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The Role of Social Media in Small Museums in Michigan

Western Michigan University

Spring 2018

Kaitlin McGrath

## Introduction

In order for museums to remain relevant in society, they need to evolve with changing practices and technologies. No change is more obvious in recent history than the introduction of digital technologies like social media. Often, people view change negatively, but the introduction of social media is not necessarily bad. Social media connects people from across the internet and creates online communities for people to gather and exchange ideas. Social media is now firmly ingrained in the daily life of many people. Institutions like museums need to learn how to integrate this new technology into their practices. The challenge for museums is knowing how to use social media effectively.

Everyone does not always welcome new technology. Because social media has emerged relatively recently, the majority of museum workers have not grown up with this technology. To many people, it is a new and complex system of communication. As a result, some museums feel threatened by social media and overwhelmed by how quickly it is evolving. Still, if it museums implement it correctly, it can be a valued tool for communication and outreach.

Small museums especially may have the most to gain from utilizing this technology in their institutions. There is no set definition for what constitutes a small museum. According to the American Association for State and Local History's Small Museum Committee, some of the characteristics that define a small museum include an institution with a small paid operating staff and an institution that uses volunteers to carry out vital museum functions.<sup>1</sup> Other qualifiers might include the size of the budget, the scope of the collection, and the number of patrons that attend the institution.

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of State and Local History, "What is a Small Museum?"  
<http://community.aaslh.org/small-museum-what-is-a-small-museum/>

Smaller museums usually do not have access to as many resources as their larger counterparts. With social media, museums do not need large marketing departments or staff dedicated to audience outreach; they just need internet access and someone willing to run the accounts. Creating and running a successful social media presence, however, requires more work on the part of the institution. Social media can offer unique solutions to the problems of small museums as well as some unique issues. This paper examines the role of social media in museums with a focus on small museums in Michigan. Furthermore, it asks how small museums can use social media effectively.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part of this paper examines the role of museums and social media through a review of some of the scholarly literature in this area. A main theme is the mission of museums to engage their visitor. The first section of this paper looks at the evolution of museums and their changing focus on visitor engagement. Subsequently, it examines the potential of social media to connect people and open new channels of communication. Next, the paper examines how museums are currently using social media. Afterward, the paper addresses issues found in this new medium and what potential setbacks they might cause. Last, this part explores the purpose of a social media policy and strategy. Many of the studies discussed in the first half of the paper only look at the impact social media has made at large museums, many of which are outside of the United States. Smaller museums generally do not appear in these studies. Only further study can fill this gap in the literature. This lack of research dealing with small museums does not mean that social media has made less of an impact on smaller museums. Moreover, small museums can learn from the social media strategies utilized by their larger counterparts.

The second part of the paper is an examination of case studies that show how small museums currently use social media at their institutions. This paper looks at museums that serve a local community, use volunteers to complete staff functions, or have staff filling multiple roles. For the purposes of this paper, the social media sites examined will be limited to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. The information gathered in the first part shapes the analysis of the case studies in the second part. The end of the paper includes an appendix on suggested best practices for small museums that want to use social media.

### **The Role of Museums**

The role of the museum in society has changed since the very beginning. In their earliest form, museums began as private collections which were opened to the public.<sup>2</sup> These collections often reflected their owner's specific worldview.<sup>3</sup> This was not an issue because collectors assembled their collections for themselves, not to be meaningful to others. Issues emerged when collectors opened their collections to the public. These new museums did not speak for the public. While anyone could arrange a collection, wealthy individuals kept the most notable because they had the time, money, and resources to grow and maintain their collections.<sup>4</sup> This created a very narrow point of view in museums. Many museums looked to how they could become more meaningful to their visitors.<sup>5</sup> Despite this willingness to change, some outdated practices persist. Museum leadership is one of the areas slow to change.

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," in Gail Anderson, ed., *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2012), 52.

<sup>3</sup> Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 53.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 53.

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 53.

Museum leadership has traditionally consisted of the academic elite who were usually white upper-class men.<sup>6</sup> One may consider these men the more modern equivalent of the wealthy private collector of past eras. Their background, personal tastes, and status influenced what the public found in these collections. Generally, the objects in a collection were of the culture of the curator of that collection. Curators displayed the objects from other cultures or social groups as novelties or would not display the objects at all. In art museums, the most well represented art was art of the upper class, while folk art of the working class was harder to find.<sup>7</sup> Members of these other groups would have limited input on how these institutions presented history. Essentially, traditional curators “created museums that were the temples within which they enshrined those things they held to be significant and valuable.”<sup>8</sup> Many museums have made an effort to move past this practice, but the shadow of this system remains at some institutions.

Likewise, institutions have realized that they need to do more than just focus on the items in their collection. Over time, “the museum has moved from centring on artefacts to embracing a perspective which includes and focuses on the concrete visitors of the museums.”<sup>9</sup> This is essentially saying that the focus of museums has shifted from one that concentrates solely on objects to one that focuses on visitor learning. More museums are now asking what the visitor gets out of their experience at the museum. This is not to say that museums are seeking to diminish the importance of the objects in their collection, just that they have begun to reevaluate how they interpret them. This shift in focus changes how the museum presents information to the public.

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<sup>6</sup> Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 53.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 53.

<sup>8</sup> Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 53.

<sup>9</sup> Nanna Holdgaard, and Lisbeth Klasturp, “Between Control and Creativity: Challenging Co-creation and Social Media Use in a Museum Context.” *Digital Creativity* 25, no. 3 (2014): 191, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2014.904364>

Communication is an essential aspect of this new focus. Traditional communication asserts that museums maintain an authoritative voice. The museum staff chooses which objects go on display and tells the public what that object is, what it represents, and what the public should think about it. There is little room for different interpretations or contrary viewpoints in this model. This is a problem because, “what is understood as factual today may be renegotiated tomorrow.”<sup>10</sup> Even though the viewpoint of the museum may be measured and accurate, it may also be biased. In the end, only a few members of staff actually craft the voice of the institution even though it is representative of the whole museum. According to researchers Mathilde Puhl and Rémi Mencarelli, “this voice is now being lowered and even drowned out by the voices of visitors.”<sup>11</sup> Museums now need to figure out how to convey their message to their audience while keeping in mind the unique voice of the visitor.

Moreover, teaching an audience through simply laying out the facts in a one-way conversation may not be the best way for everyone to learn. Active engagement may affect a wider audience. The variety in education theories illustrates this point. According to George Hein, a professor and research associate at Lesley University, the traditional view on knowledge and learning proposes that knowledge exists outside of the learner and that the learner acquires that knowledge incrementally.<sup>12</sup> This represents the classical view of knowledge. Hein elevates a newer theory, constructionism, which states “learners construct knowledge as they learn ... they constantly reorganize and create both understanding and the ability to learn as they interact with

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<sup>10</sup> Ashley Shaw and Don Krug, “Heritage Meets Social Media: Designing a Virtual Museum Space for Young People.” *Journal of Museum Education* 38, no. 2 (2013): 244, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2013.11510774>

<sup>11</sup> Mathilde Puhl and Rémi Mencarelli, “Web 2.0: Is the Museum-Visitor Relationship being Redefined?” *International Journal of Arts Management* 18, no. 1 (Fall, 2015): 48, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1717299064?accountid=15099>

<sup>12</sup> George E Hein, “The Constructivist Museum,” in Gail Anderson, ed., *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2012), 126.

the world.”<sup>13</sup> Essentially, this asserts that knowledge is a construct that is formed by the experiences of an individual. People learn through experience and interaction. Constructivism is highly applicable to museums because of the wide range in museum visitors. Constructivist museums “allow visitors to draw their own conclusions about the meaning of the exhibit.”<sup>14</sup> Constructivism emphasizes how important engagement is to audience learning. Employing the basis of learning theories like constructivism may allow museums to connect with a new audience.

This culminates in the fact that museums want visitors to have some control over their experience. Most museums want to engage with the visitor; however, some museums are content to just place an item on display and relay the basic facts about it. In the traditional view, visitors come in to look at the object, read the label, and leave. The majority of museums want their visitors to have a deeper experience than that. Museums can achieve this by making the experience more participatory. Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum*, defines a participatory museum as “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content.”<sup>15</sup> Participatory museums want to hear feedback and create a discussion with its visitors.

This is echoed by Nanna Holdgaard and Lisbeth Klastrup of the IT University in Copenhagen who stated that museums want to “engage audiences and transform them from passive observers into active participators and creators.”<sup>16</sup> This creates a richer museum experience for the visitor. Engaging the audience often means encouraging discussion. Museums provide their audiences with a unique space for discussion and intellectual growth. The advent of

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<sup>13</sup> Hein, “The Constructivist Museum,” 126.

<sup>14</sup> Hein, “The Constructivist Museum,” 128.

<sup>15</sup> Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010), ii.

<sup>16</sup> Holdgaard and Klastrup, “Between Control and Creativity,” 190.



digital technologies created many new resources museums could use to engage their audience and promote discussion. One of the most significant tools to come out of these digital technologies is social media.

### **The Growth of Social Media**

The internet has drastically shaped every aspect of human life since its creation. Internet users can access almost any piece of information. Communication with someone on the other side of the globe is not only easy, but is instantaneous. Digital devices like computers, smartphones, GPS, and tablets are now widespread and fully entrenched in our society. The introduction of social media has only quickened this digital evolution.

Social media has completely changed the way in which people communicate. Essentially, social media is the term used to describe online spaces where users can create and consume user-generated content. It is above all a place to interact with others. Communication between users of social media can be almost instantaneous and, in its essence, it encourages the online viewer to become a participant. Social media has also changed the way in which people hold conversations online. Online communication is no longer a conversation from one-to-many, but from many-to-many.<sup>17</sup> Instead of one entity talking to an audience, people and organizations can engage in a multi-group conversation.<sup>18</sup> This fundamentally changes the elements of communication.

Social media is ever-present in modern society. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, Facebook is “the primary [social media] platform for most Americans” with about

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<sup>17</sup> Bojana Suzic, Miroslav Karlíček, and Václav Strítěský, “Adoption of Social Media for Public Relations by Museums.” *Central European Business Review* 5, no. 2 (2016): 6, <https://doi.org/10.18267/j.cebr.148>

<sup>18</sup> Adrienne Fletcher and Moon J. Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations in American Museums." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 27, no. 5 (2012): 508.

68% of US adults reporting that they use Facebook.<sup>19</sup> YouTube, a nontraditional social media platform, is used by about 73% of the US adult population.<sup>20</sup> The study does not group YouTube with the other social media platforms because many people use it to view videos, but few use it to actually engage with others or create content. Use of other social media platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Twitter tend to fall closer to one-fourth to one-third of the US adult population. Instagram has the highest numbers of US adult users of the platforms mentioned with 35% while Twitter has the fewest with 24%.<sup>21</sup>

As the internet becomes more advanced, its users discover innovative ways to communicate with one another. The uses of social media include dispersing information or media, receiving quick feedback, sharing photos or stories, keeping up on news, or connecting with others. Social media sites all hold different niches in online communication. Twitter is a microblog, Instagram and Snapchat are photo-sharing platforms, and Facebook is a social networking site. Some sites overlap in abilities, but each can be geared toward a variety of different interest.

Social media is a useful tool for connecting with other people especially, younger generations. About 88% of 18- to 29-year-olds reported that they used some type of social media.<sup>22</sup> Some specific social media platforms are more popular with young adults. US adults “ages 18 to 24 are substantially more likely to use platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter even when compared with those in their mid- to late-20s.”<sup>23</sup> Younger generations who grew up on these new technologies are incredibly well adept at using them. Ashley Shaw and

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<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use in 2018.” (March 2018): 2.

<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use in 2018.” (March 2018): 3.

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use in 2018.” (March 2018): 2.

<sup>22</sup> Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use in 2018.” (March 2018): 4.

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use in 2018.” (March 2018): 4.

Don Krug of the University of British Columbia describe young people as “critical consumers of digital media”<sup>24</sup> When studying the social media interaction of young adults, Shaw and Krug identified two major themes. They identified that these interactions consisted of “connecting with others and [...] generating and interacting with information.”<sup>25</sup> This shows the importance of communication and participatory learning in this new medium. Museums can take advantage of this information and utilize social media to create meaningful interactions with its audience.

### **Museums and Social Media**

Social media brings an innovative take on how museums engage with their audience. Jenny Kidd of City University, London argues that “such media take the museum outside of its architectural bounds, and, in their very virtuality and immateriality, begin to put the story centre stage; recognising and even embracing subjectivity.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, the museum is no longer confined to a physical space. One worry of some museum professionals is that putting information from the museum online either on a website or on a social media account will discourage visitors from attending the physical museum. They believe that if the potential visitor can see an image of an object on display with a description online, they no longer have incentive to visit the museum. Contrary to this belief, a study by Antonio Padilla-Meléndez and Ana Rosa del Águila-Obra of the University of Málaga found that there was no perceivable competition

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<sup>24</sup> Shaw and Krug, “Heritage Meets Social Media,” 239.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw and Krug, “Heritage Meets Social Media,” 242.

<sup>26</sup> Jenny Kidd, "Enacting Engagement Online: Framing Social Media Use for the Museum." *Information Technology & People* 24, no. 1 (2011): 65, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/855076001?accountid=15099>

between the physical museum and its online presence.<sup>27</sup> The study found that online content could supplement the experience of museum visitors.

There are numerous benefits associated with social media usage. Most social media accounts are free to create and maintain.<sup>28</sup> The speed at which posts and messages can be sent allows an institution to instantly communicate with its followers. Significantly, social media allows an institution to easily engage directly with its audience. Museums can take advantage of many of these positive aspects.

Museums often have a reputation of being stuck in the past and slow to change. In order to stay current, museums need to adapt to these new online technologies or risk becoming outdated. Social media is gradually supplanting the old media such as newspapers as a way to advertise the institution. Promoting the institution through social media helps increase interest in upcoming events, projects, or exhibits. Similarly, social media can expand the reach of a museum. It is possible for an institution that may have only attracted local visitors to now reach a wider audience. Social media provides the platform to make this happen. As previously stated, social media can help users reach younger demographics. The vast majority of young people use social media, and many of them use multiple platforms.<sup>29</sup> In order to reach a young audience, museums need to know where to find them. Most importantly, social media enables audience engagement. Social media allows the museum to connect directly with its audience. Through this connection, the audience can participate and shape their learning experience. This connection

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<sup>27</sup> Antonio Padilla-Meléndez and Ana Del Águila-Obra, "Web and Social Media Usage by Museums: Online Value Creation," *International Journal of Information Management* 33, no. 5 (2013): 896, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2013.07.004>

<sup>28</sup> Fletcher and Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations," 507.

<sup>29</sup> Pew Research Center, "Social Media Use in 2018." (March 2018): 4.

with the audience is important because, “without strong relationships with visitors, donors, and volunteers, museums would not be successful and could cease to exist.”<sup>30</sup>

Many institutions are creating social media accounts across different platforms. One study found that the most popular social media sites among museums were Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>31</sup> The study also found that the photo sharing site Flickr was among the most used; however, its place among museums may have been supplanted by other photo sharing sites like Instagram and Snapchat which have gained a greater user base since the study was conducted. According to data from a study by Henrikki Tenkanen et al., Flickr was less popular than Instagram when it came to the number of posts, unique social media users, and social media user days.<sup>32</sup>

Many museums have taken advantage of social media at their institutions in different ways. Most institutions utilize social media to promote events at their institution or make announcements.<sup>33</sup> Activities where the audience engaged with the institution online like scavenger hunts or other interactive puzzles and games ranked lower on the list.<sup>34</sup> Museums can use social media as a valuable tool for audience participation. The Museum of Fine Art in Boston utilized social media for the creation of a new exhibit. They asked the public to help curate the exhibit by choosing their favorite pieces of Impressionist art from their collection. The public could cast their votes through the museum’s Facebook page or through a specialized website.

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<sup>30</sup> Fletcher and Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations," 506.

<sup>31</sup> Fletcher and Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations," 511.

<sup>32</sup> Henrikki Tenkanen et al, “Instagram, Flickr, or Twitter: Assessing the Usability of Social Media Data for Visitor Monitoring in Protected Areas,” *Scientific Reports (Nature Publisher Group)* 7 (2017): 9, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1983426842?accountid=15099>

<sup>33</sup> Fletcher and Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations," 511.

<sup>34</sup> Fletcher and Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations," 511.

The museum would distinguish the audience favorites in the collection and place the three most popular paintings at the entrance to the exhibit.<sup>35</sup>

### **Issues with Social Media**

The introduction of social media brings new practical and ethical concerns to museums. Social media is an entirely new field that is ever evolving. Many of the platforms discussed have only emerged in the last ten to fifteen years. This can create unique challenges for those who participate in this new mode of communication. While social media presents many great possibilities for museums especially in education, outreach, and engagement, “in expanding access and inclusion, and exploring dynamism and collaboration, concerns about such things as transparency, censorship, respect for constituencies, how best to advance education and research, preservation, and privacy are raised.”<sup>36</sup> These are concerns that museums need to address.

The new method of communication is one problem found in social media. The way one conducts oneself online comes with a new set of protocols and appropriate behaviors. The openness of the medium can cause serious ethical problems. The “heightened public nature” of social media is unique to this medium.<sup>37</sup> Users can post anything online instantly and with little thought. The inherent danger in this new medium is that one never knows what someone else might say. Communication that would have been seen as inconsequential or a transient thought in the past is now very visibly posted online.

One major issue encountered with social media is a loss of control. A prime example of this is the comment feature available on many social media sites. This feature allows users to add

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<sup>35</sup> Puhl and Mencarelli, “Web 2.0,” 46.

<sup>36</sup> Wong, “Ethical Issues of Social Media in Museums,” 102.

<sup>37</sup> Amelia S. Wong, “Ethical Issues of Social Media in Museums: A Case Story,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 26, no. 2 (2011): 100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2011.566710100>

their own comments to other users' posts. Many times, people compose comments that lack relevance or accuracy. The dilemma for museums is whether to leave such comments as they are, correct them, or delete them altogether. This is an issue because users could see any type of censorship as an affront to the collaborative nature of the online environment. However, to leave inaccurate or even hateful comments unaddressed would also provide a disservice to the other visitors of the site. Amelia Wong, the manager of social media outreach at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, addressed this issue by creating a code of ethics to guide the staff of the institution. The code they established bans "vulgarity, derogatory language, outright abuse, Holocaust denial, and off-topic rants."<sup>38</sup> The staff monitors the comments and selectively deletes comments that violate their code of ethics. They do this "in the interest of trying to prevent the spread of misinformation, hate, and inanity, as well as to shape a space for potential dialog that has a modicum of civility."<sup>39</sup> A downside to this method, though, is that it requires constant vigilance of what users post which may not be practical for institutions that do not have the resources to dedicate staff for this purpose.

The success of the museum's social media also depends on the amount of planning that the institution invests. Even though social media is easy to set up and use, there is no guarantee that it will be a successful tool. Work needs to be put into maintaining it, learning what the audience responds to, and crafting what is posted by the museum. In reality, "just because one has a blog, Facebook page or YouTube channel, it does not necessarily follow that an active, vibrant and ongoing community will dialogue there."<sup>40</sup> If a museum does not have a clear idea of how they want to use social media at their institution, they may not see many benefits from

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<sup>38</sup> Wong, "Ethical Issues of Social Media in Museums," 104.

<sup>39</sup> Wong, "Ethical Issues of Social Media in Museums," 104.

<sup>40</sup> Kidd, "Enacting Engagement Online," 69.

implementing this technology. Poor planning or implementation can ruin social media campaigns.

Holdgaard analyzed a case study that dealt with the failure of a museum-led social media campaign. This campaign was for an art project that was the result of a collaboration between an art collective and a major art museum in Copenhagen. The goal of this campaign was to raise awareness of the artist's exhibit at the art museum and promote a performance piece of a fake funeral done in conjunction with the exhibit. The campaign, conducted through Facebook, encouraged people to create fake Facebook profiles that would "die" on the day of the funeral making them "ideally become co-creators of the 'death and identity' activities" present in the art project.<sup>41</sup> This campaign failed because it did not attract outside users, create buzz about the exhibit, or attract media attention. Holdgaard determined that the campaign was overly complicated and only attracted a very small group of individuals to participate.<sup>42</sup> Holdgaard suggests that the museum should have given more thought to the viability of the campaign before they launched it.<sup>43</sup>

## **Social Media Policy**

A social media policy can keep institutions like museums from making serious mistakes on social media, and a social media strategy can guide an institution in social media campaigns. A social media policy can be defined many different ways. Louise Cadell, the research officer at the Queensland State Archives, defines social media policy as "the prescribed principle of action or practice relating to an online channel, space or environment in which people engage and

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<sup>41</sup> Holdgaard and Klasturp, "Between Control and Creativity," 195.

<sup>42</sup> Holdgaard and Klasturp, "Between Control and Creativity," 199.

<sup>43</sup> Holdgaard and Klasturp, "Between Control and Creativity," 198.



converse.”<sup>44</sup> A social media strategy is similar and many social media policies contain a social media strategy. Social media strategists Robin Effing and Ton A. M. Spil define a social media strategy as “a goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position.”<sup>45</sup>

Essentially, a social media policy is a set of guidelines that steer an institution’s social media usage. The strategy lays out a purpose for that usage.

Social media policies are beneficial because they can safeguard the institution from liability. A policy can state who has the authority to post or control an institution’s social media. It can also direct the institution to create posts with reliable information and to always maintain a professional image online. The policy should be tailored to the needs of the individual institution. It should also be just broad enough to apply to future developments in social media or new social networks.<sup>46</sup> In its essence, “a good social media policy therefore, does not only protect but also provides an explanation as to why the institution or organization uses social media in the first place”<sup>47</sup>

The social media strategy may be more open to interpretation. The institution decides the extensiveness of its strategy and what it to include. A thorough strategy should identify the institution’s target audience, its choice of channel, goals, resources, policies, method of monitoring, and content activities.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Louise Cadell, “Socially Practical or Practically Unsociable? A Study into Social Media Policy Experiences in Queensland Cultural Heritage Institutions,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 44, no. 1 (2013): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2013.773858>

<sup>45</sup> Robin Effing and Ton A. M. Spil, “The Social Strategy Cone: Towards a Framework for Evaluating Social Media Strategies,” *International Journal of Information Management* 36, no. 1 (February 2016): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2015.07.009> 2

<sup>46</sup> Cadell, “Socially Practical or Practically Unsociable?” 10.

<sup>47</sup> Cadell, “Socially Practical or Practically Unsociable?” 6.

<sup>48</sup> Effing and Spil, “The Social Strategy Cone,” 2.

## Case Studies

In order to determine the role social media plays in smaller museums, five museums in Michigan were selected as case studies. These five museums do not represent the practices of small museums in Michigan as a whole, but rather they serve as examples of some of the social media practices of museums. The institutions are the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, the Alamo Township Museum, the Manistee County Historical Museum, Historic Charlton Park, and the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. The museums are all based around communities in West Michigan that range in size from townships to counties. Each interview was collected between December 2017 and January 2018. The purpose of these case studies is to show how small museums in Michigan use and view social media at their institution.

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is the largest of the small museums. It has thirteen paid full-time staff, fifteen paid part-time staff, and numerous regular volunteers. The museum had an annual attendance of 122,000 for 2017.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, the smallest of the museums that participated was Alamo Township. Alamo Township has no paid employees, only volunteers. Of these volunteers, there are two primary volunteers who run the museum and about four or five other dedicated volunteers. The museum had an estimated annual attendance of 5,000 for 2017.<sup>50</sup>

The responsibilities of the social media administrators varied across each museum, but generally, their role included other responsibilities besides just running the social media. Elizabeth Barker and Regina Gorham were interviewed for Kalamazoo Valley. Barker is the museum support specialist. Her duties include answering both phone calls and emails, working

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<sup>49</sup> American Alliance of Museums, *The Official Museum Directory 2017* (New Providence, NJ: National Register Publishing, 2017), 971.

<sup>50</sup> American Alliance of Museums, *The Official Museum Directory 2017*, 970.

with school groups, and handling the website and social media for the museum. Gorman is the collections manager at the museum and collaborates with Barker on many social media posts. Barker also runs the social media for Alamo Township, which has no paid employees. She is the secretary of the board and handles the social media and marketing for the museum. Mark Fedder is the executive director and the only paid full-time staff at Manistee County. He runs the museum's Facebook page in addition to the many other responsibilities of running a museum. At Charlton Park, Shannon Pinkster, the education coordinator handles the institution's social media accounts. Tracy Gierada, the curator and interim executive director, runs the social media of the Heritage Museum.

The main social media administrator of each institution was asked a series of questions about their institution's social media usage. The questions included information about which social media platforms the institution used, the number of followers an institution had, the kind of content the institution posted to their accounts, and their views on social media at their institution.

## **Results**

By far, Facebook was the most common social media platform for museums involved in the study. All five museums reported that their institution had a Facebook page. Kalamazoo Valley has two Facebook pages, a general one for the museum and another for The Fretboard Festival, an event the museum hosts every year. Additionally, Facebook is the only social media platform used by Alamo Township and Manistee County. The followers of the Facebook pages varied with each institution. The main Facebook page of Kalamazoo Valley had the most followers with almost 7,000 while the Facebook page of Alamo Township had the smallest

number with just under 100. In addition to Facebook, some of the museums utilized other types of social media. Kalamazoo Valley, Charlton Park, and the Heritage Museum used photo-sharing sites such as Pinterest or Instagram. Kalamazoo Valley and Charlton Park also used Twitter. Similar to how they handle Facebook, Kalamazoo Valley has one general and two specific twitter accounts. None of the museums interviewed used Snapchat.

The subjects of posts were mainly promotional in nature. The smaller museums posted almost exclusively about exhibits or events put on by the museum. Gierada estimated that about one-half to two-thirds of the Heritage Museum's posts promote events at the museum or fundraisers. Interestingly, many museums in the study also reported using their institution's social media to promote other institutions or organizations. Fedder reported that he posted content to Manistee County's Facebook page that promoted the local historic theater's summer classic film series. Barker and Pinkster also stated that their institutions, Alamo Township and Charlton Park respectively, would post about township or county events.

While promotional posts were by far the most common, other subjects also appeared. Content classified as a call to action occurred somewhat frequently. These included requests for volunteers from Alamo Township and requests for contributions to the Heritage Museum fundraising campaign. Posts that included information about the museum were also common. These posts included information as simple as letting the public know when the museum is open and when and where an event is held. In addition to basic information, educational posts that contain information about subjects familiar to the museum were frequent. This could come in the form of fun facts, blogs about local history, or information about an object in the museum's collection. With Kalamazoo Valley, Barker has taken an interesting approach to using social media to promote education through highlighting a specific artifact. Kalamazoo Valley has an

Egyptian mummy in their collection, and it has become a kind of mascot for the museum. The mummy has her own twitter account where it appears as though the mummy composes and sends out her own tweets.

Generally, the museums did not utilize social media as a tool for visitor engagement. All five museums have enabled comments on social media platforms that allow people to post their remarks. The most common responses to posts are simply “likes.” Museum posts generated mainly positive comments or thoughtful reminiscences from the audience. The museums infrequently employed posts that encouraged audience engagement. Some museums would occasionally pose a question to their followers on social media, but these questions rarely generated meaningful discussions. Sometimes the reverse happened, where the public posed questions to a museum through social media. This can create another channel for engagement and can generate a discussion.

The frequency of posting to social media varied for each institution and depended on the social media platform and account. Pinkster stated she tries to post something to Facebook three to five times a week and to twitter two to three times a week. Barker for Alamo Township tries to post something at least once a week. Fedder does not have a set schedule for posting things to Manistee County’s Facebook page and only posts when the museum holds an event or when there is free time to manage the account. The time available to social media administrator dictates the frequency of posting.

The social media administrators in the study listed a number of benefits that resulted from their museum’s use of social media. Barker for Kalamazoo Valley found social media improved the reach of the institution. People who may have moved away could connect to the institution and learn about the museum, exhibits, or upcoming events. They found it also helped connect

with people in their twenties and thirties who used Facebook. Barker for Alamo Township and Pinkster of Charlton Park both emphasized that social media was helpful in getting the word out about programs and events and in letting the public know when they were open.

In addition to the benefits of social media, the museums also noted some negative aspects they encountered. Barker stated that for Kalamazoo Valley, while social media brought the positive attention to the museum, it also elevated some criticisms of the museum through negative comments left on some of their posts. In the case of Alamo Township, Barker discussed the issue involved in multiple people controlling or having access to a social media account. The tone of posts varied depending on who wrote it and many posts did not seem cohesive. Pinkster identified another issue involving tone at Charlton Park. Pinkster stated that they encountered issues when they corrected incorrect information about the museum from other users. The other users reacted negatively and Pinkster felt that Charlton Park's response came off as harsher than they mean to be. Fedder touched on a few issues he encountered with Manistee County's Facebook page. Foremost was the gray area of deleting negative or inaccurate comments attached to a museum post. Fedder found it difficult to draw the line of which comments to delete and which to allow to remain. Interestingly, both Fedder of Manistee County and Gierada of the Heritage Museum noted that they had issues with people taking images – usually historic photographs – from their Facebook pages and posting them on different websites without permission and without credit to the museum. This practice can infringe on copyright law and can lead to the spread of misinformation regarding the content of the photographs. Gierada also stated that the informality of the platform has led to people making inquiries through social media instead of through the proper channels of the Heritage Museum office. These were usually questions about a topic that a staff member would need to research. These inquiries would

normally cost a fee. Because of this, the museum has to decide which questions they can answer on social media and which people they would need to contact and ask to go through the traditional channels at the museum.

Many of these issues tie into the museums' social media policy or strategy. Of the five museums, only Kalamazoo Valley has a written social media policy. The policy is not unique to the museum though; it comes from Kalamazoo Valley Community College, the institution that governs the museum. Even so, the strategy that Barker employs for Kalamazoo Valley is unwritten and based on her personal approach. Most of the social media administrators at the other museums stated that they also employed a personal, unwritten social media strategy for their institution. The person in charge of the account would deem what was permissible to post and what they wanted the museum to communicate. This is a feasible strategy because there usually is one person who controls the account and knows what tone they wanted to strike. Fedder did not have a written or specific social media policy or strategy in place for Manistee County. This was primarily because the museum did not see social media as a priority. The director stated that it was difficult to make time to create posts and manage the social media account of the museum with the other responsibilities of his role at the museum.

## **Conclusion**

Each museum examined in the case studies approaches social media differently. Some viewed it as mainly a promotional tool, others viewed it as a means for audience outreach, and others viewed it as a technology that is nearly impossible to keep up with. In the majority of the cases though, social media seemed to be an afterthought. Despite its potential, the social media administrators very rarely utilized it outside of its basic functions. A number of factors caused

this situation. The main factor is the lack of time. Social media competed with the other responsibilities of the administrators. Another contributing factor was the potential for negative incidents. These range from angry commenters to serious ethical dilemmas about the nature of online communication. The newness of the medium is another factor. People are still exploring what social media can do. These are fair assessments of the limitations of social media. Adding social media to an institution does not guarantee success. It takes a great deal of work to create a successful social media presence that engages its audience. This is why a sturdy social media policy and strategy needs to be in place. A museum needs to have a firm social media policy and strategy if it wants to benefit from social media. Otherwise, its social media use is directionless.

These case studies allow people to see the current state of social media at some small museums. By learning about the issues encountered by these museums, small museums can develop strategies that address these problems. It is also important to note that this study reveals an approach where social media is often underutilized. This mentality needs to change because social media is here to stay. Museums cannot ignore this new technology; they need to learn to adapt.



### **Appendix: Best Practices for Small Museums that Want to Use Social Media Effectively**

- 1. Start with one platform.** With social media, it is important for the institution to start simply by using only one social media platform. This allows the social media administrator to focus on running one account and to become familiar with the platform. It is also important for the museum to build a following before expanding to other platforms. Facebook is an ideal social media platform to start with because it is the most popular platform and can incorporate text, videos, photos and more in posts. Once the institution feels confident with their ability to manage a social media account, the institution can branch out to other platforms.
- 2. Have a dedicated social media administrator.** Assigning one person the responsibility of running the social media for a museum helps ensure the continuation of a singular voice throughout the posts. It is important to state explicitly whose job it is to not only create posts but also monitor those posts for audience questions and other issues. This

person can be a staff member or volunteer, but it must be someone who can be trusted to speak for the institution.

- 3. Create a social media strategy.** This strategy should drive the institutions' use of social media. A strategy should lay out what the museum wants to do with its social media. What do they want to do with their content? Whom do they hope to reach? How to they plan to engage their audience? These are all questions that a strategy should answer.
- 4. Create a social media policy.** A social media policy should be a guide for a museum's social media use. An ideal social media policy should include all previous points clearly written into the policy. A good policy will state which platforms the institution uses, who is in charge of running the accounts, and what the purpose is of the museum's social media. In addition to this, a good policy should also have clear rules for conduct on social media. This should include what the administrator can and cannot post online, the procedure for deleting comments, and other common issues.