be underpinned by a clear mission with actionable social values [36]. However, both upper management and marketing must also emphasize their trust and confidence in staff's social media practices and embrace the ambiguity of social media and potential failures or foolery. Finally, the institution's investment into social media is important for staff to allocate time and resources into its continued use.

While the persistency of infrastructural factors in hindering social media use within museum literature may seem discouraging, staff's acts of maintenance may lead to future infrastructures. Acts of repair in terms of maintenance can sometimes seem stationary, but some have suggested that they are also sites of alteration [37]. Through continuous repair incremental changes may take place not only in terms of social media work but also the institution's underpinning infrastructure. When asked about future visions of social media use, staff had enthusiastic ideas that relate to social initiatives such as: platforming visitor voices, challenging normative discourse and as a way for staff to learn from communities' expert knowledge. What this study underlines is that the discourse around museum staff's idealization of social media for

⁴ During Covid-19 this was implemented by some individual institutions in the form of online platforms such as Whatsapp, however their usefulness has yet to be assessed.

social goals and its use in practice is complex reflecting larger issues regarding the organization of responsibilities, institutional neutrality, risk, and perceived value.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, persisting critiques of museums “signaling openness” on social media which condemn staff’s social media practice as passive due to reliance on utopian discourses ([6], p. 240), must recognize systemic issues that go beyond a lack of staff agency to be nuanced by continuing tensions between social media and museum infrastructure. While this study focused on museum infrastructure, the structures of social media platforms must also be contended with and closer attention to how platforms intersect with museum practices could provide further insight into its potential for social initiatives. According to Graziano and Trogal [10] repair can manifest as “counter-conducts that demand an active and persistent engagement of practitioners with the systemic contradictions and power struggles shaping our material world” (p. 221). Contrary to an idealistic approach to social media, the study forefronts the agency of staff working with social media within the confines of contradictory museum structures and uncertain social media terrain, exemplifying the need for respect of its professionalization and recognition of the legitimacy of burn-out.

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