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Changing Roles of Museums: Social responsibility and creative museum
management.
Museums for social harmony: new management challenges for museums
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**Connecting museum collections and creator communities: The Virtual
Museum of the Pacific Project**

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*"I'm interested in what you can't see in collections...where this has
been, what its function could be and how it still exists today...artists
have a perspective that may assist in keeping some of these things in the
way these objects always were made, but [also] ensuring that they
evolve as well because that's part of the culture".*

Artist Latai Taumopeau talking about a *Ngatu*, a traditional bark cloth from Tonga,
in the Australian Museum collection[1].

For me as the Director of a Museum holding a significant collection of ethnographic
material from the Pacific, Latai's comments raise many critical questions and
challenges. What role does or should the Museum play in the preservation of
traditional culture, and role can we play as cultural practice changes and evolves?
How do we as an institution evolve to meet the communities changing need to access
museum collections, and how do we make those collections as accessible as possible?
Perhaps most critically, how do we capture and present "what you can't see", the
intangible heritage associated with all of our collection items? The Virtual Museum
of the Pacific is one way we are seeking to address those questions.

Today my colleague Peter Eklund and I want to speak to you about a prototype
Virtual Museum of the Pacific developed jointly by the Australian Museum and the
University of Wollongong, both in Sydney, Australia. First, I will set the scene and
give some background to the project and set out its overall objectives and where we
will go to next. After that, Peter will talk more about the Virtual Museum prototype
itself.

The Australian Museum holds major cultural collections from Indigenous Australia
and the South Pacific, with the collections starting in the late 18th Century. In many

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[1] Films with the full interview with Latai Taumopeau, a Sydney based performing artist of Tongan
heritage, and the performance inspired by the museum object, are both available on the Australian
Museum website at http://australianmuseum.net.au

cases we know relatively little about the origin and in some cases the purpose and context of the objects in our collection. At the same time, much knowledge was lost from creator communities as a result of colonial processes, including the work of missionaries, and through the impact of disease. On the other hand, for more recently collected items we know a great deal about the creators and the stories and intangible heritage that sit around a collection item.

Until recently, the only way our Pacific collections were seen was in exhibitions, but that is only a fraction of our collections. Otherwise they were mainly talked about by anthropologists, in articles published in learned journals and in books. Most of the time this information was well out of reach in cost and language terms from the communities that created these objects.

This situation caused us to really focus on the question as to what our cultural collections were for. Are they only for limited view in exhibitions, and only able to be accessed by scientists? Or are they for wider use, and should be able to be accessed by all?

This led us to adopt the view that we have a major obligation to "unlock" our cultural collections, and in particular to connect them with their creator communities. We have now been doing this for some time with Indigenous Australian communities but today I want to talk about the work with our Pacific communities.

In considering how to connect collections with creator and diaspora communities, at the Museum we have adopted the stance that in most ways we are really "custodians" for creator communities and their descendants. For us custodianship means we are holding the collections in trust for someone else. It means that we don't just "own" the collections in western legal terms. It means that we have obligations as custodians to not be passive, but rather to take action to connect collections with communities. This raises the question then as to how do we give access to these collections.

Australia is of course part of the South-West Pacific and we have close connections with communities and the Pacific Islands of Polynesia and Melanesia. Even more close at hand, we have major diaspora communities resident in Sydney and in many parts of Australia. Those communities are actively connected with their culture and heritage and interested in it. In particular, many of the communities are wanting to learn more of and re-connect with their past, and value museum collections as one of the pathways to do this.

We have had successful ongoing, but small scale, programs for bringing Pacific community members to our Museum to access and document collection objects. The harsh reality is that such programs can only ever be relatively small and for a select few, and that giving physical access to every item to our collection is difficult at many

levels. However, the advent of the internet and social media has meant that it is now relatively easy for us to give virtual access to almost everything in our collection. Such virtual access combined with the power of the internet means that community members can not only see and access everything we know about a collection object but can add to that information and in many cases tell us things that we didn't know. I should quickly and firmly make the point that we do not see digital access as a substitute for physical repatriation, where such repatriation is justified (for example, human remains and certain secret and sacred ritual objects).

From the idea of granting virtual access we went onto work with the University of Wollongong to develop a prototype called The Virtual Museum of the Pacific. My colleague Peter Eklund from the University of Wollongong will talk about the prototype in more detail in a moment, but let me talk a little more in this segment about what we have learned from our work around the development of the prototype. In some ways we moved too fast in developing the technology and tools to give the virtual access, and perhaps not fast enough in developing a governance or advisory mechanism that involves communities.

We have spent considerable time talking about the complex western and traditional intellectual property issues that surround cultural collections, both tangible and intangible. We need to work a way through those issues in such a way that the complexity of the intellectual property matters does not stop any virtual access and paralyse the project. At the heart of managing intellectual property is the notion of informed consent from the creators of objects and in some cases from their descendents. The older something is and the less we know about it the harder it is to find somebody to speak for it. As a simple principal then, the older something is and the less we know about it, the more reason there is to put it up on the web so there is a chance of filling in the missing information. Both the Museum and the creator community can only be better off. On the other hand if an object is being created recently and we can reasonably find someone to speak for it then we should consult about informed consent to display the object and its details.

Obviously community consultation and input to the greater project is crucial. We have also been studying with interest the Reciprocal Research Network created by the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, and Canadian aboriginal groups. Our next steps are to work on a more inclusive governance structure for the Virtual Museum of the Pacific project, perhaps similar to that for the Reciprocal Research Network in Vancouver, and to seek partnerships with other museums which hold significant Pacific collections, for example the Queensland Museum, Museum Victoria in Australia and Te Papa Tongarewa and the Auckland Museum in New Zealand.

We have also of course been looking at how we refine and improve the information technology that sits behind the Virtual Museum of the Pacific prototype. An on that

note it is now my pleasure to hand over to my colleague Professor Peter Eklund from the University of Wollongong to continue this talk.

The Virtual Museum of the Pacific is a prototype social media system so the selection of a suitable set of 427 objects (from about 60,000) from the Australian Museum's Pacific Collection is an important part of the process. The Australian Museum's project's anthropologist selected the objects based on (1) her knowledge of Pacific material culture in general (2) knowledge of the specific collection (3) with the aim to create a representative `sample' of Pacific objects that are relevant and interesting for community members, researchers and general public. Further, the selection represents a number of overlapping categories which have similar attributes, but may come from a variety of geographical areas objects constructed from a variety of materials and techniques, so that the descriptors have enough variety, as well as overlap. A further constraint is that moving objects in preparation for photography involves at least two people so objects that are too large, too fragile or too heavily are excluded.

Navigation in the Virtual Museum of the Pacific is dependent on relationships and attributes in the descriptions associated with the objects. The navigation is based on Formal Concept Analysis, a concept clustering technique. Semantic associations are automatically derived from the object tags so that when new information is added, so too new pathways or semantic connections between objects emerge.

The Virtual Museum of the Pacific allows the relationships among the objects of the pacific collection to be explored using a semantic framework that generates page impressions to navigate through the collection by rendering a conceptual view with links to semantically related neighbouring objects. The design results from more than 15 years of research (largely by me but also by others), developing and testing the idea of navigating collections of digital objects.

Stakeholders can re-focus the discussion around objects, they can adjust the conversation to enhance relevance as well as improve, correct and extend the quality of the object knowledge. The interactions give them the opportunity to leverage one another's knowledge in a respectful way is, this is at the heart of the design of the Virtual Museum of the Pacific.

The Australian Museum maintains a corporate, formally managed taxonomy (a control vocabulary), in its collection management system KeMu (also used by Te Papa). Important is the idea of extension of metadata tags. In our own work, WordNet is used and normalization occurs via application of both synonym and hyponyms: "neighbouring terms" enhance the accessibility of the metadata.

The tags applied by stakeholder communities to objects in the collection are likely to be a folksonomy rather than a formal taxonomy and the Virtual Museum of the

Pacific has been designed on the understanding that the "warrant" of all formal taxonomies emerges from the vocabulary used by a community of interest, with the traditional control vocabulary being just one of many, albeit a traditional western view of the collection. In other words, the Virtual Museum of the Pacific facilitates the emergence of community derived, dynamic taxonomies from the social media interaction, as well as contributing to the evolution and relevance of pre-existing formal taxonomies used by the museum. We expect that the interaction between formal taxonomies and the communities' folksonomies enrich both, keeping the former fresh, and up-to-date, and providing some stability and common vocabulary for the latter.

Given that some of the contents of the Virtual Museum of the Pacific date back to the early 19th Century and Pacific Island creator communities transformed considerably over that time, the information about an object in the possession of the Museum becomes increasingly important in defining its meaning and significance as time passes.

How do annotations behave over a long period of time? Terminology in any community changes as understandings evolve; nomenclature drifts with time. Historical tags compete with current usage for our attention. Given that a user group has privileges to do so, they can re-define classification schemas to suit their contemporary trends.

To the Australian Museum, seeking to make sense of the acquisition processes that have informed its development and manage its collections responsibly, strengthening links with creator communities and increasing access to the Pacific Collection is a priority.

The Virtual Museum of the Pacific, allows social tagging as well as multi-dimensional browsing, delivers significant advances on that agenda. Its capacity for facilitating debates about the categories of objects via tagging and folksonomy creates a space for considering and contesting assumptions about the role of objects in relation to their cultural importance. It operates within understandings of language and taxonomies as a dynamic and changeable social process rather than through the use of fixed categories, and as such it foreshadows future developments for collection management and social innovation in the museum industry.

In summary, The Virtual Museum of the Pacific has the potential to replace a Museum content management system via collaborative annotation.