

Future Museum Symposium

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Technology won't transform museums, but technology will enable the ideas that do.

Technology's effect on museums has mostly been felt behind the scenes, and hasn't really caused the kind of wholesale transformation of the museum narrative that we imagined it would. Tech's preferred mode of innovation--"move fast and break things"--has proved to be a poor fit for museum practice, whose change tends to be measured in years or decades. This has meant that, after more than 20 years of increasing investments in museum technology, the transformation that many predicted would result has not come to pass. Instead, we're seeing real transformation coming about as a result of new ideas and actors in the sector that have been enabled by technology.

The most recent structural innovation in museums happened in the Seventies, with the integration of education/interpretation units into museum practice. It was hard for those of us working in museum tech in the ensuing decades to not see our work as enabling the next phase of museum practice. We imagined that by embracing not only technology, but many of the belief systems associated with technology culture in the early 2000s (Web 2.0, mobile apps, participatory culture, etc.) we could bring about that next phase.

For the most part, that didn't really happen. The two key tech-enabled innovations that came out of this period were an embracing of social media and a commitment to digitization and open access. While both of these innovations were important, both have had limited impact on museum experience. Social media has mostly become another venue for telling the same narratives. Open access is still more interesting for its potential than for what it has actually achieved. The new forms of "long tail"-oriented storytelling we hoped would emerge didn't happen. The experience remained the same, it just now took place on your mobile device.

At the same time, technology has begun to slowly work its way into every corner of museum practice, but acting as an accelerant much more than a transforming force. Tech helped museums move faster, and to be more responsive, but it didn't actually change what they *did*. And that's not actually a bad thing! While technology hasn't transformed the museum experience on its own, it has become a carrier wave for a different kind of transformation, which has mostly occurred outside of museums. Here I'm thinking of the emergence of museum-adjacent organizations that incubate new practices *outside* museums and then use tech as an amplifier to manifest these practices *inside* museums.

These groups—Museums Are Not Neutral, Prime Access Consulting, Commissioner, Museum Hue, Museum Two, and many more—are starting to produce real transformation in the museum experience. They are changing collecting practices, questioning bedrock interpretive assumptions, and encouraging the inclusion of a diversity of voices in the work that museums do. In short, these groups are producing the kind of transformation in the museum experience we have hoped for, and while technology is a key part of making that transformation happen, it is not at the core of it. It turns out that the future of museums is not in mobile apps, it's in a de-colonized collections database. It's not in VR, but in developing a whole new cohort of art collectors. Without technology, these groups might not even exist, and even if they did, they'd be incapable of marshaling the kinds of resources and public opinion necessary for making real change happen in museums.