

Cameroon and mobile telephony: Telling the story of technological change ‘in their own words’ - global knowledge from a local perspective

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Abstract

The Science Museum’s new gallery, *Information Age*, will cover the last 200 years of the history of communication and information technologies, from the electric telegraph to the mobile phone. It will celebrate the vast number and range of people from the past and present whose lives have shaped and been shaped by, information and communication technology. As part of a step change in the museum’s interpretation from a historical and technical focus towards a more people-focused interpretation, we are working with audiences in the development of content and framing of objects. One of the 21 stories we will be telling on gallery is the emergence and resulting culture of mobile telecommunication in Cameroon. Seeking to connect visitors to their heritage in unique and powerful ways has opened new avenues for content research and development, but also uncovered questions and challenges about the interpretative voice, authority, authenticity and approaches to collecting material culture. These questions have provoked discussion and steered the use of a participatory methodology with the Cameroonian community in London to address the issues raised.

This paper will take a closer look at the process of participation and community engagement in the role of sharing local knowledge for an international audience, using the Cameroonian community project as a case study. Our approach aimed to help us present this technological and cultural revolution in the most authentic way. This approach has allowed the Museum to explore and expose local knowledge, ensuring it becomes global knowledge for the Museum’s audience. The question remains for interpretative institutions to ask themselves which voice is

needed and challenge themselves to disassemble the ‘unassailable voice’ allowing the social and personal stories of the object to be truly revealed and for visitors to connect with them.

Introduction

The Science Museum, founded in 1857, is situated in South Kensington, the cultural quarter in South West London surrounded by other national institutions, such as the Natural History Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum. Today the Museum is world renowned for its historic collections of science, medicine, technology, industry and media. It has over 3 million visitors a year from all over the globe, who experience its awe-inspiring galleries and inspirational exhibitions.

The *Information Age* gallery, opening in Autumn 2014, tells the story of how information and communication technologies have transformed our lives over the last 200 years. It will expose, examine and celebrate the technology that has changed the way we connect with one another, illuminating how human creativity has defined and shaped our information and communications networks. This object-rich gallery will showcase our extensive collection as well as new and contemporary additions that bring new stories. It will feature the voices of those who invented, operated, and were affected by each new wave of technology. This project is ground-breaking for the Science Museum by involving audiences in creating and interpreting content through a range of projects and initiatives.

The gallery content is divided into six areas – called Networks – reflecting key information and communications technologies. Within these Networks are 21 Transforming Events – stories that illustrate the significance of a network to users’ lives. One of these stories is the emergence and resulting culture of mobile telephone communication in Cameroon over the last 20 years. We use the pivotal moment of when the first mobile phone companies were established in Cameroon to highlight the technological and cultural change that happened with the introduction of the mobile phone. We explore the stories of the people who experience this cultural shift, from the call box owners who established businesses selling call time and phone credit; the mobile phone repair culture that has generated technical expertise; the differing ways mobile phones are utilised to the relationship the traditional communication technologies have with the new technology.

One of the themes of the conference is local community knowledge and global context and for this paper I want to look at the questions: how can local knowledge become global knowledge when set within national museum? How do we make personal stories, brought by

Cameroonian people with local knowledge, represent wider global stories that our visitors will find accessible within a fixed museum setting? To explore this question I will break it down by considering how we extract these stories; how the stories and voices can be woven into the fabric of the gallery in harmony with historical context, technical detail and scientific content; and who owns the interpretative voice and what are the roles of the different stakeholders in this process. By using examples from our participation project with members of the Cameroonian community in London to co create the display which tells the story of mobile telephony in Cameroon, I will look at the journey the *Information Age* team took to address these questions. I'll explore see how we responded to the particular need for this new content and collection to be developed with the Cameroonian community. I will also examine the challenges raised by audience inclusion in content development and interpretation and consider the lessons learned through the process. First of all I will describe how the museum developed its interpretative approach and how the principles of participation provided a different way to help achieve the move towards a people focused interpretative approach.

The *Information Age* gallery team has many areas of concern to address: content development, audience engagement, object collecting and research. All these must be woven into a harmonious gallery that provides an object rich display with people and their stories at the heart the interpretation. Traditionally, the Museum has concentrated on the technical knowledge and historical stories within the collection when putting objects on display to the public. When stories did have people in them, they tended to be part of the background to historical and technical details rather than as characters in their own right unless they were significant figures. In Charlotte Connelly's paper, 'The Many politics of displaying Cameroon's mobile culture' she observes that though, 'science and technology displays have never been simple presentations of incontestable facts, they have on occasion been guilty of presenting themselves as unequivocal statements of truth' (Connelly, 2013:11). She related the way museums chose to narrate their interpretation of these technical collections to what Lawrence Weschler has called 'the Unassailable Voice, in his 1995 book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, to describe a voice that speaks with institutional authority which museums often assume in their interpretation of objects. In discussion about Weschler's voice, Peter Walsh comments that,

'For the most part, it is both impersonal and disembodied: it is usually not a true human voice, connected to a real identity and personality, but a bureaucratic composite...

Those of us who actually work in museums, of course, realize the Unassailable Voice is a myth.’ (Walsh, 2010: 229)

In recent years there has been a move at the Museum to feature people and their personal stories significantly in the interpretation of objects. This is in response to audience research that reveals our visitors are interested in the impact of technology on users’ lives. They are looking for people-centric narratives and for multiple perspectives on the use of an object, rather than the facts of its manufacture. This gallery, like science and technology museums across the world, is responding to a challenge to make the collections more immediately relevant to audiences whose lives and experiences have changed radically since their doors first opened. We no longer expect to have audiences with only a technical or professional affiliation with our technology collections, and are instead looking for new ways to connect visitors to their heritage. But how does this change affect the traditional museum voice of interpretation? One of our goals for *Information Age* is to move away from that disembodied voice, and the ‘myth’ of one composite voice to include a multiplicity of voices in the gallery. That might be in the form of oral histories or archive materials that are interpreted by the Unassailable Voice. But we want to go a step further for the Cameroon story and have a range of voices doing that interpretation as well. The intention is to expose the people behind the voice to lend authority to the words. This makes it an excellent opportunity to take a participatory approach to working with people on the content development and we will explore this more later.

This step change to work with audiences to develop people focused narratives brings challenges to the *status quo* of the museum’s attitude to interpretation and the authoritative voice and decisions about sharing this voice. How does participation facilitate this change in approach? The museum sector has already expressed the need to address the issue of public ownership of museums, especially with the financial support given by government to national museums like the Science Museum, and creating dialogue with the public to decide how museum knowledge and collections will be shared. The trend in the heritage sector towards participation, which has always had strong roots in community arts, has increased over the last 10 years with significant funding for museums being tied to participatory activity. UK museums and galleries realised they needed to commit to actively involving their audiences in their development if they wanted to grow as an organisation financially as well as culturally. A push from key funders of the *Information Age* gallery for participation as part of the funding

requirements played a key role in the motivation to try ambitious participation projects in the gallery development, as well as the desire to gather new knowledge and perspectives for the Museums' collections and increase engagement with our offer for our new and current audiences. Nina Simon reflects on the approach in her influential 2010 book *The Participatory Museum*, clearly setting out the principles of participation and how institutions can apply it to their work, while research such as Dr Lynch's 2011 report *Whose cake is it anyway?* have questioned whether museums and galleries have actually worked in meaningful participatory ways and the challenges to this. So participation has become a buzzword for museums but does it mean in the context of gallery and exhibition development and visitor engagement? In her preface to *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon sets the challenge saying,

How can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life? I believe they can do this by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers.

(Simon, 2010: preface)

In her chapter about defining participation in your own institution, she starts by stating the three institutional values which all participatory projects are based on;

Desire for the input and involvement of outside participants

Trust in participants' abilities

Responsiveness to participants' actions and contributions

(Simon, 2010:Ch.5)

This is important to addressing the challenges of authority, the interpretative voice that should be heard and the role of the different stakeholders – museum, participants and visitors. If there is a true desire to work with participants and the expert knowledge they bring is valued, institution must respond to their input and give them the same status and authority as the content team; in essence sharing their content development role.

Simon also uses her in-depth experience to define the modes of participation in museums. The Science Museum has appropriated some of her suggested models of engagement – resulting in what we term the 3 'Cs' - Contribution, Collaboration and Co-creation. It is important to use the model that supports the institutional ambitions and specific project objectives so you can be realistic about how 'participatory' you can be and what the

likely outcomes will be. The parameters of the project will also influence the type of participation that is feasible. If resources, content style, space etc. have been defined, this will greatly affect what can be decided with the participants. I would add that the level of decision making the external participants will influence the level of participation

So what are the challenges faced by museums when allowing audiences tell the story 'in their own words'? Firstly there are two conflicting processes: consistency in standard of museum presentation versus participative inclusion, and one voice versus many voices. There are also decisions to be made about the amount of ownership that will be given to that audience group; whether they will inform, influence or have decision making power, the Museum must be open to adapting established processes and expected outcomes to flex with partner involvement.

My role as the *Information Age Learning and Participation Coordinator*, is to create and support opportunities for the public to be involved in the development of content, interpretation and ways of engagement with the gallery objects and stories. The Cameroon project was one of a series of participation projects. It aimed to support how the Museum told the story of the emergence of mobile communication in Cameroon. This is a global story that also had a very personal impact on the way Cameroon society related to communication technology - old and new, and each other. Cameroon was chosen as an example of the different ways communication technology had developed outside the Western world. It holds a variety of stories that illustrated how mobile communication had a social and economic impact in Africa. This strikes a chord with this paper's question about local knowledge that has global relevance and how we can transform one to the other. As the content team began exploring ways to represent this important global story in the gallery, we realised the absence of any artefacts or personal accounts meant we would have to start a new collection of objects and stories rather than reinterpreting current collections. We approached experts, historian Walter Gam Nkwi and anthropologist Mirjam de Bruijn from the African Studies Centre in Leiden to help support our research. Their work found in the anthology, *'Mobile Phones: the new talking drums of every day Africa'* described the historical development of the telephone in Cameroon and the material nature of the culture. The Museum agreed to collaborate with them but also decided to work participatively with the Cameroonian community to build this new knowledge, supported by their research. It was also essential to include the community as early as possible in the development of the display to share this knowledge with visitors.

This decision for co creation was informed by three main reasons. Firstly the story of Cameroon and mobile telephony is dominated by people: people with access to rapid personal communication; people building businesses; people connecting with Cameroon from the Diaspora; and people utilising mobiles phones in different and innovative ways. We needed local knowledge to inform this display and we had an obvious lack of in-house expertise in the area.

Secondly, the distant location of this story meant that though it was not possible to work directly with people in Cameroon on the content development, participation was an opportunity to build connections within the London based Cameroonian community and engage an underrepresented audience. Thirdly, our ambition to deliver an authentic representation of the story and interpretation of the objects made it imperative to work directly with people who had experience of the story. There was an anxiety from the Museum team about being seen to represent a foreign perspective of Africa with a story about western technology impacting a ‘developing’ country. There was also concern about how to talk about the colonial history of Cameroon. All this highlighted our particular need to work in an in-depth, participatory way, with Cameroonians defining the story and negotiating the meaning of objects displayed. As a result the Cameroon project adopted a co-creative model of participation, which consisted of working with over 20 members of the Cameroonian community over 3 years. Together we explored the themes identified, co-selecting objects for the collection, co-developing the messages and stories told on gallery and making decisions on the display design, including object arrangement and text for the labels. The community also informed a field trip in 2012 where objects were collected and interviews were conducted with relevant individuals in Cameroon. The co-created display of the Cameroon story is now a single showcase with over 21 objects, both large and small, including graphics and digital displays

Referring back to the questions from the start of this paper, we had to ask ourselves; ‘how do we extract these stories?’ As the Participation Coordinator, it was my role to facilitate this process. I worked with the Cameroon Forum, a community platform organisation in London, to recruit a group of London based Cameroonians to act as a small advisory group in preparation for our field trip to Cameroon. We met at the Science Museum in a series of workshops in late 2011 and explored their experiences of mobile phones and their impact on Cameroon, from the perspective of their family at home but also as Cameroonians living in

Britain. By pulling out the emerging themes, together we decided what objects were needed in the collection to exemplify these types of experiences. We drew up a wish-list of objects and stories to explore during the trip. Prof. de Bruijn was able to attend one or two of these sessions and in parallel she and Dr. Nkwi were commissioned to do some field work in Cameroon and help us identify possible objects to acquire. Along with the research, this formed the basis of the display content without the details confirmed, that would form the work of the second phase. Once we'd returned with the objects and stories, we invited new Cameroonian community members to join us to develop the specific content for the display. We wanted to add their knowledge to the bank we were building so the group shared personal stories which we then used to extract common themes. Combining this with work from the previous phase, the group selected the important themes to summarise the experience of mobile communication in Cameroon. The specific stories that were then chosen to represent these themes became the local representation of global themes that a museum audience could relate to.

This leads us on to think about the next question, 'how can the stories and voices be woven into the fabric of the gallery - drawing out the personal aspects for use in a display surrounded by technical detail and scientific content while giving them the same status?' Having stories from a different cultural context that focus prominently on contemporary and familiar objects, or not technology at all, means we have to think carefully about how these stories contribute to the overall gallery message. Our strategy of working with Cameroonians and an anthropologist with expertise helped us to limit the influence of any preconceptions we might have held at the Museum. It built on technical research we had carried out into the nature of the network and differences you might find in handsets in Africa, for example dual SIM phones are not only available, but that they're also very common. Participation helped to bring a different perspective to the interpretation on these objects, which on first glance might not appear relevant to the rest of the gallery. By combining all these different areas of expertise we hoped to arrive at a good representation in *Information Age* of both technical aspects of mobiles in Africa, but also ensuring they were socially important examples to the Cameroonian community, which our visitors are also interested in.

This work raises a question about who owns the interpretative voice. It is a delicate balance to retain the authority brought by the Museum while giving equal weight to the personal knowledge our participants contributed. Also with this display, the personal nature of the experiences if they were amalgamated with Museum's own knowledge into Weschler's

‘Unassailable Voice’ we would risk losing the emotive impact of the individual stories. The team used research documenting how mobile telephony has impacted the economic and social landscape in Africa and specifically Cameroon the last 20 years as a foundation on which to place the personal experiences of the people who encountered these changes. We have combined a top line narration to convey the main topics and key pieces of information the audience needs to understand the context of the display with detailed personal experiences to bring relevance to the objects. Visitors are provided with a fuller picture which they can make a strong emotional connection with.

My last question was, ‘what are the roles of the different stakeholders in this process?’ There were three main stakeholders: the participants, the Museum and the Museum visitor. For this project, beginning the participation approach at this early stage in the content development meant taking the decision that participants had a strong steer in the direction of the content. However the museum still had overall ownership of the general concept for the display to ensure it still fit with the rest of the gallery’s style and content objectives. The visitors are the consumers of the display so it had to be clear from the beginning that the content was for a wider audience than those familiar with Cameroon. The Museum and participants would need to consider this in the structure of the stories. The relationship between the museum and participants moved from consultation to collaborative to co-creative as the engagement in the project continued. At times this meant difficult choices and heated debates. A practical example of this is the interpretation of the Talking Drum. This object is one of the traditional tools used to communicate messages between rural communities across Cameroon by transmitting coded rhythms that are deciphered via the community leaders. This wooden object does not seem to be directly related to mobile technology on first glance and suggestion of collecting and displaying it initially cause anxiety in the content team due to our inexperienced reading of this object as a potential symbol of archaic, defunct technologies. It was the group’s reinterpretation of this object that transformed our understanding of it from the usurpation of traditional technologies by telecommunication giants to a story of a rich cultural history of communication and the interplay of these technologies to influence a new culture where history still had a role. The participatory process has elevated the talking drum to the status of what Nina Simon calls a ‘social object’ – an object which inspires discussion and dialogue and given the museum the confidence to display it with this meaning and not redundancy. All this has led

to an authentic representation of this local knowledge in a global context which has been relayed to an international audience through the museum display.

Finally I will address my big question, ‘how can local knowledge become global knowledge in a museum setting?’ I’m really asking how we can relate local knowledge to bigger global themes and connections with strong links to the museum collection. Through the process of participation we were able to draw out the experiences of the community and work with them to create a strong narrative for the stories that were intrinsically linked to interesting, surprising and vibrant objects. Having gone through the process we have gained an appreciation of the complexities of working with a group who is unfamiliar with museum processes. We have had to combine, at times conflicting agendas and motivation in order to convey a global story with shared ownership. Inevitably challenging projects like this raise more questions than they answer. We are really excited by the work the Cameroonian community have put into making this story in *Information Age* authentic, personal and relevant to our visitors. However, there are still questions to be answered as we draw to the end of the project. In particular we need to think carefully within the Museum, and with the group, about dissemination and legacy. How will we share the story beyond *Information Age*, and who will lead that process? One thing is clear, the opening of *Information Age* is not the end of our relationship with the people we’ve been working with.

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