

Museums, management and controversy

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Introduction

This paper is in two parts. In the first part, I explore the different types of controversy which face contemporary museums and some of the issues involved. The second part of the paper looks at guidelines for managing controversy with examples of two case studies.

What is controversy and how do we recognise it?

I found a lot of *d's* when I searched for an English definition of controversy. The term is defined as a *dispute, a debate, or a disagreement*.

Controversy is not necessarily negative. A dispute, a debate or a disagreement can reveal different positions on a subject, resulting in a richer discourse. It can be the catalyst to engage people in a conversation around an important issue and may build consensus through finding common ground between opposing views.

When, however, the subjects of controversy involve strongly held values and the discourse become polarised, conflict can arise which is sometimes irresolvable. If the discourse of controversy occurs in the public domain, it can have uncomfortable consequences for the parties involved.

The potential for controversy is a fact for which museums have to be prepared. Awareness of areas of potential controversy enables us to plan ahead and respond strategically when and if issues occur. In museums, controversy can be associated with¹:

- Collections
- Inclusions/ exclusions
- Standards, ethics and mores
- Collective narratives
- Unresolved and emerging issues; and
- Contested histories

The list is neither definitive, nor are the six categories mutually exclusive. Accompanied by examples, these headings provide a framework within which to anticipate where points of contention can arise.

Collections

One source of contention coalesces around the rightful ownership of objects, particularly when the objects have been acquired from indigenous communities and are associated with secret/sacred rituals or involve human remains. In general, the provenance of objects acquired by museums and galleries, often in good faith, has been the subject of more intense public scrutiny in recent years. The looting of cultural artefacts in zones of armed conflict has resulted in more objects with dubious provenance appearing on the market, presenting museums with potential pitfalls in

¹ This paper is not examining controversy associated with employment. It acknowledges that diversity in the workplace is an area around which there are significant issues, some of which have entailed controversy.

the process of acquisition. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some museums have considered 'de-accessioning' objects to manage escalating operating costs or to purchase new works- a move often accompanied by outcry and dismay from both the public and other museum professionals.

Inclusions and exclusions

Criticisms about the exclusions of women, migrant groups, indigenous cultures, sexual mores and sexuality have forced museums to consider issues of inclusion. Greater inclusion does not, in itself, eliminate controversy because modes of representation and the interpretation of difference can be a source of contention. Are marginalised groups represented as victims or people who struggle to have their voice heard?

Standards, ethics and mores

Controversy is also played out through questions of what is admissible according to standards, ethics and mores. The exhibition of human remains is a contested area, sexuality in its myriad forms can provoke dispute- and art, with its capacity to bring with it 'the shock of the new', still contains the power to deeply divide public opinion.

Grand narratives

Important collective narratives can be a source of discord. There are divergent views on how we represent war. Narratives that lionise heroism and promote nationalism compete with interpretations that deplore the inhumanity of war, the social cost and the targeting of specific groups through holocausts and genocides. The origins of the world and its species are currently a highly polarised debate between creationists and scientists.

Unresolved social issues

Controversy often arises when museums explore emerging or unresolved social issues which come accompanied by divergent views and value positions. Whether these are perceived as being linked in some (often indirect) way to current geo-political conflicts, reflect deep divisions within a society or explore issues around which there are contested positions, museums can find themselves in the centre of a maelstrom.

Contested histories

In many post-colonial countries, colonizers and indigenous peoples have widely divergent views on the experience of contact, challenging museums to include multiple perspectives on events. The decision by the Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution to question the then prevailing narrative about the necessity of dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the war in the Pacific was contested by the Air Force Association resulting in a much-reduced exhibition and the resignation of the then Director.

Even this brief summary reveals that the potential for controversy is considerable. The next section explores strategies for managing controversy.

Managing controversy in museums

At one point in my career, I worked for a large museum in Australia whose diverse audience included many families and school groups. The museum's diverse collection covered decorative arts and design, science, technology and social history.

The museum was considering two exhibitions. The subject of one was birth control and the second was about an annual festival- the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Although both subjects were within the museum's remit of social history and design, there were concerns that these exhibitions would please some visitors at the expense of others.

The forward- thinking Director at that time asked me to chair a working party tasked with developing guidelines to deal with controversy. So, with representatives from marketing, visitor services, design and curatorial we set about considering what we, as an institution, could and should do in situations that might prove controversial. We came up with the following guidelines.

1. In the first instance, we recognised that controversy is not just a phenomenon imposed on the museum by external sources. There can be differing opinions within a museum as well. If a museum is planning an exhibition that could be controversial, all the major *internal* stakeholders have to be involved and resolving internal differences has to be a first priority.
2. Secondly, a wide range of external stakeholder groups has to be identified, notified and invited to discuss the exhibition plans in advance.
3. Similarly, it was felt that potential audience responses to exhibitions idea that might invite controversy are best assessed at two points; before and during the exhibition. Front- end evaluation enables museums to test audience responses to proposed exhibitions in advance. These can then be addressed in the exhibition planning rather than being received afterwards as negative publicity. Further opportunities for audiences to express their immediate reactions can be built into the exhibition experience through the use of audience feedback forms. The working party further recommended that the design of the exhibition take sensitivities into account and offer visitors the option of making an intentional decision to visit the exhibition by being transparent about the content prior to entry.
4. Finally, while museums are trusted for their balanced and unbiased approach to information, when the decision is taken to take a position on a subject, marketing has to be straightforward and transparent -clearly making that position known.

Case studies

The museum developed both of the proposed exhibitions and opened them to the public.

In the case of the exhibition about birth control, the curator met with all of the relevant stakeholders including free-choice and right-to-life groups and educators and parents. The designer ensured that a major introductory panel at the entrance to the exhibition explained the content and advised that some might find the subject controversial. The spatial design was constructed so that entry to the exhibition masked the display until an intentional decision to enter was made by the visitor.

Visitors to the exhibition were provided with an open-ended feedback sheet to express themselves freely and they did; revealing some of the most remarkable personal stories we had ever encountered. And- there were no demonstrations and no negative comments in the media but there was a lot of praise from educationists, families and other visitors.

Similar design approaches were applied for the exhibition about the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras which attracted a wide and varied audience. Among the feedback forms were those from parents thanking the museum for mounting an exhibition that made it easier to discuss issues of gender with their children.

Conclusion

The role of marketing in both of these exhibitions was not just about publicity. It was about positioning the museum in relation to the subjects. In this, the museum had to consider the issue of public trust.

Museums are trusted more than the media and politicians as sources of information (AAM 2001, IMLS 2008). That their even-handed and balanced approach to subjects is one of their the things most valued about museums is encapsulated in this research from the UK.

Museums hold a unique position of being trusted, which is particularly important given the perceived lack of trusted organisations in society. Members of the public...see museums as the guardians of factual information and as presenting all sides of the story
(BritainThinks, 2013).

Museums are valued because they are seen to offer a balanced, disinterested and carefully researched presentation of facts.

When controversy is involved, however, the museum may be taking a position or be seen to taking a position which departs from public expectations for neutrality and objectivity. By engaging stakeholders and the public in conversations about the exhibition, addressing concerns and ideas at an early stage and being transparent by declaring a position openly, museums can maintain public trust in the institution and in the role of museums in society.