

The future of museums - Part One

A panel discussion with Frank Howarth, Director of the Australian Museum; Associate Professor Angelina Russo from the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University; and Louise Douglas, General Manager, Audiences and Programs at the National Museum of Australia. We also hear from the Director General of the International Council of Museums, Julien Anfruns.

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Transcript

This transcript was typed from a recording of the program. The ABC cannot guarantee its complete accuracy because of the possibility of mishearing and occasional difficulty in identifying speakers.

[French Accordion *Flambee Montalbanaise* - Guy Viseur et son orchestra]

Antony Funnell: OK we're ready for our tour of the Louvre; I've got a flat white for you and a cappuccino for me, and I'll grab some croissants as well.

Woman: Thank you. Such a beautiful day.

Antony Funnell: I think we should get right into it.

Woman: Sure, OK, I've got the laptop open, let's do it. Where should we start?

Antony Funnell: I think we should just click through the home page and go straight to the Egyptian artefacts.

Woman: And if we've got time can we check out the virtual tour of the Pyramid? I want to see if they've got an online gift shop.

Antony Funnell: Let's do it.

[music]

Antony Funnell: Yes, that was a set-up of course, and it may offend some museum purists to hear this, but the fact is that many of the world's top museums now get far more visitors through their websites than they do through the front doors.

The way we interact with museums and their collections is changing fast, and so too is the way they're now engaging with us.

Hello, Antony Funnell here, and welcome to *Future Tense*.

Over the next two programs we'll explore some of that change. This week we'll go big picture and then in part two, we'll look at a few of the many innovative ways in which those involved in the industry are positioning their institutions for the future.

Now, having started with a bit of a Parisian theme, let's here from Frenchman Julien Anfruns.

Mr Anfruns is the Director-General of the International Council of Museums, headquartered in Paris, and he says despite the global economic downturn, it is an exciting time for the museum sector, as it grapples to reposition itself in the 21st century.

Julien Anfruns: Today, museums are much more globalised than they used to be. They do have more international exhibitions, moving all around the world, attracting collections from all the museums of other origins, as well as new territories for museums, and especially today in Asia and in the Middle East.

At the same time, museums as well are moving forward with new technologies in order to create somehow a better understanding of their collections through modern audioguides, through tactile galleries, for instance, through new 3D possibilities in order to understand their collections in every respect, so that's quite a challenge for museums today.

Antony Funnell: So the days of the static display, the static museum display, they're long gone?

Julien Anfruns: I think so. Today it's very much about how to be interactive. Many museums try to create events in their galleries. The Louvre museum has created different night events for a younger audience, and you can listen to music, you can have theatre plays, and all of that in correspondence with the current collections.

Antony Funnell: Now you mentioned there that there's an emphasis on Asia as a growing area of interest for museums. Are we seeing more museums popping up in cities around the world?

Julien Anfruns: So regarding Asia, I'm just going to give you one example regarding Shanghai, which is very specific. The Mayor of Shanghai wants to develop the museums for the city by 60% within three years, which is enormous. And actually the Chinese authorities want to offer the same cultural ratio to city people as there is in major cities in Australia, in Europe, or in the United States, so they want to have like a catch-up somehow ratio for that.

Antony Funnell: What does that mean in terms of the international governance of museums?

Julien Anfruns: So it's a very important question that you raise. When you make a comparison with what's going on today about economics, we do see that there is a need of global governance or global regulation. That's pretty much the same for museums. Because if you do have new territory somehow, with new standards, it's very difficult to have an exchange for an exhibition, and then for instance, a premium that you have to pay for insurance are going to be very difficult to bear. So I do believe that we need to endeavour and to strengthen the dialogue between all the museums, and to have standards of ethics and of methodology among different experts.

One of the ways is to share the code of ethics that the International Council of Museums has developed over the years which is a very good reference for museums in 155 countries. But more than that as well is how to implement those kinds of standards, and for this you need a lot of training, you need a lot of dialogue with experts, because unfortunately, many parts of the world do not have the adequate training for their museum people.

Antony Funnell: Well thank you very much for your time.

Julien Anfruns: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Antony Funnell: Julien Anfruns, the Director-General of the International Council of Museums and a former Director at the Louvre in Paris.

Now let's pick up on that idea of building interactivity, which Mr Anfruns spoke about and which certainly seems to be at the very heart of the change that's going on. And to help us explore that theme, we're joined by:

Louise Douglas, the General Manager, Audience and Programs at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra

Frank Howarth, the Director of the Australian Museum in Sydney

and Associate Professor Angelina Russo, from the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University in Melbourne.

Welcome to you all.

All: Great to be here, wonderful to be here.

Anthony Funnell: Angelina Russo, to you first. You've been researching some of the changes in the museum sector over the last few years. Why don't you kick us off. How would you assess the state of museums at the moment?

Angelina Russo: Thank you very much Antony. I think that museums aren't necessarily what they used to be, and we're currently in the process of sorting out what they will be. We've been working over the past 18 months with three major Australian museums and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, which is part of the Smithsonian, to explore the impact of social media on museum learning and communication. So what we're looking at is the rise of social media technologies, like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr and how these change the relationship between audiences and institutions as people create, upload, combine imagery and text, to create their own types of visits.

Antony Funnell: So I take it from what you're saying there, that I guess the core focus of museums in a way used to be about preservation and education, but that's changing.

Angelina Russo: Sure. Early museums were set up to give people an opportunity to learn about existing cultures and practices, and to explore the impact of technologies. You know, the Great Exhibitions which Louise can talk to you about quite succinctly,

were so much part of the 19th century, and they were underpinned by a desire to demonstrate the innovations and developments to ordinary people and they were built on people's curiosity, delivering experiences which were wondrous and extraordinary. And museums built on this curiosity by exhibiting their taxonomical research, often in the form of minerals, astronomy, and the wild and exotic animals. And so that connection between museums and dinosaurs, both physical and metaphorical, was born. And to an extent museums today still struggle with this image of themselves as dusty institutions that you visit on a school trip and return to when you're looking for something to do with the kids on a wet day. And yet funnily enough, whether by force or choice, curiosity remains an integral part of the museum visit.

Antony Funnell: Now Frank Howarth, you've just come back from America, where you talked to people from other international museums. Give us a bit of an idea of the sort of discussions that are going on over there.

Frank Howarth: There were two big issues running around. One was mundane and financial, the impact of the global financial crisis, and that has hit a lot of American museums, much more so than here, but put that one aside.

The other one that was far more interesting to talk about was the R-word, Relevance, and the big debate was, how do we become more relevant? And the sub-set of that one was amongst some of our colleagues, a sort of low-level fear about loss of authority, and is this going to challenge the role of museum expert. How do we maintain our authority positions when moving in to a social media world that is all about debates and forums? I think that's by far the most exciting area of museum development, this duality of museums as authoritative sources of information, in our case things like climate change, and at the same time, provide forums for debates, either on our own websites or on third party social media sites.

Antony Funnell: You're no longer the gatekeepers that you were?

Frank Howarth: No, gatekeeper in the sense of we meted out the information in a way that we thought the audience could digest. You know, we sat on top of the mountain and handed down tablets of wisdom. Now we're managing forums where people will debate, and in many cases will say things we don't actually agree with. It's the whole sort of Wiki commons idea that it's OK for somebody to say something you don't agree with; somebody else will probably come in and correct that. So how do we manage these forums, and the authority?

Antony Funnell: Louise Douglas, at your museum, the National Museum of Australia, how are you managing this change?

Louise Douglas: Museums actually have been quite responsive in the business of communication, and particularly over the last 30 or 40 years in terms of responding to the growth of communication techniques. So one of the ways we have seen that in museums is the introduction of where there were only curators, they were really the only kind of professionals, now of course there's public programs, there's education, there's public affairs, there's marketers, so the whole idea of communicating with our audiences I think has been there for quite some time, and this is something we looked at very closely in the early years of the museum. And we experimented with a number of programs, some web-based, some in the institution. So for example, we have a

broadcast studio which was built around the idea that we would have a two-way communication link with our audiences, now we're reviewing exactly how we use the broadcast studio.

We also had some very, very early web-based programs which you would now describe as social media, a program called MyMuseum, where we invited our web visitors to work with content that we provided and create their own kind of programs and mini-exhibitions. So we've been responding I think from the beginning. But I think what's happened is that the speed of change that's happening now is so fast that we've really got to review how organisationally we are ready for this.

Antony Funnell: Now we've gone from the situation where we've had a scarcity of information to an abundance of information. In order to deal with that change and to remain relevant, Frank Howarth, do some museums have to reinvent themselves, and become less generalist in their approach?

Frank Howarth: Yes. There's two things, both the focus of the museum and that's responding to what people want to know about and want to talk about, as distinct to giving them what we think is good for them, and for a natural sciences museum that's been the philosophy for a long time, so we're turning that round.

In terms of less or more, it's interesting. The way we're looking at it at our place, we have about 350,000 people walk through the front door, but we have about 21-million people spending about 4 minutes or more on our websites. So our reach to people in terms of contact hours, however you want to measure it, is vastly higher in the virtual world than it is in the (if I can put it in inverted commas) 'real world', but there's a good duality, they feed off each other, it's not one at the expense of the other.

The harder issue for our staff is moving to a different way of doing things, moving from, say, having very specialist curators who are highly knowledgeable on the small slice of our collections, to people whose primary focus is unlocking the collections and engaging our stories, collections, whatever, with communities. A very different set of skills, and that change is a bit threatening for some people.

Antony Funnell: Louise, is that an issue that you find with staff at your museum?

Louise Douglas: It's really what I was saying before, that we have got to start looking at the roles in the way we describe what it is we expect our staff to do, and one of the great topics of discussion inside our organisation is just that. What does this new way of engaging with and interacting with our audiences, particularly online, and for a national museum the online world is perhaps even more important than for museums such as Frank's who have a very, very large population base, physically co-located with them, we really have a much more sort of abstracted audience in a sense, because we speak to a national audience. Our mandate is to do that.

We're terrific at doing exhibitions, and we're terrific now at doing publications around them. So the old sort of school products are definitely something we can do without thinking about it. But really, doing co-created kind of products, what that means for the role of a curator, the role of an educator, the role of the public programs person, is something that we're addressing at the moment.

Antony Funnell: And presumably, that co-created, that brings us to the whole idea of user-generated content, not just engaging with people online, but accepting that perhaps they have a role in building what is there online, in shaping part of the museum's displays. How do you factor that in effectively?

Frank Howarth: We want to have a play with crowd-curated exhibitions, although that was with a bit 'Let's see what happens and no great expectations'. It can go horribly wrong, in the sense of a crowd can give you a perfectly-formed lowest common denominator that's equally boring to everyone. Or it could come up with something that's really fantastic. But the user-generated content, there's been a couple of spectacular examples where people have thought it went horribly wrong.

The Tate Modern ran a beautiful vodcast of the performance artist Mark Wallinger, who was in an interview lasting about 10 minutes, half the time he was sitting in the chair talking, the other half of the time the footage is of him walking around the Tate in a bear outfit, which he does. Somebody appropriated that YouTube video and put their own voiceover on top of it, a total piss-take of the whole concept of performance art, as if it was coming out of his mouth. That stirred an interesting group of possums at the Tate.

The other one Brooklyn Museum ran some beautiful one-minute videos, they just asked people to make of an experience visiting the Museum. One of them was these three guys who came in wearing black masks and everything, and literally measured up a painting as if they were about to steal it. And that caused the security people at Brooklyn Museum to go berserk. So you take risks, but at the end of the day everybody thought 'Well, what came out of that is better than what was'.

Antony Funnell: And Louise, your perspective?

Louise Douglas: I think we've got to be unafraid and really be open to the creative energy, helping interpret our collections in a way that we perhaps haven't been before. And I think attitudes are shifting within our organisations. I think there is a lot more openness now to the idea that our web visitors of all ages, and clearly one of the big issues for us coming into the future, is the way our audiences are changing from the baby-boomers who are reasonably techno-literate, but a younger generation - this is absolutely what they want to do create their own

Antony Funnell: What about their expectations? I read an article recently that was from the Centre for the Future of Museums, and it talked about what was called the My Culture trend, where young people apparently want their museum experience to be personalised for them, to be a very personal experience, in the same way that social media has given them the ability to personalise their music, say, or their online endeavours.

Louise Douglas: And this is in a way it's not a new idea for museums, or for social history museums in particular, and we in fact started out saying 'Come to our museum and see yourself in our museum'. So the idea of having that personal connection between some aspect of the stories, or the experiences that are in museum exhibitions and programs, is not a new one, but I think the change is that visitors want to create something for themselves out of the material that we have on display or on our websites.

Antony Funnell: Angelina, is that something you've picked up in your research?

Angelina Russo: Yes, absolutely. In July, I was lucky enough to attend a talk, a sold-out talk at the London School of Economics which had the two heavyweights of museum directors. We've got the other heavyweight here of course with Frank. But Nick Serota from the Tate, and Neil McGregor from the British Museum, and they were talking about the museum of the 21st century, and they actually said a couple of things which are quite relevant to our conversation.

One of them had to do with museums looking more towards broadcasters as a sort of role model, if you like, for their future practices. And the other had to do with curators sort of looking to their role as becoming much more like cultural producers, and I think that social media gives us an opportunity to do that, because increasingly, we do give our opinion in very public ways, when someone has a good museum experience, they might upload images to Flickr or a video to YouTube, or they might write a blog post, or Twitter about it.

And each time one person uses this technology to provide their thoughts and express the meaning of their experience, hundreds and possibly thousands depending on how many people they have in their network, receive that update. And so depending on who that person is, their thoughts and opinions can become extremely influential.

And I think that if we're able to actually tap in to that, and look at how we can work with our audiences, to really connect that desire that comes from curiosity, and that the curiosity that's actually built in the way that social media itself operates, then we actually have quite a nice fit between the technology and the collection and then the knowledge institution.

Antony Funnell: Frank, can I just come back to you. You mentioned at the beginning of the program, and then we put it to the side, the financial crisis. How much of an effect has that had on the ambitions of museums to change and to try and do the sorts of things that a couple of years ago they thought they wanted to do in terms of relevancy to future audiences?

Frank Howarth: Well it's forced us to really hone in on the things that have impact, and that demonstrate that relevance, and that means putting (mixing metaphors) putting some sacred cows out to graze. And really putting some things aside, that people said was really, really important, and I think in our case, it's probably shifting more resources into opening up and unlocking and changing the nature of our websites to really adopt Web 2, ways of doing things, and probably cutting back on what some people would have said was core business for a natural sciences museum a few years ago.

The second string is we're becoming much, much more commercial. I think all of us, right around the world in the museum community, realise that unless we're to die a death of a thousand cuts, we need to raise more of our own money, and that comes back to the relevance issue again. We have got to be relevant for people.

Antony Funnell: And Louise, what about co-operation between museums, given money is tight everywhere, are we seeing a focus on trying to do exhibitions together?

Louise Douglas: I think that's been around for some time. It may well accelerate as a principle upon which we have to work, and particularly in the business of bringing international exhibitions to Australia, which is a vastly expensive process. There are certainly discussions on the go about being more cooperative in that regard.

I think the economic situation that we all face is certainly putting an additional pressure on the whole question of how we resolve the deployment of resources inside our institutions. We have to keep doing the conventional things, as Frank has said, the core business has to continue, but it's really about how to perhaps integrate some of these new processes into existing products.

So, for example, with exhibitions, we are now starting to look at the idea with an exhibition we're doing on the History of the Irish in Australia, using social media, using blogging, to help the research process be undertaken for that, and to help identify where there are stories and collections around the country that might form part of that exhibition. So I guess from a resources point of view, we're looking at what are we doing already, that might be more core business products such as exhibitions, and how do we bring social media processes and the idea of co-creation into those development processes?

Antony Funnell: And what's the future for I guess what we know as the blockbuster exhibition?

Frank Howarth: What it means is we get really hard-nosed about the business model for those. And they have to make economic sense. And the lending institutions have got an eye to what they can raise by lending out either whole exhibitions or their collection materials. I don't think we can do a blockbuster in Australia unless it's a partnership with other institutions any more, because the freight costs and the insurance costs are simply too high. But it really takes a very commercial edge, and much more risk management.

Antony Funnell: Now from the stellar if you like, to the particular, and to families and communities. I mean we've seen I think a trend towards the museum as a social space. Is that going to continue?

Angelina Russo: As a social physical space?

Antony Funnell: Yes, that's right.

Angelina Russo: Yes, oh, absolutely, and in fact I think there's evidence to suggest that the global economic downturn has been in fact very good for museums that are free, perhaps not so much those that have an admission charge. But for those that are free, there's certainly been an increase in the ways we see families using museums as social space, as a space to have rich experiences that don't cost anything. So that's a very fundamental point I think, about the way families might be looking at museums as part of their kind of leisure timetable.

Antony Funnell: And, Frank, your experience here? I understand you had experience in California recently along these sorts of lines.

Frank Howarth: Yes, at the Australian Museum, rightly or wrongly we charge entry here in Sydney, and we haven't seen any decline in that as a result of the global financial crisis. The experience in California is the new California Academy of Sciences, which is in any other sense a natural sciences museum in San Francisco, and they now charge \$24 a head, and they get 3.2-million visitors in their first year of operation.

Even more than that, every Thursday night they close at 5, reopen at 6, with a minimum age of 21, no kids, they get 2,700 people, they sell out every week, paying \$10 a head to come into that place. They have two discos, about 5 bars, the whole museum is open, and I was lucky enough to see that in action a few weeks ago. It's truly fantastic, it's the biggest disco in town, the biggest bar in town, the biggest pick-up joint in town. It's a different sense of relevance, but it's there.

Antony Funnell: Angelina Russo from Swinburne University, now are museums in a very good position to pick up on that social capital if you like, to integrate themselves more into the community's activities?

Angelina Russo: Absolutely. I think they are perfectly positioned, particularly at this moment where technology is finally at a point where we can have these discussions in public in real time. And if we think about the fact that ordinary people like you and me are curious about big issues that affect us, things like climate change, population explosion, conservation, our research indicates that museums are actually well-placed to innovate and explore contemporary issues in partnership with their audiences.

It's like for instance the Environment Minister Peter Garret announced the establishment of the Coral Sea Conservation Zone, just recently. You know some of the questions that I'd be asking around that, is what role do museums research play in that review and will scientific collections institutions be asked to contribute be asked to contribute and will new partnerships and research arise from this assessment and how will this involve ordinary people? The very things that we're all worried about at the moment actually have a spatial temporal history in the museum research records.

Museum Victoria for instance have the water-smart home, which is a website that sort of looks to inspire and educate the public in ways that they can reduce, re-use and re-value water in their daily lives. And it encourages that sort of clustered conversation around how to make decisions to save water. And I think it's a great example of how we can actually tap into the curiosity and the big issues out there in the community, and work in partnership with audiences to actually explore these issues and ensure that that relevance touches us every day.

Louise Douglas: Anthony, most of the museums these days actually frame themselves as a place for debates. The other point I wanted to make about particularly families coming to museums, as part of the broader community, is that somehow we have to offer them experiences that they won't get anywhere else. So a point of debate I think in museums, is the extent to which our exhibitions are filled with screens, and there's a sense in which some parents are starting to feel the screen dominates the home environment so much that they are less inclined to go to institutions where they sense that the screen is paramount.

Frank Howarth: One of the things that's coming true is a statement I saw in I think *The Australian* newspaper now about six or seven years ago, referring to the hook of the reel, the yin and yang of the virtual and the real, and I strongly believe that the more the world gets virtual, the more families want to see real things, they want to touch real things. We're doing much more where people pick up and engage and touch, and much less of the Don't Touch.

Antony Funnell: Louise and Angelina, let's wrap on that. I mean that idea that people will still want to touch things, that tactile side of museums is still very relevant today.

Louise Douglas: There's an incredible paradox here at work isn't there? I mean as we get more kind of enmeshed in technology, it's actually good for museums, because in fact the idea of something authentic, something real, starts to have much more power and that is something that we really believe is going to sustain us into the future. So I think we're all finding ways to provide much greater access to the physical object, and touching collections is something that now we are just going to have to find ways to make happen.

Antony Funnell: And Angelina?

Angelina Russo: Yes look, having just taken my niece and nephew to the National Gallery on the weekend have them sort of pore over the Egyptian artworks, or at least through the glass, I can absolutely say that wanting to touch the real is still very much part of the experience.

But I have to say that as far as museum professionals go, this is one of the issues that we discuss a fair bit on one of the professional networking sites that we run as part of this particular project which is Museum 3.0 Ning site. And it's interesting to see how different audiences actually respond to that idea of the virtual and the real, and how central that still is an argument whereas when we'd speak with a lot of technologists, we've moved beyond the virtual and the real, it's now about how to make the virtual more accessible, you know, what copyright issues there are, etc. etc. But actually that fundamental concern about being able to access the real, and to embellish or interpret through the virtual, is something that continues to really extend debate around the world.

Antony Funnell: Well Angelina Russo, Louise Douglas and Frank Howarth, thank you very much.

All: Thank you.

Antony Funnell: And Frank is from the Australian Museum, Louise from the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, and Angelina Russo is a researcher in museum communication at Swinburne University in Melbourne.

Andrew Davies is my co-producer, and our technical assistance this week came from Peter McMurray.

Guests

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Frank Howarth

Director of the Australian Museum, Sydney

Louise Douglas

General Manager, Audiences and Programs at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

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Music

CD title: *Cafe de Paris*

Track title: Flambee Montalbanaise

Artist: Guy Viseur et son orchestra

CD details: Music Collection International

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