

Making Content Social

Sebastian Chan

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/>

in conversation with

Angela Plohman

<http://www.baltanlaboratories.org/>

Sebastian Chan is the Head of Digital Services & Research at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia. Coming from a background in social policy, journalism and media criticism as well as information technology, he has been building and producing websites and interactive media since the mid 1990s. At the Powerhouse he has been responsible for driving a strong user focus in design, usability and content, as well as expanding the scope and reach of the museum's suite of online projects. His other interests include electronic music and digital art, and he has directed and curated large scale national and international events and festivals, and also produces related media from radio broadcasts to print.

Angela Plohman is the Director of BALTAN Laboratories, a new art and technology laboratory based in Eindhoven. Previously she was programme officer at the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, Montreal; a freelance writer, project manager and researcher for a number of international media (art) organisations; content developer at LabforCulture.org; and project manager and content developer of the new Van Abbemuseum website.

The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia is one of the most pioneering museums worldwide investigating and using social technologies in the museum context, having consistently committed to developing innovative online projects that engage and involve their visitors and users on a global scale.

In 2006, after two years of research and experimentation based on the premise of the museum as a collection of experiences, rather than simply a collection of physical objects in a physical space, the museum put 70% of its collection online in a new collection search that allows users not only to search through the collection but also to tag items, adding their knowledge and experiences to that of the museum.¹ The focus is on simplicity and serendipity, encouraging users to get lost and discover new things as well as enabling easy access to what people are searching for. Within six months of the launch, website traffic tripled, expanding the audience from mainly local/national to global. In the first few months after the collection search went online, 95% of all available objects in the database had been viewed, despite the team expecting a smaller number of best-known works to be the main objects of interest. They discovered that they were able to cater to minority tastes in a way that would have been impossible through the museum's exhibition policy but that is completely feasible online.

¹ For more information, see: Chan, S., 'Tagging and Searching – Serendipity and museum collection databases'. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/chan/chan.html>.

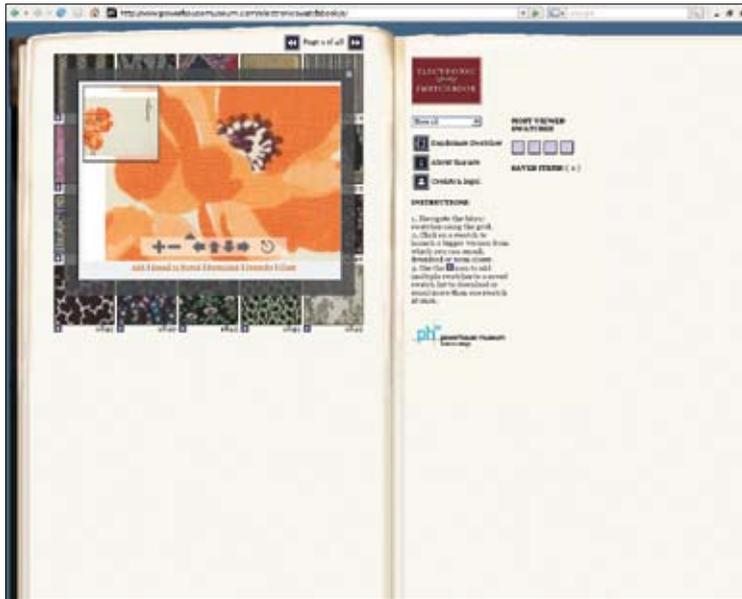
The Powerhouse had previously tested out the social side to the system on a smaller scale through an electronic swatchbook project that allowed fashion students to tag individual pages from these books online, providing a whole new layer of information to the books as a whole. Previously, digitalisation of museum collections was driven primarily by preservation but now it's all about access. Browsing has become more important, likened to the experience of wandering in a library where you may chance upon a book by accident. The library model has become more about social space, similar to the supermarket model – what else do I want? Audiences use museum content much differently than is expected or than what may be desired, but these experiences can only enrich what is done with collections.

Over the years, the Powerhouse has moved from having a web site to having a web presence, with its content found on multiple other social websites (such as Flickr, where the Powerhouse was the first museum to add their content to The Commons on Flickr; Facebook, where the marketing department of the museum maintains pages for different events; or YouTube, where the museum has been active since 2006). Communities form around the content and they communicate back, providing the museum with extremely valuable feedback and information about its own collection and activities. This allows the museum to bridge the semantic gap, i.e. the difference between curatorial (top down) terminology and audience (bottom up) understanding and meaning. By making its content social and engaging with other online projects, the museum is able to improve its work – designing better exhibitions, writing more accurate wall texts and labels, and benefiting from the knowledge of the community in the research of its own collection.

The Powerhouse's web presence is extensive, and not only in relation to its collection. It maintains several blogs, some targeted at professionals (such as Seb Chan's own fresh + new(er) blog) with others more general and public-facing, such as the *Walking the Wall blog*, a travel diary that accompanied a Powerhouse exhibition on the Great Wall of China. The Sydney Observatory also maintains a blog that is twice as popular as the Observatory's own website. The Powerhouse has made a separate website for children after realising that it was too hard for children to navigate the main site. On this site, they use a Creative Commons licence that allows children to, for example, download and play with reproductions for free.

For the Powerhouse, the web is seen as central to the museum's activities rather than something on the periphery or simply the responsibility of the marketing department. It listens and engages in the conversations happening online around its

(Below and right) Swatchbook project site of the Powerhouse Museum, <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/electronicwatchbook/s/>



content, and is not afraid to adapt to the behaviour and needs of its visitors or respond with new technologies and means of communication.

Sebastian Chan is currently the Head of Digital Services & Research at the Powerhouse Museum. Coming from a background in social policy, journalism and media criticism as well as information technology, he has been building and producing websites and interactive media since the mid 1990s. At the Powerhouse he has been responsible for driving a strong user focus in design, usability and content, as well as expanding the scope and reach of the museum's suite of online projects. He is known as a cultural sector specialist in social media and Web 2.0 applications, as well as web analytics. His other interests include electronic music and digital art, and he has directed and curated large scale national and international events and festivals, and also produces related media from radio broadcasts to print.

Chan was in Amsterdam for two events in September 2008, including a Masterclass for museum professionals on the application of social media in museums, organised by n8 in collaboration with the *Nederlandse Museumvereniging* and *DEN* on the occasion of the Open Museum symposium at *PICNIC '08*. Virtueel Platform had the chance to speak to him more in depth about the Powerhouse's pioneering activities and future plans.



The Powerhouse

ANGELA PLOHMAN

How does the Powerhouse compare to large US museums which are also very active in using social networks?

SEBASTIAN CHAN

The Powerhouse prides itself on being Australia's key interactive museum, and has been doing so for around twenty years. A new director has just started at the museum and there are big plans for reorganisation. The bottom line remains that enough people have to come through the door.

In Australia (as in most of Europe, but unlike in the US) museums are answerable to government as they are funded by government. We have to be accountable and also count the number of visitors we attract. The government also places restrictions on what you can do (this has consequences for new media projects in museums, e.g. how do you deal with social software, legal issues). It is hard to compare – Govt also gives limitations on what you can do. The Powerhouse is a state museum, with a mandate to that level of government, it is also important to note that it does not have a mandate to the local city. Some smaller museums in the US are visited primarily by a very local audience. Sydney is not a dense city (and thus cannot easily summon up a direct community interest).

The Powerhouse currently has large web department, with a small core of three people. There are extra staff for national research and state cooperation (extra funding for these). Because the Powerhouse is part of a network of museums, the technology and data can all be reappropriated for use in the broader network.

AP

You mentioned that most of the web team at the Powerhouse are artists and musicians. How does this affect the work of the department?

SC

There are side benefits with a team engaged with other forms of media. Musicians, for example, have an understanding of audiences and how they engage with arts. An audience creates its own energy at a show. Museums can learn from this. Visual artists are open to new

ways of presenting material. Also, it means that the team is creative outside of their work which makes them great to work with.

AP

What the Powerhouse has accomplished within its web services department is incredible. But what do you do when there is just a single person responsible for the web presence, not a whole web team?

SC

Smaller organisations have more problems. Unfortunately the big survive and dominate the web, the promise of Web 2.0 is built on the myth of small becoming big. Flickr's Commons project works because it's big. In the Netherlands Hyves is big. Our experience with national federated collections shows small museums can go along with big museums, but that the benefit of 'big' is the exposure to a bigger audience.

AP

Is it really a question of size or do you think it's more about the whole museum seeing the web as integral to every aspect of its activities?

SC

It is about seeing how your content and expertise, your knowledge, can fit into the overall ecosystem of the web. If you do this well then even a very small specialist museum can have enormous reach – indeed, often those who are already specialist cope better. Those more generalist museums like the Powerhouse – a museum that covers an enormous breadth of human creativity from trains to shoes – struggle.

AP

How does the Powerhouse link between its rich online offerings and the physical gallery experience (audio tours, other manifestations of the digital)?

SC

This is an area that the museum still needs to work on. Currently the gallery experience is pretty much separate from the rest of organisation, including the web Services. However, the web is increasingly permeating all parts of the organisation.

Making content social

AP

You have referred several times to the notion of making content social rather than talking about specific technologies. Why is this important for museums? And is this something only to be pursuing online?

SC

Making content social is more interesting than putting technology first. It's all about opening up and sharing. The cultural sector doesn't have a business model for that. But this is justifiable. At a recent seminar in the UK for Culture24 (www.culture24.org.uk) I was struck by the situation in the UK where museums have free admission. For the museums this has created great opportunities – people visit more frequently – but it hasn't been without its problems. It has put pressure on the web Units in museums to come up with business models that generate income (since this income is no longer available from admission fees).

This favours the 'global brand' museums such as the Tate and V&A. But take that away and smaller museums are no different.

AP

You pointed out that the museum now has less of a monopoly on interpretation and authority in these social media scenarios. Do you see this as one of the main challenges as the cultural sector tries to adopt these new strategies?

SC

Not a challenge, more a statement of fact.

We can bury our head in the sand and tell ourselves that Wikipedia or whatever we don't 'like' doesn't exist or is 'not accurate' but it doesn't change the facts that a significant proportion of our audience is now also using/reading/listening to these media.

Better that we engage and learn. It always strikes me as odd that research staff will complain about the accuracy of Wikipedia and go to great lengths to find errors, but never think about actually fixing the errors that they do find – and thus improve it for everyone!

'Knowledge is power' is still very relevant except that sometimes we get confused with

the difference between information and knowledge. Museums and others have plenty to contribute knowledge-wise but we have to start going beyond 'just information'.

To be truly knowledgeable you need to be able to effectively communicate your knowledge.

AP

Are there particular dangers in community-based projects?

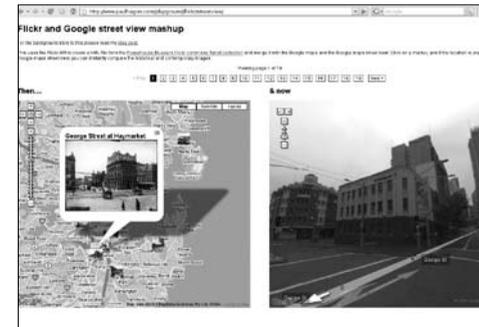
SC

Community based projects can be dangerous – simply because they involve multiple voices, different perspectives, and, well, 'other people'. As Sartre wrote 'hell is other people'. Of course, we can't be so negative but it might sound strange to say this but museums work well with irregular visitors, but regular repeat visitors can pose problems – mainly because, rightly, they take 'ownership' of the museum. They are often more demanding and less tolerant of problems. But online the regular visitors are a blessing. These are not new problems for museums. We have to keep reminding ourselves that only a small fraction of the population (in Australia) actually visits museums and so we're not built to cater 'for everyone'. We need to be mindful that the 'old ways' suited a relatively distinct elite audience and an education/learning oriented audience, and if we want to reach out to new audiences, we need to change our ways to accommodate their differing expectations of who we are, what we do, and why.

Since our collection has been opened up to the general public the curators have been inundated with questions and they can't handle the demand. We need systems to manage this demand. Social media scales well but one to one customer service doesn't. This paradox is incredibly important to remember.

AP

Talking about blessings, on your blog you recently posted a two-part interview with Bob Meade, an amateur blogger and tagger and one of the most active contributors to your content on Flickr. This is an incredibly insightful piece for museums trying to evaluate how and why its regular visitors would want to be engaged with collections online. Bob Meade seems to



Mash-up between Google Street View and the Flickr Commons photo collection of the Powerhouse Museum, created by Paul Hagon, <http://www.paulhagon.com/playground/flickr/streetview/>

feels a strong sense of ownership, as well as responsibility for this content. Having the opportunity to be able to comment online or tag, made him think 'hey, I know something about this. I think I might put that in there'. How did your interview with Bob Meade enlighten your view on the users of the tools you are developing?

SC

It seemed the obvious thing to do. Here was someone who was investing a phenomenal amount of time and energy helping us out. The very least we could do was to acknowledge him and then try to learn more about his motivations.

Like any audience research, these sort of qualitative interviews are really important in informing us of future directions, opportunities.

Listening is a pretty critical social skill to have – even if you are a bureaucracy or corporation.

AP

In your blog, in a post about the book by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff's *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, you make a key point about audience by saying that 'even here at the Powerhouse we've had social media projects fail because we have over-estimated our intended audiences and their predicted behaviour'. How can museums effectively develop projects that meet their target demographics (or technographics)? Are there enough Bob Meades out there?

SC

It is a combination of experimentation, low-risk pilot projects, and audience research. What we are doing at the Powerhouse is balancing what used to be an almost entirely 'supply-side' attitude to the content we made available ('we have this stuff that we think is interesting so here you go') with a demand-side element ('ok so you want to see this as well, we've got one of those, here you go').

Being more responsive to audiences and visitors, and citizens means tempering our strong desire to show what we want to show,

with an improving understanding of what citizens might be interested in. Now on the web this is really much easier than in our galleries – we don't have to have 'limitations' as a result of space etc. We can have everything in multiple places simultaneously in the digital space – so why not take advantage of that?

There aren't that many Bob Meades out there. But there are a lot of people who from time to time exhibit a similar level of enthusiasm – its about finding them and providing the right context in which their knowledge, skills and interests can align with the museum.

The Commons on Flickr

AP

The Powerhouse museum was the first museum to put its collection on The Commons on Flickr. You mentioned that digitalisation was previously driven by preservation but now it's about access, and that you see the museum as a node in a network of other sites, a publisher with multiple channels. The Commons, as a global, collective project, exemplifies this perspective. How has participating in The Commons enhanced the Powerhouse collection?

SC

What it has done has make citizens aware that the Powerhouse holds quite a significant set of photographic heritage. As a museum we haven't done many photographic exhibitions and these images have been, for the most part, only known to those who are in the research community. Now, they are there for others to explore and play with – and as such they are reaching many new people.

AP

The Netherlands has recently contributed for the first time to The Commons on Flickr with photographs from the Dutch National Archive. In the first two weeks since the archives have been on The Commons, the images have been viewed over 400,000 times and more than 400 comments have been added. What do you see as the most exciting aspect of this collective effort? Why should more museums be opening up their collections online in this way?

SC

Access and engagement. I think that that

volume of traffic highlights the enormous latent interest in these archival materials. People just haven't known that this sort of material is available for them to see, let alone use. If they did then they've always had to struggle with our archaic search tools on our own websites which has meant they have only had appeal to 'serious' researchers – and, frankly, there are not enough serious researchers out there in the world to maintain and fund archives, museums and libraries.

AP

Going back to your interview with Bob Meade, he talks about using the content online that he finds (in this case of the National Archives of Australia), and he states that he regards these collections 'as my heritage and everybody else who's here. And also it should be available for research from overseas as well. So yeah, I think it's my right to use it . . .' Do you think that this is what drives people to engage with these collections online in general?

SC

Not yet but I think that as more citizens become aware of what museums hold and preserve in trust for them, this attitude will become more prevalent and we will be able, as institutions, to use it to press funding bodies, philanthropic and governmental, for more adequate levels of financial support. After all, the biggest cost for a museum is actually the preservation and research of objects that aren't on public display.

Making our collections more accessible and placing them in online locations where citizens happen upon them is only a good thing.

Who are we doing this for?

AP

Are you designing for regular museum visitors? Do they actually want all this stuff?

SC

What is a regular museum visitor now? 85% of our online visitation comes via search engines. About 20% of this traffic is looking for us, the rest is looking for an enormously diverse range of content that we just happen to have references to. In the last 12 months there have been nearly 700,000 different search



Collection of Powerhouse Museum photographs at the Flickr Commons, http://www.flickr.com/photos/powerhouse_museum/

phrases that have led visitors to our website – and that’s a hugely diverse audience and range of visit intentions.

Museums used to have monopoly on information about stuff. Art museums have always been about experiences and interpretation. But science museums are not just about interpretation – they have, traditionally, been seen as trusted sources of ‘factual’ knowledge. Science museums are in a competitive environment now – with each other all over the globe, as well as with non-museums like Wikipedia. At the same time our physical spaces are now becoming more experience oriented. The experience economy is a big challenge. With other cultural fields you can adapt more easily to this new world, e.g. a performing arts company can change their programme. A museum with a collection can’t do that so easily.

The social web is about expression and social communication but in our physical spaces that aspect is more hidden. You can learn a lot from the web about potential audience.

AP

How do you track the success or failure of these online initiatives?

SC

We build in a fair amount of evaluation and review into our projects and we work very much with an iterative development approach – launch early before its completely ready, then iron out the bugs, add new features once we have actual people using the sites.

We also take a reasonably advanced approach to web metrics and analytics. We know that museums, generally, don’t make good use of web analytics tools nor do they really leverage the data they are gathering. We’ve been working to get more value from what we know and can learn about our users, visitors, and audiences.

Of course, it isn’t just about the numbers – really the only thing that matters is what insights you can get about your visitors so you improve your services in line with their needs. This gets lost when museums ‘compete’ over how many ‘millions’ of visitors they get online.

In fact I think the huge numbers that we’ve all been historically reporting are becoming a terrible burden.

They hide the reality that a great proportion of these ‘visits’ are not from human users, and they stop us from asking the right questions of our data.

AP

What new areas of development is the web services department of the museum working on now? What makes the Powerhouse’s experience and approach unique in the world of Web 2.0 and museums going social?

SC

The Powerhouse is currently focussing some attention on developing geo and mobile pilots. One key thing is that no museum should do the location-centric/geo-aware projects by themselves – it just makes no sense. A future user on their mobile device out in the world won’t just want one single institution’s dataset – they will want to compare, contrast and explore multiple datasets. Imagine if the local gig guide only had information on one chain of venues, or one type of music?

We’re five years away from these kinds of things getting mass appeal so for now it’s just a pilot. But you have to have your content ready now. That is the basis for experiments in this area.

We are also heavily investing in experimental work to make the connection between the gallery and the web far more seamless and the borders more porous between the two. There are several projects we will be launching during 2009 which will finally realise the potential of the collection documentation and search tools we’ve got on our website, within the galleries as well.

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CONTRIBUTIONS BY:

Shelley Bernstein
Cathy Brickwood
Sebastian Chan
Annet Dekker
Teresa Dillon
Mike Ellis
Yolande Harris
Lotte Meijer
Martine Neddam
Angela Plohman
Esther Polak
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Cathy Brickwood
Annet Dekker

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Cathy Brickwood

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Niels Kerssens

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