

The Prosumer: The Key Player of the Museum of the Future

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This paper analyses the role of the prosumer within the cultural sector and why prosumers should be identified as key players for the museum of the future. Social platforms such as Tumblr and YouTube are presented as important tools for museums to build new communities and engage their audiences in a meaningful conversation while preserving our heritage. Fruitful examples of digital initiatives in the UK and the US such as The Space (UK) and the MoMA Teens (US) are addressed to demonstrate that heritage institutions should be focusing on digital design and production as much as enabling users to become producers. The contemporary debates on such current trends as 'the curator phenomenon' and 'Post-Internet Art' are analysed here to show how digital natives (those born during the age of digital technology) are the prosumers museums need to attract. This audience, used to self-expression via such devices as mobile phones and tablets, cannot be ignored. We should also expect to see an increasing number of artists using the internet as their medium in the future. These are not passing trends, as some might argue, but a way of life for the younger generation and its successors; this paper, therefore, builds a case that supports the integration of the prosumer with the cultural sector.

*Prosumer. Digital commissions. Museums. Digital heritage. Tumblr. YouTube.
Post-Internet art. Post-Tumblr aesthetic.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the roles of the producer and the consumer have been fused together in what has become known as the 'prosumer'; this might sound like a futuristic word but the term dates from the 1980s. The futurist Alvin Toffler (1984) first coined 'prosumer' when he predicted a new trend that would allow the consumers to participate in the production and design process in order to fine-tune products to their needs in an extremely saturated marketplace where mass production would have finally shifted to mass customisation. Prior to Toffler, Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt (1972) argued that electronic technology would transform the role of the consumer to that of the producer. It is my intention to show how prosumers are influencing the cultural sectors and specifically heritage institutions. Heritage institutions should be focusing on digital design and production as much as enabling users to become producers. These two objectives need to go hand in hand if institutions want to successfully engage their audience in a meaningful conversation while preserving our heritage, ultimately building new physical and digital communities.

Does Toffler's world sound contemporary? It is indeed the world which westerners inhabit. In a privileged world that has at its core an economy based on customisation, the buyer is no longer the receiver of the final product but is an active player in the production process; products are built impeccably around them. We can now customise the features of our car, toaster, shoes, computers, greetings cards, and so forth. Often the process of customisation is performed easily with a 'click'; in fact, the majority of e-commerce sites allow users to tailor products, creating a unique and memorable shopping experience. Websites such as [Kickstarter](https://www.kickstarter.com/), [Indiegogo](https://www.indiegogo.com/) and [Peoplefund.it](https://www.peoplefund.it/) are powerful online platforms for prosumers; there, anyone can become a creator, set a funding goal and deadline for a project, and then wait to see if people will like it and decide to support it financially.

2. THE WEB 2.0 IS YOU!

With Web 2.0, a radical change has been introduced in the way we understand and share knowledge. Consequently, there has been a great change in the way we think about heritage

institutions and their purpose. These organisations are no longer repositories of old knowledge but are often places where different communities can gather together: to learn, to experience, and to share this contemporary approach of interacting with heritage institutions, which has been facilitated by the way digital technologies and the internet are shaping society.

At first, we used the internet to receive information passively from writers, institutions, and publishers; with the democratisation of the internet, the audience can finally respond, joining the conversation and turning its role from passive to active. Online consumers can now leave comments on blogs and e-commerce sites, and share their thoughts and what they do in real time using social networks such as [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#); they can also contribute to open-source projects like [Wikipedia](#). This has been described as the democratisation of the internet: 'The Web 2.0 is YOU!', claims the cover of *Time Magazine's* issue for Person of the Year of 2006 (Time 2006).

The internet is us: a vast population of users who can now share their opinions and skills with others in real time, wherever their current location, simply by using their computers, smart phones, and tablets. Therefore, the human-computer interaction (HCI; based on the study of how users interact with computers, with the scope to plan and design intelligent and user-friendly interfaces) and the overall online experience of users are important considerations and these should be priorities for 'the museum of the future'.ⁱ

The Museum Association (2012: 2) argues that: 'Every museum can do more to improve people's lives and play a bigger part in meeting society's needs. UK museums are transforming the ways they engage with people.' What is meant here by 'society's needs'? Different groups and communities have different needs and desires; therefore different heritage institutions will themselves have different objectives. Some organisations might be more focused on community engagement and on the delivery of events and in-house workshops; other institutions might have a strong digital strategy in place as they try to reach online communities of users. Whatever their interests are, it is undeniable that young people have a strong interest in the digital realm and museums should act upon this if they want to engage with youngsters. It is also worth remembering that we often associate technology with young people but the reality is that nowadays nearly everyone is aware of the enormous digital opportunities in place and users' demand for digital services is increasing rapidly. Smart phones, gaming platforms and social networks are accessed by all ages. A survey based on the

general social media usage, conducted between July and September 2013 among 6,010 adults in the US by Pew Research, shows that:

Some 73% of online adults now use a social networking site of some kind. Facebook is the dominant social networking platform in the number of users, but a striking number of users are now diversifying onto other platforms. Some 42% of online adults now use multiple social networking sites (Duggan & Smith 2013).

Heritage institutions should be focusing on digital design and production as much as enabling users to become producers. In order to make users key players in the museum's life, art institutions need to enable them to interact with the museum's activities and tools as well as to contribute to the classification of collections. This objective could be achieved through building new digital platforms where users can interact live with the museum, participating in events beforehand that have been tailored and curated by the museum's staff. By curating events and digital platforms where the user is invited to be the producer, museums can still have control over how their resources are used and ultimately improved while facilitating a real collaboration with the public. Museums could create blogs where the public act as editor; the audience could upload pictures of themselves visiting a particular exhibition and then, with the help of a curator, assign tags to objects seen while exploring the museum, adding their own descriptions to the museum's collections and leaving comments on their visit. This could be taken a step further and turned into a video to be displayed inside the museums; a screen at the entrance could be used for this purpose. This would possibly generate curiosity and excitement in the visitors.

3. THE GREAT POTENTIAL OF ONLINE EXHIBITIONS

The potential to engage the public in online activities is great. Nowadays, heritage institutions, especially medium to large size ones, have a proper digital team in place. This usually oversees the website, social networks, CMSs, in-house digital media and much more. However, this is not enough to satisfy the public's desire to be a real part of the museum's life. Heritage institutions should invest time and capital in appointing in-house digital curator who can create new digital experiences with the user in mind, designing digital platforms with the help of the audience to ensure that these are effective and successful. Some institutions have understood the great potential of online exhibitions, digital art, and platforms dedicated to the delivery of digital experiences. The following are just some examples of fruitful digital

projects initiated by art institutions. [The ICA](#), London designed and produced a microsite to run along its physical activities: 'this microsite operates as a diary and a point of distribution, presenting unique online commissions alongside contextual information such as interviews, texts, video works and documentation of the ongoing related programme' (ICA 2014). The BBC and Arts Council recently re-launched [The Space](#), 'a free website for artists and audiences to create and explore exciting new art, commissioned by us and shared around the Whole Wide World' (The Space n.d.). Here, it might be argued that these examples above only showcase projects related to contemporary art. Therefore, specialised museums might not appreciate the importance of employing an in-house digital curator to design digital experiences as they endeavour to preserve and display a variety of artefacts: a children's museum might perhaps focus on toys and educational material while a music museum might celebrate the life of a composer. However, technological progress touches everything; heritage institutions need to recognise that it is no longer a matter of size, location, and specialism. All museums are invited to join this digital conversation; the choice is not anymore whether they want to participate or not but how to make the most out of digital opportunities to ensure the delivery of an inspiring programme, to initiate a meaningful dialogue with the audience, and to invest finance and human resources ingeniously into digital projects. To support its museum's team in learning about digital technologies, [The Imperial War Museum](#) in London launched a Computer Club 'with the aim of developing digital awareness and skills across the museum' (Royston & Delaford 2014). (This example, along with other case studies, appears in a paper presented at the annual conference of [Museums and the Web 2014](#).)

US Museums, MoMA Teens

So far, US museums have been pioneers with their digital implementation and strategies and have set impressive models for other heritage institutions across the world. The astonishing work done by the [MoMA](#) and its educational department in engaging teenagers in the museum's activities has brought to life [MoMA Teens](#) in 2013. This is a cross between a traditional website and a [Tumblr](#) page, which aims to create 'a vivid new experience, and to do it in an environment like Tumblr, where many teens are already active and feel at home' (Zwicky 2013). Later in this paper, we will analyse why Tumblr is becoming so important for young audiences. MoMA Teens was launched with the scope of finding new ways of engaging young audiences, translating physical experiences into something that would still make sense online.

Another fine example of how the MoMA is taking advantage of the prosumer trend, as well as understanding the importance of using digital tools, is the initiative of inviting the participants from the previous season's [In the Making](#) courses (courses for young people held at the museum) to pose for a photo shoot at the museum, generating pictures that were then turned into animated GIFs, later featured on the [Teens.MoMA.org](#) site. There, the audience is invited to contribute to the site in a multiple-way dialogue between the audience and the tutors, the curators and the users, and ultimately between users themselves; as the [Teens.MoMA.org](#) site offers: 'please join us there to share posts, like our images, comment on what we're doing, and spread the word about the new online home for MoMA Teen Programs' (Zwicky 2013).

Projects such as this demonstrate an understanding of the current debate on digital technologies and contemporary art and its trends, as well as a strong will to invest resources on online commissions. It is foreseeable that more heritage institutions will join the conversation and produce digital projects for their online communities. In fact, digital art is changing the way curators envision shows and the way artists are producing work of art. As a curator, my work and research focus on technologies and digital art in what I call a 'Post-Tumblr Age'. I therefore analyse contemporary art under the influence of digital technologies and, in particular, the internet. New terms are now emerging such as 'Post-Internet Artist': this identifies artists whose practices are formed from and evolve around digital technologies and, predominantly, the internet.

4. POST-TUMBLR AESTHETIC

Contemporary artists dealing with new media are often too readily included in this category, which is frequently compared to the Surrealism and Post-Minimalism movements, as argued by writer and curator Chris Wiley (2013). Contemporary art derives from conditions particular to our contemporary society. In western societies many of these parameters are formed by digital technology; it is unavoidable, therefore, that artists are influenced by the internet and digital technology, as members of society and as art practitioners.

Digital natives (those born during the age of digital technology) do not know what it means to live in a non-digital world. Expressing oneself through a device such as a mobile phone or tablet has become the norm. We should expect to see an increasing number of artists using the internet as their medium in the future. This is not a short-lived, as some might argue, but a way of life for the

younger generation and those that will follow.

I do not think it is a coincidence that the term 'Post-Internet Art' was coined in 2007. This was the year Tumblr was launched and quickly became extremely popular with young people around the world, *Mediabistro.com* states that, '61 percent of teenagers cite Tumblr as their favourite social media site' (Bennett 2013). Tumblr is all about visual images; the visual is dominant in a culture that celebrates image over text, with a young generation which is constantly searching for new visual stimuli and instant gratification. We transfer the visual language of the digital realm to the physical world in a phenomenon described by James Bridle (2011) as the '[New Aesthetic](#)'. The new generation celebrates what may be called a 'Post-Tumblr Aesthetic'; this is taking over the way we conceive communication, affecting all creative fields and much more. With 206.7 million blogs (Tumblr n.d.), Tumblr is a platform that cannot be ignored. A good example of its influence is the way designers have been making websites with a similar appearance to [Syndex](#), one of the most popular free themes available on Tumblr. This has an infinite scrolling feature which has become extremely popular and has eventually been implemented by commercial websites such as [Kartell](#) and [And Other Stories](#), as well as by art institutions such as the [Serpentine](#) and the [Victorian Collections](#), among others. On Tumblr, users ultimately embrace a new form of communication devoted to the visual image. Perhaps Post-Internet Art is confronting what society presents to us: a world of found images and 'curated' confusion. Young people are tired of being spectators; they want to play an active role in visual culture, they want to produce something and therefore they become prosumers. From this desire arose 'the curator phenomenon'—the idea that everyone can be a curator. Many believe that extensive use of the term 'curator' devalues its meaning and ultimately the public's perception of the role; it has negative connotations. Thus The Hermitage Museum has published [An Open Letter to Everyone Using the Word 'Curate' Incorrectly on the Internet](#) (Morin 2012), aiming to arouse awareness of the danger of using the term 'curator' indiscriminately.

We now have many tools for curating our daily lives; we curate our shopping experiences using digital platforms such as [Pinterest](#); we have 'virtual diaries' where users share pictures of what they eat, where they go and what they do with [Instagram](#), and more. Now, more than ever, we 'curate' our lives; consider the way we curate our public image through social networks, deciding what others should see about us, retouching

pictures of ourselves and hiding compromising '[status](#)' (Jansen 2012) data from the inquisitive eyes of friends, work colleagues and potential new employers. Facebook contributes to the definition of a new online culture; although predominantly used in western countries, the network is almost global, with a total of 1,110,000,000 active users per month (according to [statisticbrain.com](#), June 2013). As Marshall McLuhan said 'The medium is the message' (McLuhan 1977); Facebook is both the medium and the message, a product of a global community of users and members who simultaneously create and consume Facebook content. Apps such as the [The Pocket Art Gallery](#), launched by Tate in 2012, which lets users curate their own museum collection, show us how art institutions can use the 'curator phenomenon' to their advantage. Ultimately, this is yet another example of how the user is becoming a prosumer and how a heritage institution can benefit from it. After all, museums, wherever possible, should mirror society in finding contemporary ways to tell stories and display collections. However, this doesn't mean that museums should uncritically embrace new trends: on the contrary, they should embrace what is appropriate for them according to their mission, structure and collections, as there is no 'one size fits all'. However, at the same time they should acknowledge that with progress new ways of telling stories and preserving heritage might arise.

Monetising Digital Artwork

It is clear from the examples presented above that many art organisations have begun to recognise the value of digital artwork and that; therefore, this has finally entered the sealed doors of museums and institutions. [Cory Arcangel](#), an artist associated with Post-Internet Art, had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art when he was only thirty-three years old, an impressive achievement for an artist of that age. Over the past few years, digital art has suddenly begun to appeal to commercial businesses; we now have many platforms making digital art available to purchase. [Paddle on!](#) (a partnership between the [Philips](#) auction house and Tumblr) and [Sedition](#) are examples of broad audience recognition of digital art. This is no longer a niche scene for a few elite experts, curators, and artists. Digital art has gained the admiration of the public and, significantly, has become profitable. [Cinemagraphs](#) and [Mr Gif](#) are examples of how GIFs have become profitable business. But the main question for me, as a curator focused on digital technologies, is whether this can be sustained. And for heritage institutions, the next question is probably whether it is worthwhile to invest capital in this area.

Digital Art

Here, it is important to remember that digital art and online exhibitions are not a new concept for the many artists, curators, and organisations that have been working on digital projects for many years. Some early projects of the 1960s and 1970s are interesting pioneering examples; for instance, [9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering](#) (1966), which was organised by the Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT). More recently, there has been [The Thing](#), a space funded in 1991, and [Rhizome](#), which supports art and technology and has been online since 1996.

There is much to be explored and there are many useful resources that museums could use to design new online experiences. It is very important to understand that today, in order to conceive a worthwhile project, a curator and an artist no longer need an impressive budget and a gallery in a prime location to host it; a fast internet connection and a computer is enough. This new way of networking is something that is possible only through the use of the internet, as more often these artists are collaborating with curators and peers without even having met once. I believe that this is the power of the web: the opportunity to collaborate with everyone, everywhere. Though not quite: as inhabitants of western countries, it is easy to assume that everyone has access to the same quality and quantity of digital facilities as we do. Statistics prove this to be wrong: according to the *Internet World Stats*, 'Africa has 9.8%, Middle East has 3.7% and Oceania/Australia has the least with 0.9% of Internet Users in the World, Distribution by World Regions – 2014 Q2' (Internet World Stats 2014). But progress is unstoppable and development is happening very quickly: according to Forrester Research, as reported in *eWeek*, an independent technology and market research company, 'In 2012, about 2.4 billion people around the world are online, out of a global population of 7 billion. In just five more years, that will rise to about 3.5 billion online users' (Weiss 2012).

All these data—the trends described above of the prosumer and curator, as well as this new way of networking and the forecast of new collaborations—are significant for museums. Being able to design and produce online projects could potentially help heritage institutions in keeping the cost of production down; an online exhibition is likely to be less expensive than a physical show. This could provide new opportunities for museums that often have small budgets. Museums often think that capital should not be prioritised for online commissions; however, the leaders of museums should see and understand online commissions as a wonderful opportunity to reach new audiences

and enhance people's lives all over the world, while saving capital.

YouTube

[YouTube](#) is yet another example of the potential of the prosumer and the new ways people communicate. This multi-channel network is definitely a platform that museums should explore and a social trend they should observe carefully. Many have argued that this network will soon be the new TV, as Alice Stanfield (2013) does here:

It is clear to see the e-media platform constantly pulls in an audience and with programmes being available to watch on demand, anyone being able to create their own 'channel' on YouTube, and catch up on programmes, is there any more use for the small box that sits in our living rooms?

In order to create a successful video, a crew of professionals is no longer needed. On YouTube thousands of videos are shared every minute; these are often made by amateurs. This summer, London hosted [Summer in the City](#), a sold-out event that had more than 8,500 attendees in few days, presenting and celebrating video gaming stations and YouTube bloggers. These are now established celebrities, 'who have millions of subscribers and fans around the world. Featuring everything from personal diary posts to beauty tutorials and short films, YouTube is not just a niche hobby—it's a lucrative profession' (Ellis-Petersen 2014).

A few museums, such as [The Science Museum](#), and [The Tate](#), have created their own YouTube channels. These are arguably successful examples. But how do we measure success in this case? Is success related to the number of views per video, to the positive comments received, or to the quality of the content presented? If the priorities of a museum are to engage the audience in a thoughtful dialogue and display their collections in new appealing ways, this should also apply to their digital strategy and, in this specific case, to their YouTube profile. Therefore, a low number of viewings of videos should not be considered successful. The next question should ask why these videos are not as popular among the YouTube audience as museum blockbuster shows would be. One of the answers probably lies in understanding how videos are presented and promoted. Museums should make sure that their videos and YouTube channel are properly promoted throughout their social networks and on the main website but, most importantly, that the videos are designed with the YouTube community in mind. A museum could think about YouTube as a new project, a chance to work hand in hand with prosumers to build an engaging channel. The

museum's team could then consult users on what their expectations are and on how to produce videos that the audience really wants to see, working with the audience for the audience. Users could be invited to help museums to produce and promote videos through in-house and online workshop and events.

In this paper, I have analysed the role of the prosumer and how this can positively contribute to the activities of heritage institutions. I have described fruitful examples of digital platforms created by museums and art galleries and explored current social and art trends such as 'the curator phenomenon' and the attractiveness of digital commissions among institutions. I have also presented new trends to be explored such as Tumblr and YouTube. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that heritage institutions should be concentrating on digital design and production as much as enabling users to become producers. I hope that I have succeeded in presenting relevant cases and in proposing new ideas for the museums of the future.

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NOTES

ⁱ The Museums Association (MA) held a nationwide discussion in 2012, inviting people in museums, funders, policy-makers, and other stakeholders to think afresh about the role of museums. 'The museum of the future – Museums 2020' was the Museums Association's initiative to create a bold vision for UK museums and their impact – the difference museums can have on individuals, communities, society and the environment (Museums Association 2012).