



# In-gallery Digital Curation—a Museum’s Innovative Approach to Audience Engagement

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The word “curation” is derived from the Latin root *curare*, which means “care”. Curation, therefore, refers to the practice of taking care of objects and managing the collections. As such, digital curation, a term that has only emerged recently, is a role that handles data collection, management and accessibility across multifaceted fields, although the exact duties and responsibilities may vary based on the institutions and museums one may work at.

At the Palace Museum, the position of digital curator is one who manages the online digital products and offline in-gallery digital exhibition curation. The latter role involves creating an immersive and interactive environment through new media technologies, which can revitalise the exhibition and boost audience’s engagement.

The idea of combining museum works with digital media technologies has been widely embraced all over the world. Over the past few years, the rise of digital technologies has brought innovative changes to the field of curation, affecting everything from collection

management, interpretation and display, to social media dissemination.

Most significantly, this is drawing a wider audience, especially those from the young generations—an optimistic sign since cultural heritage institutions including museums are the keepers of traditions and bearers of the values of humanity. It is important, therefore, for digital technologies to serve as a bridge between the museum and audience.

## **Creating a rich and memorable visit experience**

New media, in contrast to traditional media such as television, radio and print media, breaks the conventional view of audiences being on the receiving end, only seeing and listening to what they are shown. Yet, as Benjamin Franklin once said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” With this in mind, new media offers the benefit of letting the audience get involved, which is crucial to creating a more meaningful and memorable visit experience.

Moreover, new media technology provides a richer experience as its content goes beyond normal text and static images. Researchers have found that pictures and text follow very different rules for memorisation, so the more interactive and engaging way information is presented through new media can greatly affect visitors' long-term memories (Kalogeras 2014). For example, if information is presented orally, people remember about 10 per cent, but if a picture is added, they might remember up to 65 per cent. A story told by film and animation has even better rates of recollection because the vividness of these scenes, coupled with the immersive and realistic experience, is more likely to pierce the consciousness and evoke emotions of the audience.

One might argue that in an era with an overload of images and where new things are constantly popping up, people have become desensitised to image-fuelled surroundings. An enchanting visual presentation with insubstantial contents might not be remembered.

But consider this: When people see a faded picture of a long-lost friend or listen to a melody from the past, they will recount vivid memories from even decades ago because the sensory input evokes long-buried but strong emotions.

Digital curators can achieve the same effect for a digital exhibition; they can use visual sensory information in combination with a touching story and great storytelling to evoke resonance among audience and strengthen retention in long-term memory. That way, the exhibition will easily be recalled when there are any similar visual triggers.

### *Encouraging social interaction*

According to Sherry Turkle, Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, although technology brings people convenience, this comes at a cost for interpersonal communication, especially in terms of one's sociability and face-to-face communication skills (Turkle, 2011). As a public space, museums serve as an activator for people to socially interact and should therefore pay more attention to the balance between technology and humanity, for instance by providing platforms for the public to express their feelings or to share their opinions.

Traditional exhibitions organise content and present art works in a static way, often by chronology, subject categorisation, or object classification. Messages are also conveyed in one direction, namely from the artworks to the audience. This requires sufficient distance between visitors and artworks, and in most cases, this is achieved with glass display cabinets, which can make visitors feel detached from the exhibit or like they are outsiders to the museum. With exhibitions like these, the priority is to create a quiet exhibition environment, and the fewer visitors, the better the visiting experience. Any other visitors apart from oneself are seen as intruders that damage the visiting experience.

Digital exhibitions, however, are the opposite. Visitors are encouraged to interact with not only the installations, but also other visitors, thus reversing this need for isolation and instead, making the presence of other visitors a valuable part of the exhibition experience.

As new media technology grows in popularity, museums are gradually changing the way they curate exhibitions as well. Now, museums are no longer traditional show-and-tell spaces, but can be powered by new media technology to go beyond merely educating visitors to also encourage their participation. In *Rethinking Curating Art after New Media*, Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook classified visitors' participation into three aspects: acting upon each other, to have a share in or take part in, and working jointly (Graham and Cook 2015).

Acting upon each other is the fundamental one, which is commonly put into practice for digital displays. This requires the least amount of a visitor's involvement as users are invited to click the touchscreen tables to receive immediate feedback of information.

A higher degree of interaction between visitors and an exhibition occurs when visitors are invited to participate and their reaction, creations, or even their existence, becomes an indispensable part of the exhibition. A good example of this is Japanese art collective teamLab's digital artwork series, which is designed to dissolve the boundary between visitors and artwork through interaction. The viewers' existence and behaviour become a part of the artwork itself and even alter how the artwork is presented, therefore blurring the boundary between viewers and artists. As described by teamLab on its homepage:

"Whether a viewer was present five minutes ago, or how the person next to you is behaving now, suddenly becomes important. Digital art has the ability to change the relationships among people who are present within the same space. If the interaction of other people with an



**Figure 1.** *Borderless*, MORI Building Digital Art Museum, Tokyo, 2018. Image taken from <https://borderless.team-lab.cn/>.

artwork creates change that we feel is beautiful, then the presence of others can in itself become a positive element.”

In this way, the search for new relationships between people may be able to go beyond art, potentially creating new relationships between cities and individuals, as well as new ways to bring peace among people.

For example, when individuals are required to collaborate for the exhibition, they start to communicate face-to-face and socialise, which meets the museum’s goals of firstly, to work strategically in order to include citizens with different social and cultural backgrounds, and secondly, to create a foundation for competent and relevant contributions to a society’s sustainability and resilience (UNESCO 2016).

### Reaching a wider range of audiences

Digital exhibitions relying on new media technology are often highly adaptable and flexible in order to be presented virtually. Theoretically speaking, the digital exhibition could be localised at any place with the space, equipment, and internet connection. Moreover, its replicability means the exhibition could be distributed simultaneously all over the world, reaching a far wider range of audiences than conventional exhibitions, simply because the latter must prioritise the safety of the artefacts and as a result, often ends up in a physical gallery or showroom.

Flexibility can also be found in terms of form, design and content. If the interactive installation involves touchscreens with projectors and motion sensors due to display demand, it can be developed into a new installation but with

the same content. The programme would still convey the same message to the audience, but through a different user experience.

Despite this, digital exhibitions are not without challenges. In a physical exhibition, adjustments must be made for it to connect whether culturally or psychologically, to locals in the area that the exhibition travels to. For instance, when the exhibition *Garden of Tranquil Longevity (the Qianlong Garden)* travelled to America, the curator replaced the keywords “Qianlong” and “Tranquil Longevity” and renamed the exhibition *The Emperor’s Private Paradise: Treasures from the Forbidden City* to cater to individuals who did not know who the Qianlong Emperor was.

The pressure to do this is equally high for digital curators, and some may argue that adjusting the exhibition so it is embraced by the locals is as important as organising the content in the first place. This has led some artists and curators to recommend dematerialisation and decontextualisation to reduce dependency on the primary equipment or context of the exhibition.

While this may be practical for contemporary art exhibitions, it is hard to accommodate more traditional exhibitions which have usually been developed in specific contexts and are distant from life today. To remove this traditional exhibition from its original context will dilute its quality. As such, in order to create an emotional connection between the original environment and the local inhabitants where the exhibition travels, the need is for digital curators to either replicate the original environment for the target market, or create a new visual design based on the new space.

Also while the text, audio, video and user interface design for digital exhibitions are more easily adjusted, the user experience design, release platform, deployment, social sharing links and more will involve some degree of technical redevelopment.

Digital curators also need to examine the types of platforms the exhibition can be launched on. To do this, they may need to conduct market research to find out which of the release platforms—like iOS, Android, WeChat Mini-Program, and HTML5—will allow them to reach the most number of users as possible, as it is unlikely that the budget will allow for all the platforms to be covered.

After the primary proposal is accepted, digital curators may take into account similar user profiles and behaviours before revising their own work accordingly. For example, if the target audiences are mainly iPhone users, the digital curators should launch their apps on the Apple store. Links for social media sharing should also be diversified according to the behaviour of the local population, noting that people of different ages use different social media platforms and have different preferences when choosing between popular ones like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. In China, social media platforms used are entirely different, and while Sina Weibo and WeChat are the frequent choice for users from diverse ages, Tencent QQ and TikTok are more commonly used by youth who are around 20 years old or younger.

## Conclusion

Digital curation is an emerging phenomenon that has been challenged by many conservatives. Common questions include: Does it have value if it cannot replace the conventional exhibition? And if it is of value, what is its significance of being?

Yet the fact remains that technology is significantly and rapidly changing the world and the way people live. The cultural generation gap between the young and the old is also increasing. The younger generation must continue to appreciate and preserve cultural heritage and tradition in order to make sense of their identity and to establish the relationship between the individual and the community—or even the nation, to develop a sense of belonging. It is the responsibility of culture and heritage institutions to convey the value of humanity to younger generations. To remain relevant, they need to be updated with the trends in society and even to borrow the language of the youth to create the necessary connections, lest they are marginalised by the next generations. In-gallery digital exhibitions are one way to do this, and have incredible potential to help garner interest and attract people to museums.

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