Mining media content in museums:
Digging deep for new opportunities

Kim McKay
In: A Cultural Cacophony: Museum Perspectives and Projects
Online Version (2016), pp. 48-55
Page Count: 8

Author contact details:
Kim.McKay@austmus.gov.au

Published by the NSW branch of Museums Galleries Australia
© Sydney, 2016

Museums Galleries Australia
New South Wales Branch
c/- Museum of Ancient Cultures
Department of Ancient History
Macquarie University NSW 2109

Museums Galleries Australia National Office
PO Box 266
CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608
W: www.museumsaustralia.org.au
E: ma@museumsaustralia.org.au
P: +61 (2) 6230 0346

Copyright Statement
Museums Galleries Australia respects the rights of all artists and copyright holders. The New South Wales Branch of Museums Galleries Australia is the copyright holder for this publication in its entirety. Individual authors hold copyright for their respective contributions to this volume. Consequently, all works that appear in this publication do so with the consent of the artist/s or copyright holder. No image or information displayed on these pages may be reproduced, transmitted or copied (other than for the purposes of fair dealing, as defined in the Copyright Act 1968) without permission. Contravention is an infringement of the Copyright Act and its amendments.
Mining media content in museums: Digging deep for new opportunities

Kim McKay

“Imagine switching on your TV at home and tuning into the Museums Channel. Would the program hold your attention for at least three minutes…or at least through to the next ad break?”

Thank you Frank and good morning everyone. After last night’s party I’m surprised to see you here – I thought you might all be at church! It’s been a great few days here delving into the future of museums land – and what a magical place museums land is!

I think the night at the museum films just underscore this – museums should be places of imagination, of knowledge, of adventure and discovery and importantly, sometimes, places of fun.

Just take a look at the gang gathered here – they could belong in one way or another in any of our museums, the three Night at the Museum films have taken a worldwide box office so far of $1.35billion. Then add to that most recently Nicole Kidman as museum director in Paddington Bear, she’s handy with a taxidermy knife. Other releases such as George Clooney in Monuments Men and Helen Mirren in Woman in Gold, illustrate the same point.

Museums are entering popular culture as never before. Look at the Met in New York. Is it their Lombardo’s Adam – a restored masterpiece that has attracted the most attention? No, it’s the Met Fashion Gala, which was held earlier this month.

Today I want to talk with you about the opportunity I think is ‘going begging’ in museums – that of really mining our content to share through a variety of media channels – and to challenge you, hopefully, about the role each of your institutions or organisations can play in the future.
A see a dual role: museum as media platform - producer and distributor; and as educator – exhibitor, researcher and custodian. This is where the concept of narrative that Xerxes Mazda talked about so eloquently yesterday comes in.

Media, whether film or TV, has been using narrative, using story-telling, for well over a hundred years very successfully. And our early playwrights did the same.

Let’s now take a leaf out of their book, I’m going to look at how can we do this. And of course, I’ll also give you some insights into the Australian Museum’s transformation plan that we now have underway.

As you know I’ve only been at the museum for just over a year and I do love it – it’s an great experience to think about all the many and varied things I have done in my career – and I have been working professionally for 30 years – and having them all come together.

Working for and leading the Australian Museum is such a privilege – especially one steeped in history and tradition. As Australia’s first museum, its story is almost as colourful as the 18 million items in the collection.

We are the museum of Australia and the Pacific – a natural science and culture museum that’s been around since 1827, we are coming up to our 190th anniversary in just a few years.

The Australian Museum was built on the site of a convict garden, and opposite in Hyde Park there used to be a race track, so we were planted in the centre of quite a lot of nefarious early colonial activity.

The original plans for our site were extremely grand – it was meant to be a building to rival the grandest of European cultural centres where the museum, the library and the art gallery were to be housed together.

But in good NSW government tradition, they ran out of money and instead we became the recipients of a series of buildings, added to over the years, in 1800, 1870 and 1890 buildings forming a u-shape with an internal courtyard that rivals the size of the NHM’s courtyard in London – save for the 1988 brutalist building plonked in the centre of it!

Don’t get me started on interesting architectural decisions, and of course, now I’m adding one (Crystal Hall entry).
In the mid 1800’s Gerard Krefft, an amateur zoologist and curator came to Sydney from the Melbourne Museum (via the US and his home in Germany). After a year, the curator of the Australian Museum died and Krefft took over.

I really like Krefft because he introduced the study of science to the museum, naming over 30 Australian species including the saltwater crocodile and the cassowary, and participated in an untold number of field collecting expeditions. He also discovered the lungfish, not on an expedition, but by eating it at a dinner party one night.

Krefft also stood up and fought for science when it was under attack. In the mid 1860’s, the Australian Museum’s Trust were all creationists – Krefft had become an evolutionary theorist and had developed a friendship, via correspondence with Charles Darwin. Due to his strident beliefs and undoubtedly his lack of charm, Krefft fought vehemently with the Trust and there was even a government enquiry held into his behaviour over a trumped-up charge of theft from the collections. All the government found was that he was guilty of wilfully smashing a fossil jaw bone and occasional drunkenness!

One night, sitting in the parlour at the Australian Museum reading a book while sitting on the Director’s, the museum door was bashed down by two prize fighters from the local bazaar associated with the race track across the road. Hired by the Trustees, the burly blokes picked up Krefft in this chair and carried him out, unceremoniously dumping him in William Street. He was locked out and never allowed to return to the Museum.

Krefft, who had done so much to promote science and indeed open up the Museum to the public, was banished. His friendship, of course, with Charles Darwin continued and Darwin did recognise Krefft in later editions of *Origins of the Species*, but Krefft’s heart was broken and he died at 50 leaving his wife and 2 sons. His ancestors live in Sydney and I have welcomed them to the Museum. Indeed, his great, great, great grandson will be doing work experience with us later this year.

I’m telling you this story for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it’s a good yarn about standing up for what you believe in and promoting science and museology – Krefft used to stand behind canvas sheets at the back of display cases to observe museum visitors’ behaviour.
Secondly, we have recently created two reception rooms dedicated to Krefft – including the original round table and chairs where his disagreements with the Trustees occurred. I call them my ‘money rooms’ as it’s where I meet with donors and sponsors.

And thirdly, because there’s something we can all learn from Darwin.

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”

To survive you have to adapt to change, Krefft is my guardian angel – and Darwin my guiding light.

So the Museum, I have found, is full of stories. It has provided amazing experiences as the past year has shown me.

I’ve had the best shop of my life buying a giraffe and a zebra for our new Wild Planet Gallery, and I’ve been through two cyclones – Ita and Nathan on Lizard Island where we evacuated the Australian Museum’s research station for the first time in over 25 years.

Lizard is the divine island on the northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef where Cook rowed out and climbed to the top of the hill – now known as Cook’s look, to see how he could navigate his way safely through the reef after having run aground.

I’ve recently visited Canowindra - the Age of Fishes Museum – highlighting Devonian fish fossils – amazing fossils unearthed by Australian Museum scientists – with a whole bed potentially waiting to researched further – oh and we’re appointing a palaeontologist back on staff.

And just this week I was holding the newly discovered fossil jawbone of a species of mega fauna from a dig in NSW – a giant kangaroo – which may even be a new species.

Being at the AM is very exciting, I love it. People come into my office and say, “Come and look at the grizzly bear….or come and look at this woolly mammoth thigh bone.”

And then there’s the fun. Here’s one of ours checking in to the hotel next door, The Pullman, for a social media competition linked to Wildlife Photographer of the Year.

It is the stories that matter, and where the opportunity for Museums in the future truly lies.

Think of the earlier SBS on air campaign – six billion stories and counting.
Well, at the AM we’ve got at least 18 million stories – as every object in the collection or indeed every person who has been on expeditions and discovered things knows.

When I first went behind the scenes as a Trustee – my eyes opened wide ....look at this story treasure trove.

“National Geographic would have a field day”, I thought to myself.

Here is one of our indigenous stories – an eel trap, eels can’t reverse so they swim in and are stuck, love it. What a great 2 minute vignette on you tube that would make.

Just wandering through the collection stores – I have the desire to open them up physically – and we will be doing that – but also to reveal and revel in the stories.

As you may know, I worked for over a decade with National Geographic in DC, first with NG Channels, as we launched it around world, and then with the NG Society, developing new global initiatives like the Genographic DNA Project – using citizen science to help reveal where we came from and how we got here. And we have now just created the AM Centre for Citizen Science – taking that experience I’ve had in citizen science and focussing on it.

With National Geographic and before that at Discovery Channel, I’ve travelled the world and had the most amazing experiences from Egypt to Peru, from India to Morocco.

National Geographic was founded in 1888 – around a round table similar to Krefft’s.

Back in the 1982 an academic from Maryland State University uncovered some films and went to the National Geographic Trustees with the idea of launching a new-fangled cable channel.

They said no – the magazine would rule, we’re happy just making documentaries for Sunday night viewing.

Well, that man, John Hendricks went on to found Discovery Communications – now one of the largest communications companies in the world. He’s a billionaire of course.

So by the mid 90’s National Geographic had to play catch up. They got into bed with Rupert Murdoch’s Fox Channels – to launch NGCI (National Geographic Channels International).

Here is a National Geographic Channel clip – it’s a brand image clip and I’m showing it to you for a reason. If you take off the yellow border, it could be the Australian Museum or indeed your Museum.
We have to stop looking at ourselves as four walls where we display things, and start seeing ourselves as venues where we tell and share stories, where we engage the community on and off site – whether in our buildings or at home in their living rooms or through education or on public transport via smart phones.

I am going to stick my neck out today and say that I think the single most important role in any museum in the future will be that of Chief Storyteller: the person who can dig, find stories, tell stories and produce – bringing them to life for your target audiences.

Just like a TV network – you need to get to know your audiences intimately, and find out and then show them what they’re interested in.

Whether it is a 2 minute vignette, a 12 minute feature or a half hour documentary special, we had all better start seeing our organisations as story tellers if we are to remain relevant.

Here is a brief film clip by National Geographic. Phil Breslin is an Indigenous school teacher. He’s as good in the flesh as he is on camera. He is a great guy, who with the help of National Geographic’s storytelling expertise, can communicate in a new way.

Yes, it’s dramatic. It’s the competitive landscape of pay TV where advertisers have to be secured to pay for production and where audiences need to have their attention kept before the remote switches them over to another channel. Bang, three minutes average time spent viewing, and you’ve lost them!!

Here’s another, Tales By Light. Love this. People tell stories – so link the story of your objects with the story of people.

I want to unlock the 18 million stories of the Australian Museum and guide us into a new era where we become a museum and a media organisation – a platform for content creation and sharing, like no other, fulfilling our mission in a new way. And we’ll look to make money out of it too – as being associated with our stories will have enormous brand value.

How do we do this?

Here is a picture from our archives – it shows the filming of a documentary back in the 1950’s.

This is today – a control room full of young smart people who can research, write, produce, edit and broadcast with virtually the tools that exist on their phone. We all need to join the new media revolution.
Here’s Vice – an incredible news and information site with curated content as well as self-generated content. It’s growing rapidly.

Imagine if this was the Museum’s site – maybe called keyhole – like Krefft peering into our collections – and not like the Google Cultural Institute either, which is an aggregator of content.

The University of New South Wales Science Faculty has just created a new media division and employed one of the best science journalists in the country and is becoming a great producer of science video content. We’ll do similar – but in a new way, working with University of Technology Sydney interns.

Maybe every media graduate in Australia can find a place at a museum. The media platforms are everywhere and are accessible.

Very quickly, I want to tell you what I’m doing at the Museum:

Crystal Hall, our new entry on William Street is underway. It liberates our College Street grand gallery space and exposes us to passing traffic – some 200,000 cars per day and very visibly signals change to all our audiences.

We’ll be opening the Crystal Hall around end July/early September. Inside the glass pavilion there will be a huge video wall – with lots of content and enough space of 200 visitors to queue. Here is Crystal Hall - I took this yesterday. It’s a steel and glass structure.

Coinciding with this is the launch of Wild Planet. Here’s my giraffe and zebra I talked about earlier. This is the first new gallery floor space in over 50 years. It is 630sqm and it has literally saved our collection from extinction.

We’ve also created other new galleries this past year including Garrigarang Sea Country and Bayala Nura – both new indigenous galleries; and Pacific Spirit – opened by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop providing a window into our extraordinary Pacific collection;

We’ve also moved the shop and upgraded our central Atrium space; and moved the café to the rooftop to take advantage of the spectacular view. In addition, we’ve renamed Australian Museum Research Institute (AMRI) – we’re getting our science on the floor. We have 90 research scientists and technicians, now led by Dr Rebecca Johnson.
Here is a picture of a famous art work, a preserved shark. That’s not us, but it could be us – they’re trying to be us (Discovery channel in Washington DC) but they don’t have what we all do:

- Content & stories
- Authentic research
- And above all community trust

I hope I’ve described a way forward to grow and engage your audiences like never before. You all work in an amazing and exciting world – the world of Museums. But it’s challenging and how we respond and the momentum we build in our industry is entirely up to us. So take the bull by its horns and mine that content!

Note

This is the provided transcript of a keynote presentation given by Kim McKay at the Museums Australia National Conference on the 24th May, 2015 in the Sydney Town Hall.