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# Contentiousness and shifting knowledge paradigms: The roles of history and science museums in contemporary societies

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## Abstract

Museums globally exist in an academic, cultural and social context of contest and controversy. A long-established practice of exhibiting ‘the facts’, ‘truth’, ‘national history’ or unproblematic conceptions of ‘other’ places and peoples is no longer wholly sustainable in an environment where the self-evidence of all these things is under question. Topics of global importance that challenge, upset, intrigue and attract are now legitimate areas for museological investigation. Ongoing cultural, social and political tensions in Australia and in other countries also heighten the need for civic spaces where diverse communities might learn about and debate issues of contemporary relevance and importance. Therefore, what civic and social roles can history and science museums in the 21st century play in this climate of contestation, and as knowledge sources? This question will be explored drawing on findings from the international research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites—the roles of museums in contemporary society* (funded by the Australian Research Council with partners the University of Sydney, the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial).

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## 1. Engaging diversity and contentiousness as a natural state

Western democracies have over the last 15 years witnessed a rise in museum controversies and political debates. Examples include interpretations of colonialism (*The West as America* at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art; frontier conflict at the National Museum of Australia, National Maritime Museum), war and genocide (*The Last Act-Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum and *Crimes against Humanity* at the Imperial War Museum, London) and sexuality and representations of the human body (*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* at the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Philadelphia and *Body Art* at the Australian Museum). Although a body of literature has emerged to understand this phenomenon (Boyd, 1999; Crouch, 1997; Dubin, 1999; Harris, 1999; Macdonald, 1996; Wallace, 1995; Skramstad, 1999; Nochlin, 1999), much of this has been preoccupied with describing and deconstructing controversies or providing an introspective analysis of the emergence of museums as sites of controversy in the US context.

In initiating the international research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites-the roles of museums in contemporary society* (a three year study conducted between 2001 and 2004, funded by the Australian Research Council with partners the University of Sydney, the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial), we aimed to move beyond the specifics of exhibition controversies to examine the relevance, plausibility and practical operation of history and science museums as civic centers in the engagement of topics of contemporary relevance and importance (Cameron, 2003). In this paper, I examine the ways contentious topics are challenging established museum practices in particular canons of knowledge and authority through a preliminary investigation of our research findings. Most importantly, I consider the question of how museums can turn the potential for controversy into the meaningful engagement of these subjects through an account of audience needs and expectations.

The museum community is diverse, but as institutions, their mission, civic, social responsibilities and modes of engagement have always been in a constant process of transformation in response to social, discursive and economic imperatives. Museum director Duncan Cameron (1971), in his formative article, argued that museums should recast themselves as a forum, a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate, acting as an antidote to the traditional temple. In addition to being visually exciting, Museum director Robert Macdonald (1996, pp. 197–169) suggested that museum exhibitions and programs have to be intellectually accessible, stir the emotions and evoke serious dialogue. Others cast museums as centers for tolerance, as places for fostering critical thinking, problem solving and self reflexivity, and for participation through dialogue with the institution and other visitors (Museums for a New Millennium, 1997, pp. 71–74). With reference to the engagement of contentious topics, museum consultant Elaine Gurian (1995) characterized museums as 'a safe place for unsafe ideas.' More recently, Dawn Casey (2002), then director of the National Museum of Australia, described the museum as 'a forum for debate by offering a reflective space in which people can consider issues in context.'

In reference to the findings of the American Association of Museums study *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge for Museums* (2002) on the relationships between

museums, communities and civic engagement, consultant Ellen Hirzy envisioned 21st century museums as a

“center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator for change.” (Hirzy, 2002, p. 9)

Surprisingly, and despite this rhetoric, museums were described by many participants in the AAM dialogues as ‘floating above the community’, and as institutions that control rather than share knowledge, expertise and learning, as well as devalue audiences own knowledge. They were also not seen to be as public as libraries (Mastering Civic Engagement, 2002). Although a museum’s reputation for accuracy and authenticity inspires trust, there were also doubts about whether institutions have the ability to reflect a variety of perspectives (Mastering Civic Engagement, 2002).

A rich body of scholarship on museum learning is emerging that validates these concerns and suggests that institutions need to consider themselves as mediators and advocates for knowledge, rather than as suppliers of information as the sole property of institutions, and to provide tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and to reach their own conclusions (Kelly, 2005). Freedman (2000, p. 299) explains this shift as a consequence of increasing access to technologies such as the Internet, where communication, information gathering and analysis are in the hands of individuals. Because morality in a postmodern world, according to cultural theorist Zygmunt Bauman (2002, p. 138) is re-personalized and individual, institutions need to decisively move away from framing exhibition content according to a consensual, collective morality, to one that also encourages self-expression.

Clearly knowledge, its uses and distribution in institutions is a key feature in museum reformation, and as I argue in this paper, particularly important when engaging contentious topics. In a society where a diverse citizenry demands greater participation in decision making, where power is shifting from older hierarchical forms to coalitions, and where museums have emerged as intensified theatres of struggle, it is also necessary to regard knowledge as far more complex and diverse than currently considered. No matter how institutions chose to define themselves, attention needs to focus on prevailing understandings of cultural politics and knowledge, and how these are or might traverse museums.

The cultural turn in cultural studies, sociology and learning theory redefines knowledge production and transmission from one based on dominant values, to the giving and taking of meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Anthropologist Henry Giroux (1992, p. 168) also points out that, in contrast to the idea of a harmonious shared experience that underpins empiricist knowledge (and indeed museums), culture is viewed as a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege. In defining culture as multi-discursive, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000, pp. 12–13) suggests that words, things, practices, beliefs and values are the contexts for the use and construction of meaning.

Contemporary understandings of knowledge as multi-discursive expose the operation of contentiousness in museums. The Issues Laboratory Collaborative (1995) study

*Communicating Controversy: Science Museums & Issues Education* defined ‘hot’ issues as divisive because they embody alternative answers and differences in opinion and invoke emotion, while challenging an individual’s or group’s values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position. Controversy, according to this report, rests on whether something is true—a question of fact (*Issues Laboratory Collaborative, 1995*). In short, what is deemed controversial or confronting to one individual may not be to another.

In fact, many subjects have a divisive dimension. The sensitive topic of stem cell research, for example, has dissentious social, ethical, cultural and religious dimensions to it, raising a number of dilemmas, the most controversial being the use of human embryos for research. On the other hand, scientific imperatives and the belief that such research can provide potential cures for debilitating conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson’s disease and spinal cord injuries, as well as the economic benefits it brings, are other elements driving the issue. Human genetics researcher [Bruce Lahn \(2003, p. 30\)](#) points out the conflictual character of this issue in a recent medical journal;

“By now the controversy surrounding embryonic stem cell research is familiar to most of us. At its center are two opposing views. One argues that such research may bring tremendous benefits to human health...The other asserts that such research violates the sanctity of human embryos and therefore morally and ethically unacceptable.”

Contentious subjects such as contemporary issues and particular revisionist interpretations of history and taboo topics are difficult to represent in exhibitions, and provoke controversy precisely because they engage an individual’s or group’s values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position and conflict with empiricist modes of knowledge ([Cameron, 2003](#)). Therefore, the engagement of these topics and the way knowledge is disclosed must take account of differing ideologies and divisiveness.

Political theorist John Rawls observes that societies and the culture of public institutions, like museums, are inherently political and characterized by irreconcilable opinions and values;

“The political culture of a democratic society is marked by a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines ... we must find a way of organizing ideas and principles...in a different way than before.” ([Rawls, 2002, p. 123](#)).

[Rawls \(2002, p. 123\)](#) goes on to say that “the most intractable struggles...are for the highest things: religion, for philosophical views of the world, and for different moral conceptions of the good...” Reading Rawls’ argument in the context of contemporary knowledge and culture suggests that ideological diversity is a given and needs to be embraced, rather than feared as a natural state within exhibitions.

Engaging divisiveness has the potential to undermine the integrity of museums for trusted information and as safe, non-threatening places. Museum consultant [Elaine Gurian \(2002, p. 1\)](#) claims that railway stations, airports, libraries and museums are public places where strangers can interact in a civil and safe manner. Gurian goes on to say that when any of these places are considered unsafe they are abandoned, sometimes permanently ([Gurian, in press](#)). Therefore, by engaging diverse

opinions and ideologies, how can museums maintain institutional trust and continue to act as safe non-threatening places?

Divisiveness challenges the epistemological foundations of museums as ‘objective’ knowledge sources, and as authorities. The *Issues Laboratory Collaborative* (1995, p. 3) suggested that contentious issues consist of two distinctly different kinds of information. Scientific information provides the framework needed to explore an issue and can be presented with some degree of certainty, whereas the second kind of information is more subjective, involving complex choices in the areas of politics, economics and values (*Issues Laboratory Collaborative*, 1995, p. 3). The seemingly authoritative, truthful and objective quality of museum information makes it difficult to distinguish between these two sources. Also, because contentious subjects raise more questions than they answer, rather than offering consensual positions or knowable ‘facts’, a dilemma arises between the perceived objective basis of knowledge in museums and the subjective interpretations that contentious topics necessarily entail.

Taken together, the arguments of Giroux, Hooper-Greenhill, Rawls, Bauman and Gurian summarize our key research questions. Do museums have a social responsibility to represent and contribute to discussions on topics of contemporary relevance and importance? How might museums effectively engage contentious topics in new ways that acknowledge and embrace conflicting opinions, are non-alienating and acceptable to the majority of audiences? How can trust in museums as knowledge sources be maintained? In what ways can museums navigate the sensitive terrain between facts/opinion, authority/expertise, advocacy/neutrality and censorship/exposure?

## 2. Research method

Within this framework, we identified three stages each using different methodologies. First, research involved literature analysis of museological and theoretical debates about the roles of museums in contemporary society, in order to extend thinking about museums as civic enterprises by engaging discussions in the fields of media, cultural studies, sociology and conflict and peace studies. Analyses of exhibition controversies in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia sought to situate controversy in a historical context, to consider why particular exhibitions have been defined as controversial, and the implications for the roles and functioning of museums.

Drawing on the results of this phase, we developed and used a combination of quantitative (omnibus and exit surveys) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and focus groups) methods to investigate museum roles, community, audience, staff, management, stakeholders and media expectations and concerns to ensure the reliability and validity of our data (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Quantitative research involved omnibus surveys of the broader Australian community in Sydney and Canberra, drawing on a statistically representative sample of 500 respondents. We asked participants to respond to a selection of 16 topics that Australians might consider controversial, as well as to a series of role positioning statements using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Exit surveys were conducted at the Australian Museum (*Contested Sites Exit Survey*, Australian Museum, January 2003), the Australian War Memorial (*Contested Sites Exit*

Survey, Australian War Memorial, January 2003) with 197 and 248 visitors, respectively, and at three Canadian Museums, including the Museum of Anthropology (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, June 2003.), the Canadian War Museum (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, June 2003.) and the Musée d'Art (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Musée d'Art, Montreal, July 2003) in Montreal with 286 visitors. Here participants were asked to respond to the same range of questions as the omnibus surveys, to compare with the responses of the broader community. Quantitative exit surveys and questionnaires were then analyzed using SPSS (data analysis software), to enable comparisons between all data sets and cross-cultural comparisons, thereby extending the research sample.

The qualitative phase of the research involved five focus groups with museum visitors in Sydney and Canberra, according to the following demographic profiles: adults aged 18–30, no children; adults aged 30–49, with children; adults aged 50–64, with a total of 40 participants. Here we sought to discuss the findings from our quantitative research, as well as experiences of museum visiting, museum functions and activities, museum authority, expertise, trust and censorship.

By comparison, we investigated the perspectives of museum staff and stakeholders and media using an online survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with, over 100 staff and stakeholders in 26 institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and UK. Participants were asked to identify topics or issues that were particularly controversial, or hot, in their country or their institutions at that point in time, in order to capture emerging controversies and contemporary responses. Other questions related to museums, social responsibilities, civic roles as information sources, authority, expertise and censorship, as well as the impact of controversies on institutional functioning, successful programming and funding arrangements. In comparing the different geographical, social, cultural and institutional contexts, we were able to illuminate the multifarious challenges, limitations and opportunities that institutions face in presenting contentious subjects.

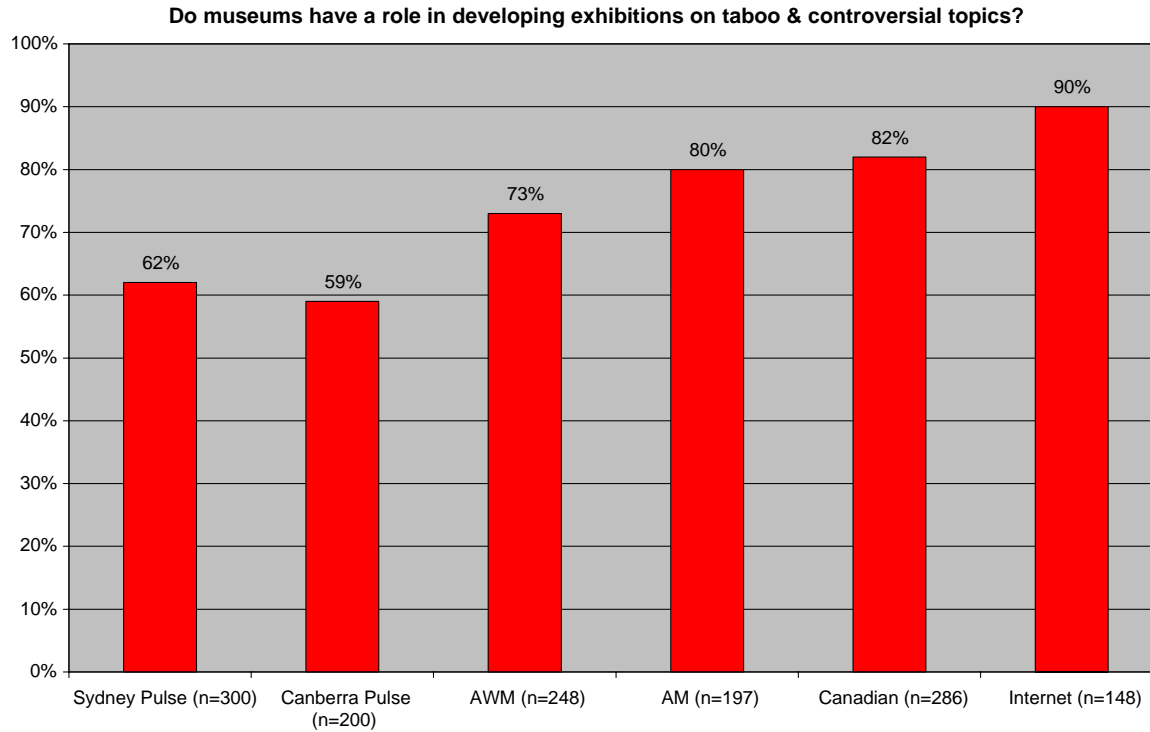
This article, however, focuses on the audience research component of the project, in particular museum roles and how these findings might assist in the formulation of new models of engagement in exhibitions around contentious topics and, indeed, any subject.

### 3. Contentious topics and social responsibilities

Elaine Gurian (in press, p. 2) rightly argued in her presentation at the 'Contest and Contemporary Society' symposium in Sydney, "there is a continuum between those museums who take a conservative stance and those that are braver." Those braver institutions and exhibitions include the New York Historical Society's exhibition on lynching *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in its graphic portrayal of the Holocaust, and the Imperial War Museum's new exhibition *Crimes against Humanity* on genocide (Table 1).

It is true that many institutions feel nervous. Representing contentious topics engages the political culture of museums, including the diverse and opposing doctrines of a range of stakeholders, many of whom have political clout and control public funding. Understandably, staff concerns about exhibiting hot topics are numerous, including the need to be

Table 1  
Museums, contentious topics and social responsibilities



Results from quantitative and qualitative research: omnibus, exit surveys of visitors at Australian and Canadian Museums and staff internet survey.

politically correct to be able to receive and maintain public funding; the risk of alienating stakeholders and interest groups; determining whose voice and history is told; as well as the risk of having the museum hijacked as a political platform for people. (Ferguson, *in press*). Programming was seen as a more appropriate way of dealing with difficult topics, due to the structural limitations of exhibitions and the ability to set up debate. Events were perceived as safer, as they don't have the permanent imprint of an exhibition.

Despite what some members of the profession and stakeholders might think, the results of our community omnibus surveys, the Sydney and Canberra Pulse, suggest that around 60% of the 500 who were interviewed believe that museums do have a social responsibility to represent contentious topics (Market Attitude Research Services, 2002a,b). The 20% of respondents who disagreed were mainly non-museum goers, expressing a more traditional modernist understanding of what museums should be—stating that they are places to present 'facts,' as opposed to opinions, and to document and showcase the past. Because edgy topics were deemed to be opinion-based rather than factual, their presence was seen as casting museums as too political (Market Attitude Research Services, 2002a, p. 23–24).

Stronger support was given to this role by the visitors sampled through our exit surveys in Canada and Australia. Around 82% of those surveyed at the Australian Museum, 73% at the Australian War Memorial (sample of 197), 82% at the Museum of Anthropology (sample of 172), 73% at the Canadian War Museum (sample of 186), and 100% at the Musée d'Art, Montreal (non statistical sample of 28) agreed with the idea. The majority were under 40, tertiary educated professionals and students. Clearly our survey results suggest that museums in both Australia and Canada have a substantive role, especially for younger more educated audiences.

Notably, staff responding to our web survey (most of whom were based in publicly funded small, medium and large metropolitan multidisciplinary, social history and art museums in Australia, US, Canada and New Zealand) showed overwhelming support, with 90% seeing contentious topics as a key role, although this was seen as dependant on the institution's mission. Admittedly this survey was self-selective and non-representative (sample of 176), yet it is indicative of trends in thinking. Moreover, only 63% said that their institutions have had an exhibition on a contentious topic, with 53% saying it incited controversy/criticism. Focus groups with over 100 staff in 26 institutions in US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand supported this finding.

#### **4. Reframing museum roles**

Although representing contentious topics is seen as a fundamental role by the community and the majority of visitors, there was considerable debate about what those roles might be. Our focus group research with Australian audiences in Sydney and Canberra revealed a range of opinions, with three themes emerging.

#### **5. Museums as places for historical reflection**

Around 25% of focus group participants saw museums as places for reflection by providing information on controversial topics and events that are in the historical record.

As one participant commented; “Museums are reflective, there is ...an opportunity to reflect on the past” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49). Another used the analogy of war to explain the need for reflection on historically distant topics and the necessity for dealing with topics honestly: “All wars are controversial...a museum’s got to show us what happened years ago, whether it’s controversial or not, whether we agree with it or we don’t” (Sydney, adults aged 50–64).

Hot topics were seen as too political, emotionally charged, value laden and opinion based, thus having the potential to undermine a museum’s reputation as a safe, non-threatening place, and as a reliable and trustworthy information source. The relationship between current topics and the potential for political manipulation was raised by one participant; “My concern about a lot of topics is that there is tremendous scope for social engineering...” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49).

One of the most noteworthy examples of a ‘too hot to handle’ topic, and one that could potentially transform museums into confrontational zones, was the Australian government’s use of military force to repel boat people and the ‘children overboard affair.’ Refugees were accused of putting their own children at risk by throwing them overboard, thus undermining their credibility as worthy Australians, a claim later to be proven false and one that divided the country. These concerns were summed up in one participant’s response; “The photos of [refugee] children in the water... It’s too political...too emotionally charged...You could imagine the arguments going on outside the exhibition.” (Canberra, adults aged 50–64). Some also questioned the ability of museum staff to present contemporary topics in an impartial way; “If you’ve got very political issues like this the curator of the museum has a lot of power” (Sydney, adults aged 18–30).

In short, this reflective reasoning is based on the idea that topics become safer with the passage of time, thus allowing opinions and views to be carefully considered and a body of trustworthy scholarly information to emerge. According to one Canberra participant; “...a museum is not necessarily there to foster discussion on contemporary issues...Contemporary issues become historical issues with the passage of time, a lot of these are very political, very contemporary and to me they just don’t fall into the gambit of a museum” (Canberra, adults aged 50–64).

## **6. Museums as places for contextualizing—learning from the past to understand the future**

For the majority of participants (around 55%), museums were viewed as places to contextualize topics and events, whether current or historical, so visitors can understand their origin, complexities and likely ramifications. This position was summarized by one Canberra respondent; “with September 11 and the Bali bombing, for example, a museum’s role is to build up a historical picture of where these events originated ...” (Canberra, adults aged 50–64). Another explained how contextualization and the educational role of institutions can help people to formulate their own views and heal; “9/11...is very controversial and recent... museums could help people to process it and come to terms with it” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49).

Like visitors, many staff saw their institution's role to provide information about the context and background to historical and current topics, "Historical museums can pick topics that can allow you to refrain from discussing these topics...they can also allow you to understand why you have come to the place that you are now in the dialogue..." (staff, *US Holocaust Memorial Museum* 2002).

## 7. Museums as social activists

A significant number of people, around 20% of focus group participants, see museums as having a more active role in building a better society and to facilitate social change. That is, by opening people's minds to alternative views on a given topic and offering suggestions on how audiences might become active to bring about change. As one participant commented; "I like the idea of an exhibition being empowering—in presenting good ideas but how to turn them into action." (Sydney, adults aged 18–30). Social activism, according to one participant, combines a museum's educational, reflective and contextualizing role with social responsibility; "If museums are to continue to exist as people friendly institutions, they have to come forward with programs to educate people about the history of terrorism, stimulate people's ideas of why terrorism happens and the role of civil society to combat terrorism..." (Canberra, adults aged 50–64).

By presenting a variety of cultural viewpoints, museums can bring about social change by promoting racial tolerance, challenging stereotypes and fostering intercommunity respect; "Given today's troubled times, I want to understand the Muslim religion or culture..." (Sydney, adults aged 50–64).

Engaging controversy for publicity's sake and to increase visitor numbers were not seen as legitimate reasons for representing these subjects. As one respondent stated, representing contentious topics must be matched by a clear rationale; "we need to know the context and why you are showing this? Is it just [to] stir up controversy—get attention, or is it because you've got an important message that you want to teach people?" (Sydney, adults aged 18–30).

In contrast, few staff saw museums as having a role to promote social activism. One exception was a senior manager at Glasgow Museums in the UK. In referring to the New Labour's social inclusion agenda that is currently leading museum sector reform in the UK, the respondent defined social reform broadly;

"To institute change on a broad scale we need to work with other arts organizations, social workers and schools who are working towards a more tolerant, open society that's honest about difficult issues. Museums can provide the backdrop for raising these issues. We have to think about what sort of society a museum aspires to help create." (director, *Glasgow Museums* 2002)

Facilitating activism on an individual level, according to this respondent, involves museums raising difficult issues and acting as information sources to assist personal resolution. Social action on a larger front, however, requires institutions to consider their own values and to work with other social and educational agencies to bring about change and combat disadvantage (Sandell, 2003; *Department of Culture* 2000).

Contentious topics such as stem cell research and immigration policy epitomize change, uncertainty and the challenges faced by people in a rapidly changing world (*Issues Laboratory Collaborative*, 1995, p. 5). Because change induces anxiety, people look for stability, constancy, predictability and for some empowerment, all roles museums can support by offering reflective experiences, contextual information and activist know-how.

## 8. Museums and positioning

Given that our findings suggest that history and science museums have a number of roles to perform in representing difficult topics, our next research question was how can institutions better orientate themselves to these topics by taking account of the needs and expectations of their audiences. To do this, we asked participants in the omnibus, visitors at the five institutions surveyed in Australia and Canada, and museum staff in focus groups and through the internet survey, to respond on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to a series of roles/positioning statements. Questions included the following: Are museums information sources and safe places to explore these topics by presenting a range of viewpoints? Or should they take a more active role, as transformative spaces to challenge and change views? Should museums act as provocateurs and take a leading role as social and political activists to bring about change, and to assist in the resolution of issues on a personal or political level? Alternatively, is the primary role of museums to offer non-challenging social experiences? Can museums be all of these things at once?

## 9. Museums as information sources

Overwhelming support, over 90% of those surveyed, see the role of museums as places that provide information on contentious topics (see [Table 2](#)). The findings from our focus group research with Australian audiences explain these functions in greater depth.

The strength of, and trust in, museums as places to represent contentious topics, according to many, is founded on long established roles as sources of reliable and credible information, “You’ve got this notion of museums that there is an edifice and therefore this must be so...” (*Sydney, adults aged 30–49*). Others compared museums to libraries as knowledge sources; “...museums are like a library.. a very reliable, informative first hand source of information ...” (*Canberra, adults aged 18–30*). These findings validate *Rosenzweig’s and Thelen’s* (1998) study on sources of historical information which rate the credibility of museums above all others.

Quality scholarship founded on sound principles of investigation underlies a museum’s information credibility factor; “...museums have a reputation like university professors, and you expect to see things which have the backing of scientific method, a well thought out established point of view. It is not just some rat bag sprouting some propaganda.” (*Sydney, adults aged 18–30*). The importance of maintaining a high level of scholarly integrity was considered vitally important, “if a view isn’t well founded then I don’t think you need to present it...” (*Sydney, adults aged 18–30*.)

Table 2  
Museum positioning statements—engaging contentious topics


<p><b>Museum positioning statements</b></p>
<p><b>AM (n=197), AWM (n=248) Canadian Museums (n=286) Web survey (n=148)</b></p>
<p><b>Places that should provide information sources about topics</b> 97% AM, 99% AWM, 96% Canadian Museums, 94% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places that should allow their visitors to make comment</b> 91% AM, 86% AWM, 90% Canadian Museums, 92% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places that should challenge generally accepted views</b> 83% AM, 63% AWM, 71% Canadian Museums, 69% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places for non-challenging social experiences</b> 46% AM, 49% AWM, 40% Canadian Museums, 31% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places that should not be afraid to change visitors views</b> 84% AM, 65% AWM, 80% Canadian Museums, 79% Industry</p>
<p><b>Safe 'neutral' spaces to explore a range of ideas and perspectives</b> 89% AM, 90% AWM, 81% Canadian Museums, 80% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places for visitors to resolve issues in their own minds</b> 65% AM, 73% AWM, 62% Canadian, 75% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places that should lead opinion on topics by pushing a particular view</b> 43% AM, 14% AWM, 30% Canadian Museums, 14% Industry</p>
<p><b>Places that should take an active political role to bring about change</b> 31% AM, 16% AWM, 26% Canadian Museums, 37% Industry</p>


Quantitative and qualitative research findings—exit surveys of visitors at Australian and Canadian Museums and staff internet survey.

## 10. Socially integrative/inclusive experiences—visitor interaction and comment

The capacity to engage contentious topics for the majority of audiences (90% of those surveyed, see Table 2) is explicitly tied to the ability to provide socially integrative experiences in exhibitions— to engage with other visitors, the institution and to leave evidence of debates in exhibitions. As one participant stated; “... everyone should have the opportunity to express their political view whether others agree with it or not...” (Sydney, adults aged 18–30 years). Our research suggests that facilitating visitor feedback, comments and discussions serves a number of functions. It can contribute to considered decision making, “with more discussion, people would be better informed and therefore form their own opinions” (female aged 30–39, homemaker, *Market Attitude Services* 2002a, p. 20). Offering dialogic experiences enables visitors to express their own opinion, to share experiences and to come to terms with ‘difficult’ issues, events or exhibition content; “You get to share the experience...if it is shocking or upsetting ...you can deal with it” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49).

Many acknowledged that museums are not the only authority on emotionally charged and divisive topics. Sharing knowledge and experiences through these means was seen as promoting freedom of speech and principles of social inclusion in public civic spaces; “...a museum needs to be inclusive—to be open to all people...And even if you disagree you should still be welcome there” (Sydney, adults aged 18–30).

## 11. Challenging experiences

Between 70 and 80% of those surveyed (strong support) view museums as places to challenge people’s ways of thinking, as opposed to places for non-challenging, social experiences (see Table 2). However, only 63% of respondents at the Australian War Memorial agreed with this proposition, and this may be explained by its strong commemorative role. Offering challenging experiences for many audiences means providing an even-handed, ‘honest’ and uncensored picture of an event or issue, including a balanced range of viewpoints representing all sides of a topic and scholarly information based on sound research.

Challenging people to think critically means providing scholarly information that is thorough and analytical. For example, according to one focus group participant the critical examination of topics implies rigor; “an unbiased, in-depth, analytical presentation of a topic” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49). According to one visitor at the Canadian War Museum, an ‘honest’ and challenging portrayal of a topic is tied to the development of a more socially responsible society; “Hiding something doesn’t help kids and the future of Canada. You have to air it in order to get to the truth, whatever the truth is” (visitor, *Canadian War Museum* 2003). Most wanted censorship decisions left to their own discretion, with forewarnings and censor ratings the preferred means of controlling content, “...as long as there is a warning a museum shouldn’t show something so that no child could see it. I would still make the decision for myself and my child” (Sydney, adults aged 30–49).

## 12. The museum's voice

One theme that emerged from our research, and which 60–75% of our respondents supported, is the need to develop representational strategies that enable personal resolution. Contingent to this, based on the results of our surveys, between 58 and 86% of respondents stated that museums should not try to lead opinion by pushing a particular view (see Table 2). Visitors come to museums with their own opinions (Kelly, 2005). Unpacking this further, our research revealed that for many a museum's role is to maintain an impartial stance and to inform opinion making, rather than overtly express strongly held beliefs and values, or engage in a partisan debate. In supporting this, one respondent stated; "museums should not express an opinion, they should provide good information and arguments....We have our own opinions" (Sydney, adults aged 50–64). Presenting a range of views, while not strongly advocating positions, validates the findings of the *Issues Laboratory Collaborative study* (1995, p. 4).

Ideally, scholarly information ought to be presented in a way that empowers people to engage in critical thinking, stimulates or prompts debate, and assists audiences to weigh information to inform their own decision making and to draw their own conclusions. In the words of one focus group participant; "Museums should present things in a nonjudgmental way so that kids and people can form their own opinions from the information presented" (Sydney, adults aged 30–49). A neutral/non-partisan voice for many is akin to presenting opposing sides on a given topic: "...it becomes neutral if there's two sides of the story..." (Canberra, adults aged 18–30). Audiences are also becoming more savvy on how they read information sources, and are increasingly sensitive to bias and attempts at being told what to think, "Material should be presented in a way that lets you make up your own mind. I don't like being told what to think, and I wouldn't want my kids to be told what to think" (Sydney, Adults 30–49).

Given that these topics are value and opinion laden, and information sources are biased, presenting a range of sources including opposing views on a topic contributes to a more informed or 'objective' opinion. The inherent subjectivity of information sources for many can be offset to an extent by incorporating a range of opinions: "everything that you read is somebody's opinion. The best you can do is try and get as many different opinions as you can and try and formulate your own..." (Sydney, adults aged 18–30). Findings from the *Issues laboratory Collaborative study* add to this by suggesting that people like to be given information on the relative acceptance of various viewpoints (1995, p. 5).

Presenting a range of reliable information is also analogous to having all the 'facts' to weigh up arguments and formulate personal opinions; "If you want to resolve issues you would have to have every piece of information really in order to make it an educated judgment on something..." (Canberra, adults aged 50–60). By incorporating diverse views, including those of the left and right political spectrum, a more comprehensive pool of data can be presented for consideration; "Some people will be offended others aren't, that is why museums should present both sides of the argument, absorb them and you make up your own mind" (Sydney, adults aged 50–64).

### 13. Transformative experiences

Most importantly, around 80% of those surveyed, with the exception of the Australian War Memorial at 65%, believe museums have the power to shift an individual's point of view (see Table 2). Our focus group research revealed that transformative experiences can occur by opening people's minds to a range of views and new knowledge based on sound scholarship, as well as by offering suggestions on how people might become socially active. Alteration can occur by engendering empathy to others points of view; "You have got your own views...you want to see how someone else sees things -to go hey, that's another way of looking at it" (Sydney, adults aged 30–49). In providing the latest scholarship on a topic, museums can both change views and lead opinion; "... a lot of archaeological findings are being challenged...museums can lead by good scholarship" (Sydney, adults aged 50–64).

Around 70% of those surveyed did not see museums as places for resolving issues on a political level (see Table 2). As one respondent remarked; "Museums should just present the facts—not opinions, they are not political places" (Sydney, adults aged 30–49 years). At a fundamental level, museums are perceived as non-threatening places because they are impartial, present credible information and are places for learning, in stark contrast to the partisan and confrontational approach taken by political parties and government. As one focus group participant noted; "...a museum should be a steady safe haven where you can go to learn and not have issues thrown in your face...if you want to resolve important issues you join a political party or get involved in the local council or some lobby group" (Sydney, adults aged 30–49).

Instead, resolution on a personal and political level can occur in an indirect way by the provision of a range of information, including the means for visitors to formulate their own views and actions. As one respondent commented; "Museums could help...to present a more true picture of what's going on and therefore it could resolve important social issues" (Canberra, adults aged 50–64). Therefore, most respondents were not comfortable with the idea that museums take an active political role to bring about change.

### 14. Institutional trust

Maintaining institutional trust is directly related to sustaining physical safety and civility within a museum's public spaces, as well as the reliability and integrity of information. As one focus group participant noted; "...it's pretty hard to get a balance to talk about very controversial issues such as asylum seekers when there is political protest out the front—a museum would not be a place where you could just walk into and feel comfortable" (Sydney adults aged 18–30). Additionally, sound scholarship, a range of views on topics and events, facilitating personal resolution, opportunities for debate, and maintaining civic responsibilities of inclusiveness and impartiality were key expectations.

Undermining institutional trust and the politicization of institutions have, for many, the potential to occur when museums present unsubstantiated opinions and openly engage in a partisan debate; "It would turn [museums] into a different institution altogether if they were trying to lead public opinion...that would border on political..." (Sydney adults aged 30–49).

Similar sentiments were expressed by staff, such as; “we should be inciting debate not championing single points of view...If we become too politicized we lose our power and for many perhaps our funding” (Staff internet survey, 2004). In taking a political role, some respondents feared that museums might be hijacked by certain groups as a political vehicle; “An exhibition about asylum seekers ...people might use it to push their own political angle...you’ve got to be very careful” (Sydney, adults aged 18–30).

## 15. Museum authority

Culture and its representation in museums can no longer be understood as an autonomous realm of words, things, beliefs and values; nor an objective body of facts to be transmitted to passive receivers (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 19). Attitudes and responses to contentious subjects are the result of frameworks of intelligibility, including the range of beliefs, values and ideologies held both individually and by the interpretive communities to which one belongs (Hooper-Greenhill, 2002, pp. 119–121). Moreover, our findings also suggest that audiences want a greater stake in what they are allowed to know, and the opinions and views they are able to express. Therefore, engaging ‘edgy’ topics requires a reframing of museum authority to one of expert mediator, informant and facilitator. In the words of one senior manager; “The authority of expert knowledge no longer gives museums the final say on the social and ethical issues involved in controversial topics...Expert knowledge can help inform a debate but can’t make it” (director, Glasgow Museums 2002).

A responsibility to select, interpret and validate information and scholarship as reliable and trustworthy, from which visitors can make informed decisions, is a vital and continuing role; “Curators are the ones to find things for exhibits and make sure they are presented correctly and accurately which is so important...” (Canberra, adults aged 50–64). In referring to lessons learned from the controversy surrounding the use of oral histories in an exhibit on frontier conflict and aboriginal massacres at the National Museum of Australia, one curator commented; “if you are found out to be wrong on facts or the views the institution presents are marginal you run the risk of undermining the museum’s authority” (staff, National Museum of Australia, 2002).

## 16. Conclusion

In summary, bringing important, challenging and controversial points of view in a democratic, free-thinking society was seen as a key role for museums by many- one of the few places where these debates can happen. “Museums are a public forum for issues that should challenge society” (female, aged 30–39, business owner, *Market attitude research services*, 2002a, p. 18). This is because museums are public spaces that offer a protected, non-judgmental environment to explore sensitive topics, are accessible to everyone, provide trustworthy, credible, scholarly information, and are seen as impartial. One visitor at the Australian War Memorial remarked; “If museums don’t do it who will?” (visitor, *Australia War Memorial*, 2003).

For others, this role is an extension of the emerging pluralistic and inclusive role for museums; “Controversy is just one factor in diversity and people have a choice to attend an exhibition or program” (visitor, *Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, 2003*). It is also tied to a democratic right of exposure and a need for society to face up to its more unsavoury qualities; “taboo and controversial topics must be brought out into the open and discussed freely” (Female pensioner, *Market attitude research services, 2002a*, p. 18).

To this end, museums can contribute to debates in a variety of ways—provide a place for people to reflect on topics and subjects in the historical record; provide a contextual framework within which a topic can be understood, and empower people to make decisions and take action. That is, by providing information, challenging, discussing and critically examining important topics, rather than pushing a particular view or taking an active role to bring about political change. Maintaining calmness, ‘safeness’ and civility, while engaging topics, was an emerging theme. “Museums should be places to vent controversy, to present a range of emotions and opinions in a non-threatening environment” (visitor, *Australian War Memorial, 2003*).

These findings support *Stephen Weil’s* (1990, p. 236) contention that museums are places that have the potency to change what people think and to influence attitudes and values. Our findings qualify *Weil’s* statement by suggesting the museums can be trusted incubators for social change, as long as audiences are left to engage topics on their own terms and resolve issues in their own minds. By raising awareness of issues and empowering people to educate themselves on important topics to determine their own position around these subjects and become socially active, museums can have a role in social transformation.

Moreover, a truly post-modernist or cultural relativist agenda is only partially realized. What emerges from our research is for institutions to provide two types of information. Many visitors still long for a tangible, factual and validated scholarly narrative they can rely on. On the other hand, they desire more subjective information that expresses a range of differing opinions on a given topic, and in which the relative acceptance of each is signalled. Both these types of information provide sources with which their own views can be formulated, tested, analyzed and expressed.

Our staff focus group research, however, revealed that there is considerable debate within many institutions about their roles. As a curator stated at the *Australian War Memorial*; “There is a range of opinions about the Memorial fulfilling the traditional role, or whether that role is changing, whether we ought to change...And if it ought to change, how far” (curatorial staff, *Australian War Memorial, 2002*).

In the ‘Mastering Civic Engagement’ report, *Robert Archibald* (2004, p. 3) argued that museums must develop collaborative transparent relationships with their audiences based on an axiom of shared authority. The sharing of power and decision making according to *Hirzy* (2002, p. 9) offers citizens expanded obligations and unparalleled opportunities. The report also asks how can museums share authority over meanings? Our research suggests that the first step towards this is in promoting a visitor-focused agenda to knowledge. Shared authority is about sharing knowledge and opinions—creating more socially integrative experiences, making a stronger commitment to promoting free debate, and allowing genuine diversity in opinion in exhibition contexts. As one staff member at the *National Museum of the American Indian* commented; “...we do very well at being

intellectual bastions, we don't do very well at giving social experiences...if we become better social experiences we may be more able to deal with controversial topics." (Staff, [National Museum of the American Indian, 2002](#)).

Shared authority is also about tone—that is, to stimulate, prompt and provoke—and not to preach, rather letting people resolve issues in their own minds. The Science Museum in London is one of the few institutions experimenting with this approach. As one senior manager commented; "We act as a prompt, raise the issue, provide the options and look at how society might begin to deal with them...The museum does not advocate a specific solution or determine the outcome" (director [Science Museum, London, 2003](#)). Shared authority is also about consultation on topics and the content of exhibitions, in identifying levels of tolerance and diversity of opinion.

Promoting a more egalitarian approach requires museums to relinquish a level of interpretive license and empower audiences to complete the interpretive cycle—to act more as expert knowledge brokers as opposed to authorities. Positioning the museum voice involves engaging a problem solving framework. That is, by raising questions rather than providing all the answers, presenting a range of scholarly information, perspectives and sources and, most importantly, assisting people to analyse and weigh up arguments and draw their own conclusions from a range of evidence. Surrendering control also means empowering audiences to make their own censorship decisions to a greater extent, rather than it being solely an institutional decision.

Integral to this is the overt demonstration of museum agency. In a contemporary world, for museums to maintain the trust of their audiences as places for impartial, trustworthy and reliable information, visitors need to critically consider the nature and source of the evidence and information presented. Audiences are beginning to deconstruct knowledge sources but, as yet, no canon has been established that reveals the decisions that are made as an exhibition is developed. As one focus group member commented; "I recently watched a documentary on the Palestinian Israeli conflict and we were told it is an extremely biased point of view—with exhibitions there is usually a bias but you are not told about it, I need to be aware of where people are coming from." ([Sydney, adults aged 18–30](#)).

This involves the exposure of the epistemological basis on which knowledge in museums is based, by the inclusion of information on methods, perspectives, and authoring, to inform decision making. There is danger that museums are still seen by many as objective and non-political in a modernist sense, and so institutions have a responsibility to dispel this myth by demonstrating their capacity and willingness to truly engage divisive topics in an open and honest way, including their own processes of knowledge production. All these things can contribute to a social inclusion agenda and social change.

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