

ICOM MPR CONFERENCE- *EMERGING TRENDS*

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How do we market controversy?- Dr. Carol Scott

- a. Between the time that I submitted the abstract for this paper and have come to write it, my reflections have taken me in slightly wider directions. So, I hope that you will indulge me as I present this paper. It should now be titled 'Managing and positioning controversy'.
- b. It is in two parts with a conclusion.
- c. The first part examines the different types of controversy which face contemporary museums. I have tried to develop a preliminary taxonomy around the subject of controversy and scope the types of issues involved.
- d. The second part of the paper looks at two case studies.
- e. One case study examines the management of controversy within a museum with a diverse collection and a diverse audience.
- f. The second looks at some of the positioning issues involved when the museum itself is memorialising a major period or event in the collective memory of a people and a nation.
- g. Finally, I make some concluding remarks.
- h. So to begin.

PART 1

- i. What is controversy? I found a lot of ***d's*** when I searched for an English definition.
- j. *Controversy* is a **dispute, a debate, or a disagreement**. It implies conflict. Moreover, controversy is usually prolonged; the subject has duration- and- the discourse occurs in the public domain.
- k. Controversy can be uncomfortable and it can have some serious consequences for the parties involved (remember the conflict around the representation of the *Enola Gay* which resulted in the resignation of the Director of the Air and Space Museum).



- l. But a situation of controversy is not always a negative. We need to remember that controversial subjects in museums can:
 - Extend the discourse on a subject
 - Engage people in a conversation
 - Reveal the polarities and positions
 - And, focus attention on the institution.
- m. For everyone working in museums, we need to be aware that controversy can arise from a range of sources including:
 - Collections
 - Inclusions/ exclusions
 - Standards, ethics and mores
 - Collective narratives
 - Unresolved and emerging issues
- n. I am not suggesting that this list is definitive nor are the categories mutually exclusive (there are overlaps between the). But it has helped me to consider the extent of controversy and the range of issues that we have to consider in each category:
 - We find controversy in issues associated with our **collections**. One major source of contention is perceptions about the **rightful ownership** of objects with an increasing focus on repatriation. There are other areas. In these challenging economic times, some museums have considered '**de-accessioning**' objects to manage escalating operating costs or to purchase new works- a move often accompanied by outcry and dismay from the public and other professionals. And **the provenance** of objects acquired by museums and galleries, often in good faith, has been the subject of more intense public scrutiny in recent years.



- **Inclusions and exclusions are a contested area.** Who should be included? Whose voice is heard? There has been controversy over the exclusions of women, migrant groups, indigenous cultures and different expressions of sexuality. Inclusion has not, in itself, eliminated controversy because conflict can then arise over representation of difference.
- Controversy is also played out through questions of what is **admissible** according to standards, ethics and mores. The exhibition of human remains is a contested area, sexuality in its myriad forms can provoke dispute- and art, with its capacity to bring with it 'the shock of the new', still contains the power to deeply divide public opinion.
- **Important collective narratives** can be a source of discord. There are divergent views on how we represent war from lionising heroism and nationalism to deploring the inhumanity of war, the huge social cost to generations and the targeting of specific groups through holocausts and genocides. The contention around national narratives has witnessed overt intervention from at least one government that did not subscribe to the notion of plurality and diversity in interpreting the national story. The origins of the world and its species are currently a highly polarised debate between creationists and scientists.
- Controversy often arises when museums explore **emerging or unresolved social issues** which come accompanied by divergent views and value positions. Whether these are perceived as being linked in some (often indirect) way to current geo-political conflicts, reflect deep divisions within a society or explore issues around which there are contested positions, museums can find themselves in the centre of a maelstrom.

- o. So the extent and breadth of subjects of potential controversy is considerable and now we move to part 2 – how do we manage it?

PART 2- The role of marketing in managing controversy

p. The theme of this first case study is ‘managing controversy is a team effort’

- Some years ago, I was working in a large museum in Australia when I was asked by the then Director to chair a working party to develop guidelines to deal with controversy.
- By way of background, this was a museum whose diverse audience included many families, school groups and what we termed at that time ‘culturally active adults’.
- The collection was diverse as well and covered decorative arts and design, science and technology and social history.
- The catalyst for the working party and necessity for guidelines was the fact that the museum was considering two exhibitions- one about birth control and one about the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras
- The fear was that exhibitions on both these subjects could potentially please some visitors at the expense of others.
- So, we set about considering what we, as an institution should do, in situations that might prove controversial.
- We came up with the following guidelines:
 - a. If a museum was planning to come up with an exhibition that could be controversial, all the major **internal** stakeholders had to be involved in the planning- we had to be ‘singing from the same song sheet’ and resolving internal differences has to be sorted out first;
 - b. Stakeholder groups had to be notified and the plans discussed with them in advance;
 - c. Similarly, audience responses to the idea were best tested beforehand rather than received afterwards as negative publicity;

- d. There should be opportunities for audiences to express their reactions as part of the exhibition experience;
 - e. The design of the exhibition had to take sensitivities into account and offer visitors the option of entering the exhibition as an intentional decision rather than just happening into it;
 - f. And if the museum was taking a stand one way or another (rather than being even handed with pro and cons on the subject presented) then marketing had to clearly make that position known.
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- Now, we did both of those exhibitions that I mentioned earlier.
 - a. In the case of the exhibition about birth control,
 - The curator had meeting with all the relevant stakeholder groups from free-choice to right-to-life to educational groups and parents;
 - The designer created a space where a major theme panel explained the content and advised that some might find the subject controversial and the design was constructed so that entry to the exhibition was an intentional decision- you could not wander into it unexpectedly;
 - Visitors to the exhibition were provided with an open-ended feedback sheet to express themselves freely- and they did- we received some of the most revealing and remarkable personal stories that I have ever read.
 - And- we had no demonstrations, no negative comments in the media but a lot of praise from educationists, families and other visitors.
 - b. In the case of the exhibition about the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, we found that it attracted a wide and varied audience and among

the feedback forms were ones from parents thanking us for making it easier, through the exhibition, to discuss issues of gender with their children.

- c. The role of marketing in both of these exhibitions was not just about publicising them.
- It was about positioning the museum in relation to them.
 - One of the major issues to consider is public trust.
 - Museums are trusted more than the media and politicians as sources of information. Their even-handed and balanced approach to subjects is one of their 'unique selling points'
 - This quote from some recent research undertaken in the UK encapsulates it
- *Museums hold a unique position of being trusted, which is particularly important given the perceived lack of trusted organisations in society. Members of the public...see museums as the guardians of factual information and as presenting all sides of the story. BritainThinks research on public perceptions and attitudes to museums 2013*
 - Now we were very aware of this when we developed the guidelines. Museums are valued because they are seen to be balance and to present both sides of the story
 - But when we exhibit issues of controversy, we may be taking a position (or be seen to taking a position) for one side of the other.
 - And we decided that 'trust' can also be maintained by being transparent and honest with the public

- If a museum is taking a position on a subject for an internally curated exhibition –or- if the institution decides to take an outside exhibition which is taking a position, the museum should declare it.
 - So- the approach was to state the position openly. And that may entail saying ‘this exhibition tells one side of a complex story from the perspective of...’.
- d. These guidelines stood us in good stead for many years and are still being applied but I would add some caveats to them:
- They were directed at temporary exhibitions within a large institution where there were other choices. That fact alone allowed visitors to select which exhibitions they visited. They could choose not to visit a controversial exhibition and if they did, their visit was intentional and entailed a level of personal responsibility.
- e. My second case study comes from a different type of museum. These are museums where mission and the focus of the subject matter involves a major event and the people who suffered, perished and, in some cases, survived the experience.
- f. We can include in this category Holocaust and Genocide museums which have multiple purposes:
- memorialising
 - providing a voice for the ‘voiceless’
 - ensuring collective remembering
 - finding meaning for the present and the future in the past.
- g. The theme of this section is that the overall marketing position in these museums is usually found in the *meaning* distilled from a subject which may have occurred in the past**

but which resonates in the present and has future implications.

- h. Marketing in institutions like these must balance
 - the past with the present and the future,
 - the survivors and the descendents of survivors with a more general public
 - around a message which takes a definite position.
- i. For example, I have just returned from working with *one* of the Holocaust Museums in America.
- j. In the first instance, Holocaust Museums have been established to memorialise the event of the WW II Holocaust and to ensure that the 'voice' of the victims and the survivors is given a space in which to tell their stories.
- k. The mission of the NHMM in Washington is *'...to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.*
- l. But the survivors are passing and even their children are now in their sixties and seventies. What happens when we can no longer touch the hand whose direct experience of the event gave rise to these types of museum? What is the meaning of the event as it recedes into an increasingly distant past?
- m. For these museums, marketing is in the **meaning** distilled from the past to inform and construct a future that must include a wider public than the survivors alone.
- n. So, in addition to its mission, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has a responsibility statement.

'To assure that the Museum truly is a living memorial, that the lessons of the Holocaust – lessons about moral responsibility, the fragility and importance of democracy, the dangers of anti-Semitism and racism, and the need to prevent genocide – not only are learned but also embraced by new generations' (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2002).

- o. The message, then, is one of collective civic responsibility in the face of injustice. What one Holocaust Museum terms 'being an upstander rather than a bystander'.
- p. This is an inclusive position that involves and has meaning for all: *Together, we must never forget and never repeat.*

PART 3

In conclusion, we must learn to live with controversy.

1. In a post modern world, plurality brings its own challenges. There is no adherence to one clear, unifying narrative and the vacuum that this provides allows for a diverse range of individualised perceptions about what narratives and what form narratives could and should take;
2. Our world itself is becoming more polarised and less consensual. Enforcing entrenched positions (be they political, social, cultural or religious) is becoming the norm rather than the exception;
3. The public legitimately expects to be part of the conversation and aided greatly by social media is now a force in constructing public discourse;
4. For the media, controversy is news
5. What we can do is to prepare for and manage controversy, honestly and transparently, so that we remain trusted by the public whom we serve.

Thank you.