

# Collecting the pandemic crisis: The challenge for museums in the age of COVID-19

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**Dr Mathew Trinca**

Member of the Order of Australia (AM)  
Director, National Museum of Australia

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*Using the online medium as a platform, National Museum of Australia sets out to document the pandemic as it develops, and finds the digital approach to be invaluable in documenting an unfolding historic event, enabling people to connect and exchange stories and views on the crisis, collecting diverse stories, and assisting the museum’s work in acquiring potential artefacts.*

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The response from the public was clear and immediate when National Museum of Australia launched an online project in April 2020 to record our nation’s collective experiences of the novel coronavirus. Within minutes of the project going live, scores of people across the country joined a virtual conversation about how they were coping with the pandemic.

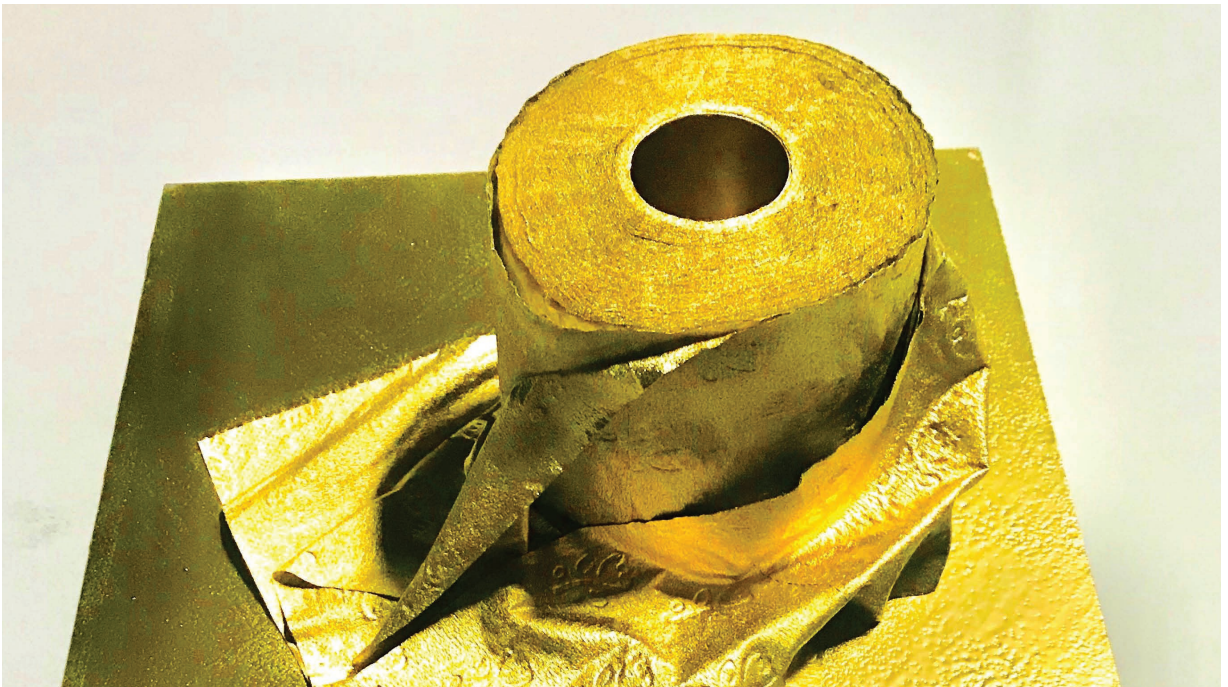
“I’ve been waiting for something like this to start,” wrote one woman on our Facebook Group page that first day. More posts followed, with people

sharing photographs, videos and stories through the “Bridging the Distance” project (Figure 1), either on social media or directly via the Museum’s website. Many of the posts offered humour in the face of adversity. There was the couple pictured in face masks for their wedding photos, and another which showed how a family had amended the game of Twister to comply with social distancing rules. Or my favourite: a photo of a roll of toilet paper sprayed gold (Figure 2), satirising the ugly rush for supplies in supermarkets across Australia as the crisis unfolded.

History may be in the telling but you need to be able to recall what happened and what it felt like in order to really know the past. That’s why the National Museum committed itself to collecting these posts and emails through its “Bridging the Distance” project and keeping them as “virtual objects” of our shared COVID-19 experience. It was an approach we trialled with a similar online project “Fridge Door Fire Stories” during that other crisis over the Australian summer of 2019-



**Figure 1.** Facebook page banner for “Bridging the distance” project, 2020.  
Image courtesy of National Museum of Australia.



**Figure 2.** “An Australian Story—March 2020”. A roll of toilet paper sprayed gold satirises the ugly rush for supplies during the pandemic, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist J.S. Gvozden.

20—the wide-scale bushfires that devastated a vast extent of the continent after a searing drought (Figure 3). The museum launched a Facebook page to document stories and imagery stemming from this defining event. The platform provided a national opportunity for grassroots storytelling and to honour frontline emergency workers, and assists in the museum’s work in identifying any potential collection objects and contacting members of public about them.

Both projects have taught us much about how we can re-imagine the task of collecting and documenting contemporary events for posterity. After all, collecting online is just a new take on the long-established museum practice of making, keeping and presenting collections of objects that bring our stories of the past alive.

The responsibility to make and keep a material record of our lives and times is something

National Museum and many other museums in Australia take very seriously. But there is a lot more to “Bridging the Distance” and other projects like them than making online archives. The real worth of online projects lies in enabling people to come together, to connect and to exchange views of what is happening to them as it is happening. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, people needed to express how they were dealing with this new world—one that was challenging their sense of themselves and was wholly unexpected. Those who sent in posts, photos and videos to sites like “Bridging the Distance” have clearly wanted to express their own ideas, as much as consume those offered to them by museums and other like organisations online. This is a deeper truth embedded in the digital turn of museums, which once were all about the stories they told but now are increasingly confronted with communities and publics who want to tell us what they know.



**Figure 3.** The launch of the museum’s “Fridge Door Fire Stories” project coincided with the incorporation into the museum’s collection of an iconic fridge stocked with cold drinks for firefighters in the New South Wales town of Bungendore. Image courtesy of National Museum of Australia.

I am convinced that life for museums and galleries—and indeed for all in the arts—on the other side of this crisis will not be quite the same as it was before. The act of closing the front doors of National Museum to safeguard the community was both materially and psychologically challenging to me as director, to the staff, and indeed to our visitors. After all, the fundamental logic of museums is based on the idea of serving the public and giving people the opportunity to learn about the world in which they live, to make sense of their own lives by making sense of real things, artefacts, in their collections, and to participate in programmes. I have never imagined that I would be a museum director who had to close the doors, to turn people away, and effectively deny them these opportunities.

For all that, amid the crisis, and the consequent closure of museums and galleries around the world, there has also come a sense of new possibilities. There have been welcome

developments of new practices and new ways of maintaining our sense of our public mission and service. In Australia, as in many parts of the world, much of this has involved pivoting our organisations to focus on digital delivery and online engagement. I have been impressed, for instance, by how quickly we have seen new communication technologies adopted across the sector and the emergence of new modes of online delivery of programmes and presentations for our publics.

This is not to say that we have somehow given up on the great collections of artefacts that underpin our work, or the virtues of the physical museum as a social and civic space which enables active, embodied learning. In fact, at National Museum, our curators have also been busy making collections of things that document the nation’s experience of COVID-19, from test kits and personal protective gear used by medical staff, to works of arts created by people during lockdown. In many cases, the contacts we made

with people through online sites like “Bridging the Distance” and “Fridge Door Fire Stories” have led to us collecting physical objects that represent their stories. Refocusing the museum’s work on virtual engagement online with people across the country, and indeed around the world, has been challenging. But it has also helped our work in more traditional areas and given us a different perspective on what we do. We have proof finally that the museum as a trusted, valued civic institution no longer needs to be defined by its location and geography. Instead, it can become a site for exchange and connection, attracting new audiences far from its doors by delivering what it does best—ideas, dialogue and debate—into their homes.

Almost 30 years ago, American writer and critic Howard Rheingold coined the term ‘virtual community’ to describe people of common interest who connected online (Rheingold 1993). Rheingold saw these new attachments, unlimited by the old geographical sense of community and unfettered by the elaborate economic, social and political superstructures organising pre-digital industrialised societies, as offering personal benefits as well as collective goods. Having had his own doubts about the impact of these communication technologies on society, he came to see the potential for these services to augment our lives, such as by distributing power more broadly among ordinary citizens rather than having it concentrated in the hands of economic and political elites. But just as we have hurried to use these new digital tools, we have also become more ambivalent about their effects on our social lives. Dystopic visions of technologised futures find full expression in our media and popular culture. We worry about our children online, even while we spend more and more time with our own devices.

Perhaps this is just the cultural conundrum at the heart of our digital age—the feeling of being impelled inexorably forward while looking back longingly to a simpler imagined past. Yet if the coronavirus crisis has done anything, it has given us more time to think. When I look at the public response to our “Bridging the Distance” project, and other online efforts to connect people, I am struck by the thought that the digital world is actually saving our sense of community. At a time when we have endured the unseemly sight of people fighting over toilet rolls as the crisis deepened, it is the grace and kindness shown by people expressing fears and anxieties about COVID-19 online that give me some cause for comfort.

It behoves us then to try and understand what this means for our great arts institutions, and more particularly for our museums and galleries around the world. While it is too early to tell how any of this will end, I do know that I am grateful for this online connection, both professionally and personally, which has lifted to a new level as we seek to protect our communities from the coronavirus. At a time when we have been forced into physical isolation, what a wonder it is to realise we seem to be drawing closer together online, though not in a way that necessarily suggests the digital will somehow supplant the physical. Courtesy of our biology, humans are altogether social animals that draw great support from being in the company of others. Those of us who work in museums know well the delight our audiences feel in the fellowship of others in our galleries and exhibitions. But I am sure we will take the great strides we have made in re-imagining the museum online in recent months into the post-COVID-19 world, whatever that may look like.

The digital turn is not one we will roll back, however much the material world remains at the heart of what we do. The trick for all of us may be in how we re-imagine and re-energise our idea of community, and indeed our institutions, by combining the best of our physical and virtual selves. In this respect, I think museums and galleries have much to offer their societies, at the same time as they have much to learn from them. Museums are after all theatres of the real, curating collections of physical things, and a range of real, live experiences which speak to us all of the wonder of our communities and humanity at large. At the same time, the necessities of responding to the COVID-19 crisis has shown us another key role for our institutions—as online facilitators of conversations and debate that help people negotiate the way through the minefields of the present and future. It is a combination that seems eminently suited for what Klaus Schwab has called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an age that will be dominated by artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles and the internet of things melding with our physical experiences as humans. Schwab’s argument is that these forces are radically changing human societies, as individuals, businesses and governments learn

to operate in wholly new ways. Museums are well-placed to help their societies negotiate and make sense of these wrenching changes, but only if they find a way to maintain their essential distinction as places devoted to things and make the pivot to this new way of living digitally.

I remain an optimist, even in the face of the mounting challenges we face in dealing with this global crisis, while not underestimating the cost of its impact upon peoples around the world. The redeeming feature of human societies is their astonishing capacity for adaptation and dealing productively with change. Ultimately that makes me very optimistic about the future of museums. I think we have the capacity to shed some of museums’ outdated organisational baggage, inherited from an earlier age, as we evolve into the institutions we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. My hope is that as we do so, we preserve the very best of what we have been known for—great collections of our material world—while enabling dialogue, debate and ideas as we increasingly learn to live in this digital world. I look forward to museums helping to lead their communities as they renegotiate this essential relationship between the virtual and the real. □

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### About the Author



Dr Mathew Trinca is Director of National Museum of Australia, Chair of International Council of Museums Australia and Co-Chair of Australia Singapore Arts Group. Under his leadership, National Museum of Australia has developed strongly engaged national and international programmes focusing on bringing alive the stories of Australia for local and overseas audiences. Trinca’s publications include contributions to debates on museum theory and practice, the history of Australian travel to the United Kingdom, on convictism in Western Australia, and on that state’s constitutional history.

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