

Museums as Sources of Information and Learning: The Decision Making Process

Much has been written about the educational and learning role of museums (Falk and Dierking, 1992, 1995, 2000; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) and their roles in community development and access (Gurian, 1995, 2001; Kelly and Gordon, 2002). Yet, in this increasingly rich and complex information age, less emphasis has been given to the roles that museums have as credible sources of information (Booth, 1998; Lake Snell Perry and Associates, 2001). Access to information and knowledge is probably at the greatest point now in our history than it has ever been. Therefore the resulting problems and stresses that this brings, coupled with how to actually use information are core issues that museums need to urgently address.

Further to this there is a view that museums need to move from being suppliers of information to facilitators, providing tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and reach their own conclusions. This is because increasing access to technologies, such as the Internet, ‘... have put the power of communication, information gathering, and analysis in the hands of the individuals of the world’ (Freedman, 2000: 299). In this sense, the museum needs to become a mediator of information and knowledge for a range of users to access on their own terms, through their own choice and within their own place and time, a ‘... multifaceted, outward-looking role as hosts who invite visitors inside to wonder, encounter and learn’ (Schauble, et al., 1997: 3).

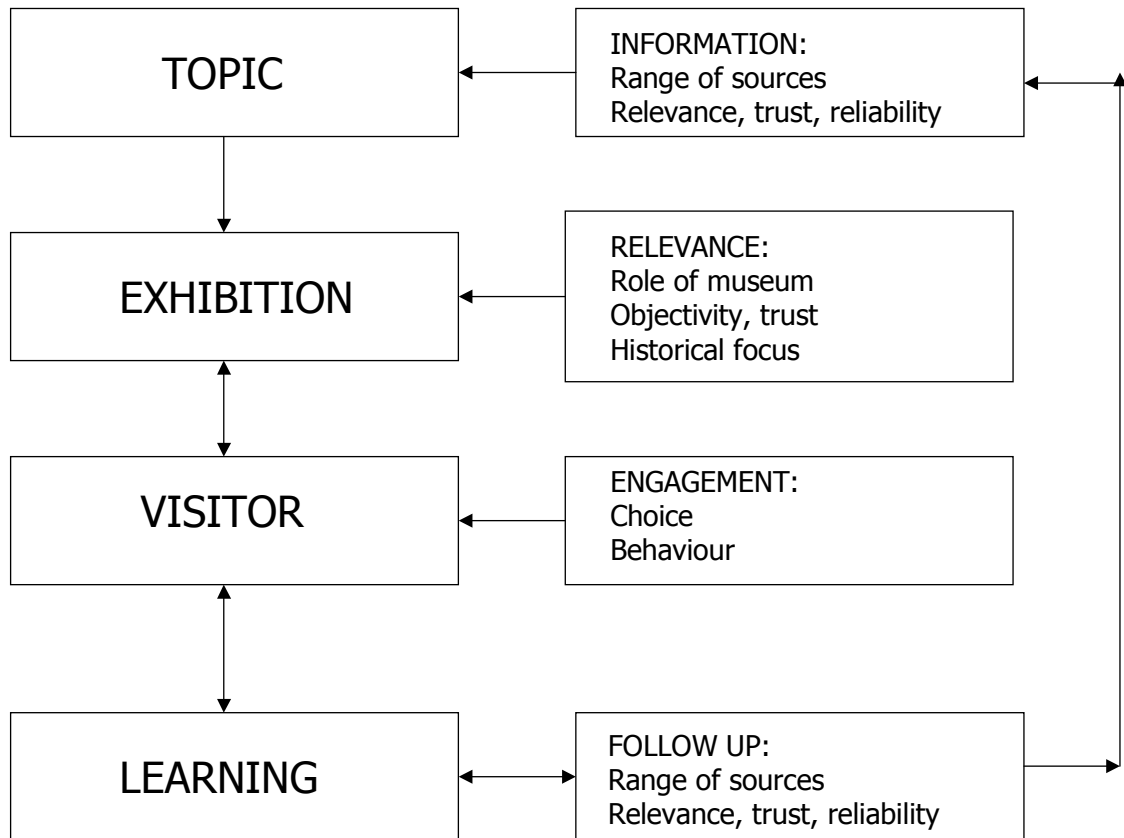
How information is used, and by who, is another key issue for museums: ‘The

role of museums in the future ... lies in legitimising information and information processes and in being an advocate for knowledge as the province of the people, not the sole property of the great institutions' (Freedman, 2000: 303). Yet, individuals need help to negotiate and use information in making decisions: 'Despite having more information at our fingertips than any generation before, there is little evidence that our ability to make good timely decisions has improved' (Cochrane, 2003: 1). This means that understanding the processes of decision-making when first, accessing information and, second, using it is critical. What are the different sources of information and how do people choose between them when looking for information about a specific topic? How do these interact with and build on each other? Where do museums fit? Do visitors believe that museums have a role in influencing or shaping people's decisions?

This paper is the third part of the *Exhibitions as contested sites – the roles of museums in contemporary society* research project. The aims and objectives of the project and details about the methodology, including the sample specifications, are contained in the background paper in this issue. This paper focuses on museums as sources for information and learning and what this means in terms of people choosing museums over other sources. The primary source of research data used for this purpose are the six focus group discussions conducted in Sydney and Canberra. Three groups were held in each city, consisting of parents aged 30-49 years and adult museum visitors aged between 18 and 30 years and 50-64 years. A secondary data sources used come from the quantitative surveys with museum visitors across three sites—the Australian Museum, Sydney (n=197); the Australian War Memorial, Canberra (n=248) and the Canadian data

gathered from three museums (n=286). Data from the Internet survey (n=148) was also used to compare visitor responses to that of staff who work in a wide cross-section of museums internationally. Finally, research being undertaken as part of my doctoral studies (Kelly, in preparation), as well as the literature, have also been accessed in addressing the issues considered in this paper. The conceptual framework I have employed in this paper is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Museums and Information: the Decision Making Process



The Topic: Choosing an Information Source

The first element in the framework is how people determine what information sources they will access when beginning to investigate a topic of interest to them. A great variety of sources of information were identified by focus group participants. These included the ‘media’ (usually grouped together but meaning newspapers, television and radio); university and other adult education courses; the Internet; libraries/books; other people (family and friends) and museums:

Mostly just newspapers, TV and talking with family and friends, discussing topics. I don't really have time to go and search out the information. If there's something particularly interesting I might go and follow it up on the Internet or something like that, but very rarely. (Canberra, 18-30 years).

A survey of Sydney adults (the LeisureScope®) found that, among a range of sources accessed when learning something new, 87% thought that other people (such as family and friends) were very important or quite important, followed by books/libraries (77%); newspapers (76%); work colleagues/peers (74%); and radio (71%). Fifty-nine percent of respondents nominated universities/formal education courses and television programs, with 58% each nominating museums and Internet/websites. This paper will focus on three of these sources: the media, the Internet and museums.

The Media

Clearly, Sydney adults do use the media (defined here as newspapers, radio and television) to access information, however, whether they trust this is another question. The American Association of Museums commissioned a survey of Americans' views about sources of trustworthy information, comparing museums with a range of other sources. This survey found that there was a low level of trust in the news media, with the majority not trusting it. For example, 65% rated newspapers as not trustworthy and 72% radio as not trustworthy (Lake Snell Perry and Associates, 2001). Similarly in focus groups in this project exhibited some scepticism about the media, with the need identified to access many different sources, including alternative media, to get 'the real story' and more detail:

I think you need to turn to some sort of, sometimes alternate, news sources to find the truth. Not that mainstream don't present the truth, they just don't present enough information. (Sydney, 18-30 years).

It was recognised that all media has some form of inherent bias, which was why it was felt important that a range of sources be consulted:

I think getting a wide range is the best you can do because even on SBS and ABC [publicly-funded broadcasters in Australia] they're still somewhat biased. Everything is made by people who have opinions. There's not anyone making documentaries that don't have any opinions ... history books and everything that you read is someone's opinion. The best you can do is try and get as many as you can and try and formulate your own. (Sydney, 18-30 years).

However the role the media plays in both provoking and exacerbating controversy is more complex than a trust or credibility issue. The media is all around us, it invades and pervades our everyday lives. Therefore it is important that looking at '... the role of the media as one key stakeholder should be a key component of [the] debate; it is essential to understanding the museum's role in a controversy or culture war' (Ellison, 2003: 5). This issue has been explored through the *Contested Sites* project in a separate study using literature reviews and interviews with media figures in Australia (for more detail see Ellison, 2003).

The Internet

The Internet is another source accessed by many people when seeking information.

When asked in the LeisureScope® survey, 58% of Sydney adults thought that the Internet/websites were quite or very important when learning something new.

People recognise the ease and convenience of the Internet: "But to be frank, it's easier to access something on the Internet. It's also a time factor, somewhere to visit and kill some

time and get some information.” (Sydney parent, 30-49 years). The ability to easily retrieve information compared to other sources was also mentioned:

The problem is it’s so easy to go on the Internet, and then you download, you print and you’ve got it there. You go to a museum, you’ve got to write things down, you’ve got to have a pencil, paper and you’ve got to write. I don’t know if we could be bothered doing that anymore. (Canberra, 50-64 years)

However, there are very strong opinions about the range, depth and credibility of information that the Internet provides. When talking further to people there are always qualifications given about the information that is accessed on the Internet:

I think more and more of the veracity of the information on the Internet. One of the problems, certainly with my children, is the assumption that because it’s on the Internet that it must have some validity and actually testing that is very difficult now. (Sydney parent, 30-49 years)

Similarly to this, the American Association of Museums survey found that 66% of respondents thought that the Internet was **not** trustworthy. The role of museums in providing access to real objects, compared to the Internet as a primarily two-dimensional medium was also noted: “I agree that you can’t get it all from the Internet. A museum will bring it into perspective [by] actually seeing it.” (Canberra, 50-64 years).

Museums

People who have discovered the value of museums use them as one of a wide range of information resources. An ethnographic study of family museum visiting found that a variety of diverse places for learning were accessed, including museums, airports, office lobbies and university lounges, and that families weren’t bounded by the

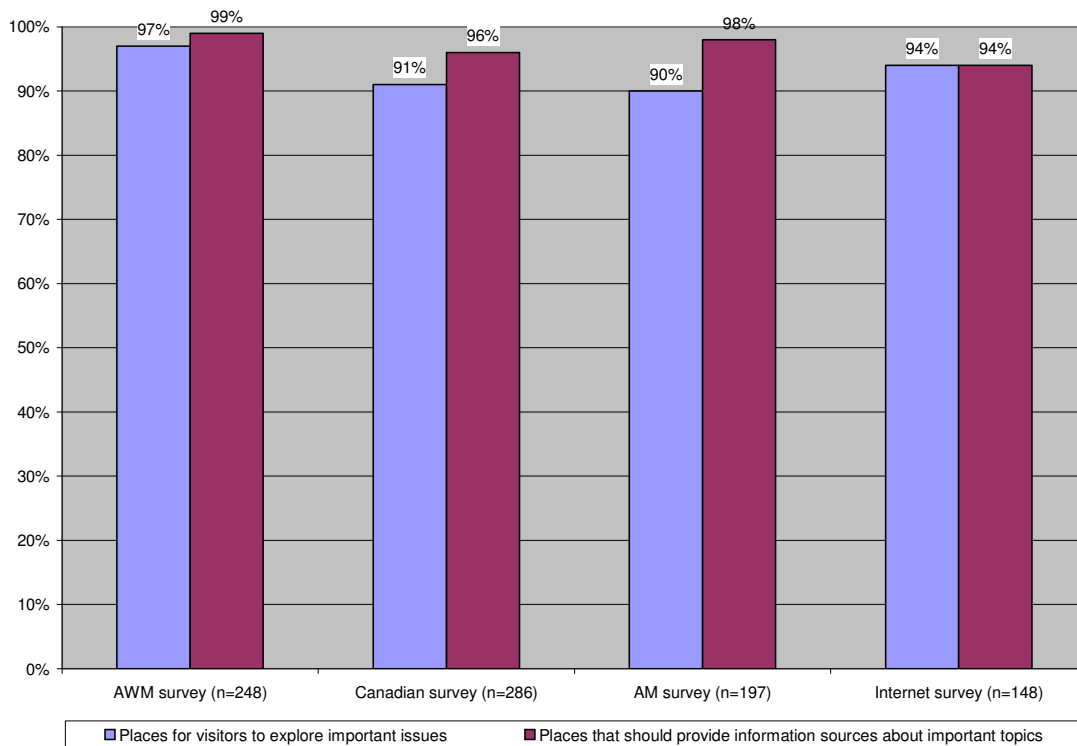
borders established by these institutions (Ellenbogen, 2002). Museums featured quite strongly in my doctoral research as sources used when learning something new.

Several questions about museums and learning were asked of 100 adults visiting the Australian Museum, including rating a range of learning resources on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not important and 5 being very important. As could be expected, 75% rated *museums, galleries and other cultural institutions* as important, which was the second highest rating following *books/libraries* at 89% (Kelly, in preparation). In the LeisureScope® survey, mentioned earlier, 58% of respondents thought that museums were very important or quite important when learning something new. The types of people that chose museums compared to the general population were female, aged 35-49 years, have children aged up to 17 years, and live in the inner and north areas of Sydney. Interestingly, this closely mirrors the general profile of museum visitors (certainly Australian Museum visitors, see Kelly, 2002a). Significantly more people that had visited a museum in the previous six months thought that museums were very or quite important places when learning something new (50%).

Why museums? There was strong support in the surveys for museums being *Places to explore important issues*. Ninety-seven percent of Australian War Memorial visitors; 91% of Canadian visitors and 90% of Australian Museum visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Staff also accepted this, with 94% of the internet survey respondents also agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Support for the statement museums as *Places that should provide information sources about important topics* was even higher, with 99% of Australian War Memorial visitors, 96% of Canadian visitors; 98% of Australian Museum visitors and 94% of staff

respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. These comparisons are shown on Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comparisons of statements: museums as information sources



Why do people see museums as important sources of information? The focus group data tells us that it is related strongly to trust, reliability, credibility and authority:

I really think museums have a reputation like university professors, and you expect them to show things which have the backing of scientific method. It's not just some ratbag sprouting some propaganda, it's a well thought out established viewpoint. (Sydney, 18-30 years)

This is coupled with the perceived education and learning functions of museums: “I use museums as a great source of education and researching subjects” (Sydney, 50-64 years).

The role of museums in helping people understand difficult concepts or issues was also recognised:

[9/11] ... certainly is a very controversial and very recent issue, but at the same time it will have to be dealt with, and perhaps it would be good that it could be dealt with by museums because it would help people process it and come to terms with it, which we have to and our children have to (Sydney parent 30-49 years).

Reliability, especially in uncertain times, is very important:

I'd say that museums are like a library, the same as the National Library, because museums are a very reliable first-hand source of information, they are informative and have a lot of what you need (Canberra, 18-30 years).

Trust is another key issue. The American Association of Museums study found that ‘Among a wide range of information sources, museums are far and away the most trusted source of objective information. Thirty-eight percent of Americans believe museums are one of the most trustworthy sources and 87% believe they are trustworthy overall’ (Lake Snell Perry and Associates, 2001: 2).

Staff also recognise the credibility that museums have:

Museums and galleries can provide the perfect setting for discussion and debate around topics that directly influence and shape our society. They can also be gatherers of information giving visitors the opportunity to have their say, compiling this data and presenting it to the public and political arenas. (Internet survey respondent, Australia, curatorial, small museum).

Although people may trust museums, whether they decide to access them is a separate issue. Perceptions about museums are critical. It is recognised that the reasons for choosing museums are complex and beyond the scope of this paper. Many other research studies have proposed a variety of models of and motives for museum visiting (for

example see Hood, 1995; Kelly, 2001; Lynch, Burton, Scott, Wilson and Smith, 2000). However, given this, people make decisions about when and what they will visit, and how they behave when they are there. If people don't see how a topic or issue could be presented in attractive ways that are interesting and relevant to them they will go to another information source. It is not merely a marketing issue, but a perception issue, as visitors have understandings about what they might see based partly on their previous history with cultural institutions. For example, when discussing terrorism as a topic, people often couldn't see how this could be done at a museum: "... how would you present, in a museum, terrorism? I don't quite understand that" (Canberra, 50-64 years), and: "I think it would become too emotive anyway ... I just can't see how that would work" (Canberra, 50-64 years).

Focus group participants also exhibited strongly held views that museums should not lead public debate, but should act as an objective source of information, especially in the current political climate, particularly in Australia. Although museums were generally seen as a trustworthy source of information, there were some concerns about the ability of museums to present objective views about a topic; the ways that they could make their own position explicit; how they could present many voices, divergent or contradictory facts and points of view; and how to assist visitors to make up their own minds. For example, when discussing a range of potential topic areas:

... when you talk about these things emotion comes into it and you may not be able to present all the facts. Depending on who's presenting the exhibition. They put their point of view so we've got to be very careful (Canberra, 50-64 years).

Presenting both sides of the story was suggested as one way to overcome potential bias:

I think it's very important that museums present both sides of the story ... I don't think people go to museums to have an opinion rammed down their throat. They just want to be presented with the facts, and it's OK to hear people's stories, and it's OK to hear the opinions of some people as long as it's balanced by the other side (Sydney, 18-30 years).

Having the full range of information and facts was seen as a critical, yet difficult, role for museums:

If you want to resolve issues you would have to have every piece of information really in order to make it an educated judgement on something. I don't know that a museum is capable of doing it (Canberra, 50-64 years).

The person/s behind the exhibition (that mythical and mysterious 'curator'!) was seen as critical in making decisions about what would and wouldn't be shown: "... who decides should you talk about homosexuality in a museum, and should you talk about did the Holocaust exist, should you talk about terrorism?" (Sydney, 18-30 years). Making this clear in an exhibition was seen as important:

And maybe the public would like to know who's actually giving us the information ... [Is it] coming from an archaeologist that's studied for years and years and years and travelled all over? It's nice to know who's actually putting forward what we're digesting. (Sydney, 18-30 years).

Staff also felt that this needed to be made explicit, as well as the organisation being aware of their own position and influences: "Museums should challenge accepted norms, but need to be sure they are aware of their own cultural biases and always present both sides of the story" (Internet survey respondent, New Zealand, librarian, large museum).

The relevance of the topic was also a consideration, with some topics seen as more appropriate for museums, while others better served by different media such as the Internet, books and other people:

Obviously websites and that, but with dinosaurs and skeletal things I think the museum is the best tangible way of seeing and being able to look at the configuration and perspective. And it depends on the nature of the subject I guess (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

The issue of topic choice has been further explored in the Ferguson paper.

The Museum Exhibition

The second element in the decision making framework (Figure 1) is the museum exhibition which covers the areas of relevance, role, objectivity and trust. Results from the quantitative studies showed that people strongly supported the role of museums in providing information about important and controversial issues **as long as** they provide mechanisms for visitors to make comment about them. Eighty-six percent of Australian War Memorial visitors; 89% of Canadian visitors and 89% of the Australian Museum sample agreed or strongly agreed that museums should be *Places that should allow their visitors to make comment about the topics being presented*. Participants wanted museums to provide opportunities for visitors to have a say through feedback forms, suggestion boxes, tours, lectures/seminars and discussion groups with guest speakers, with the option to opt out if you wanted to: “I think putting it on tape sounds like a brilliant idea. Express your views there on the spot” (Canberra, 50-64 years). Staff were also able to list strategies they have used to successfully involve visitors in programs and exhibitions, which will be further explored in the next stage of the project.

Parents, in particular, wanted support through easy to obtain and well-packaged information; lists of discussion questions/issues; fact sheets and links to further resources: “I think there is a certain amount of fear or apprehension about being out of your depth as a parent there with your children” (Sydney parent, 30-49 years). The role of the parent when visiting a difficult or controversial exhibition was also discussed:

... if you want to heighten your level of anxiety or discomfort, go there and stand in [an exhibition] and have your children ask what are extremely frank and exposing questions

about it. And it's certainly an opportunity to reflect on how you deal with it (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

Staff to answer questions, particularly about demanding issues or other cultures, was considered critical:

I think there need to be a lot more staff in the museums because no matter what sort of media it's presented to you there's always going to be an extension question from a child or adult ... [you] get direct feedback right then and there, rather than going away and having questions about it (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

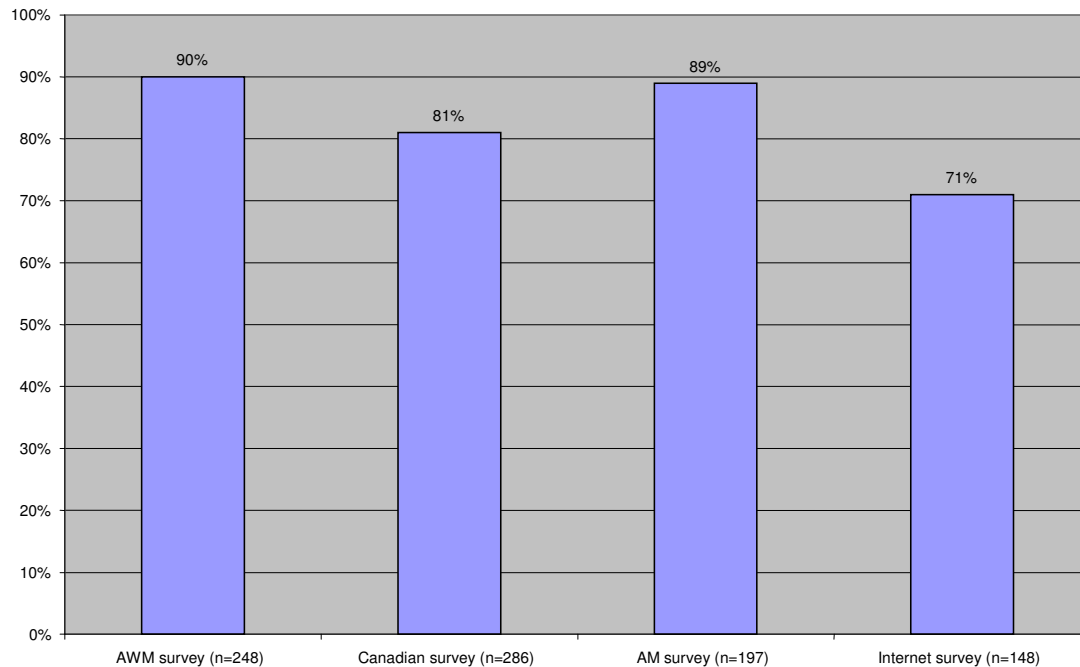
Parents recognise and value their own role as mediator, through often re-interpreting an exhibition's ideas, both in conjunction with their child and in answering their questions.

This is an important aspect that museums need to plan for and facilitate.

Staff also believe that this is an important future role of museums as 92% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, they are less sure about how well museums are currently doing this, as when asked about the current roles of museums, 55% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, a significant difference of 37%.

There was general agreement between visitors and staff that museums are relatively 'safe places for unsafe ideas', proposed several years ago (Gurian, 1995) as seen on Figure 3.

Figure 3. Museums as safe, "neutral" places to explore a range of ideas



As one participant in the focus group commented when discussing the role of museums in presenting difficult topics: “I think museums should still stay neutral [but] because other people might come in ... you don’t want to take away the peacefulness but museums are safe, neutral grounds to go to” (Sydney, 18-30 years). Others talked about museums as ‘safe havens’, that don’t necessarily influence the way visitors think, but where you can just relax and take it all in:

I see the museum as a safe haven. You can just go in there and you can let the stuff wash over you. There’s interactive things, things to watch, there’s listening, sound, all that sort of stuff and you can come out of it and you can say that was a really pleasant experience, but I haven’t necessarily changed my view of the world because of it (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

A further observation about this was that people could take political action in other ways:

I've taken the view that a museum should be a steady safe haven where you 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. You don't do it through a museum (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

Staff also generally accepted this view:

Museums should be seen as neutral environments for education and reflection. If a museum chooses to present an exhibition about a controversial topic the exhibit should not take a side on the issue but present the topic in a way that all perspectives are being addressed. (Internet survey respondent, Canada, senior management, small museum).

People were cynical about museums doing something just to be controversial:

I do worry that the museums would have a knee-jerk response and say what are we going to do to get people through the door? Let's be controversial. [This is] controversy in a vacuum, it's controversy for it's own sake (Sydney parent 30-49 years).

They thought that an issue needs to be relevant to the institution's mission and business focus: "... why are you showing this? Is it just that you're trying to ... stir up controversy just to get attention, or is it because you've got an important message that you want to teach people?" (Sydney, 18-30 years). It was felt that topic areas need to relate to a museum's content areas, supported by objects and stories from their collections: "I think they should present facts, and that's why I worry a little about the introduction of controversial subjects." (Sydney, 50-64 years).

The Visitor

The third factor in the decision making framework presented in Figure 1 concerned the role the visitor plays, including what they bring with them—their background and lived history and their expectations—as well as the choices they make during their visit. Visitors don't come to museums with a 'blank slate'. The enormous amount of museum learning literature continually highlights that the key role of prior

knowledge, experience and lived history of people in conjunction with their values and beliefs about museums (their 'entrance narrative') affects the kinds of experiences they will have, the meanings they make and subsequent learning and change (Doering and Pekarik, 1996; Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998; Kelly, 2002b, 2002c; Leinhardt, et al., 2002; Roschelle, 1995; Silverman, 1995). People choose to visit museums, they choose what they will attend to and they behave and learn in specific ways that are comfortable for them: '... the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experience and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world' (Doering and Pekarik, 1996: 20).

Museums need to accept and embrace the fact that visitors come with their own agenda and views, particularly if the subject matter is hot and topical at the time. Some people are seeking to have their views confirmed, others are more open to examine other points of view and change their minds, but it needs to be recognised that this is in **their** control, not the museum's:

[museums need to] let you make the decision as to whether you think it's right or wrong so you get both sides of the coin presented. Say at a museum where you see the pictures or whatever ... you listen to what they're saying. Then you go home and absorb it and think about it and make up your own mind (Sydney, 50-64 years).

One area where talking about difficult topics created interesting discussion between focus group participants was the perceived dichotomy between entertaining and educational experiences. Some expressed the view that just as there's a time and place for being serious and challenging, there is also an important component of fun and relaxation in a museum visit:

I think there's a time and place for it [presenting challenging exhibitions]. Sometimes it's good to go to an exhibition that's just fun, like Star Wars. And the other thing is if the exhibition isn't captivating, even if it's got good information, people won't really go.

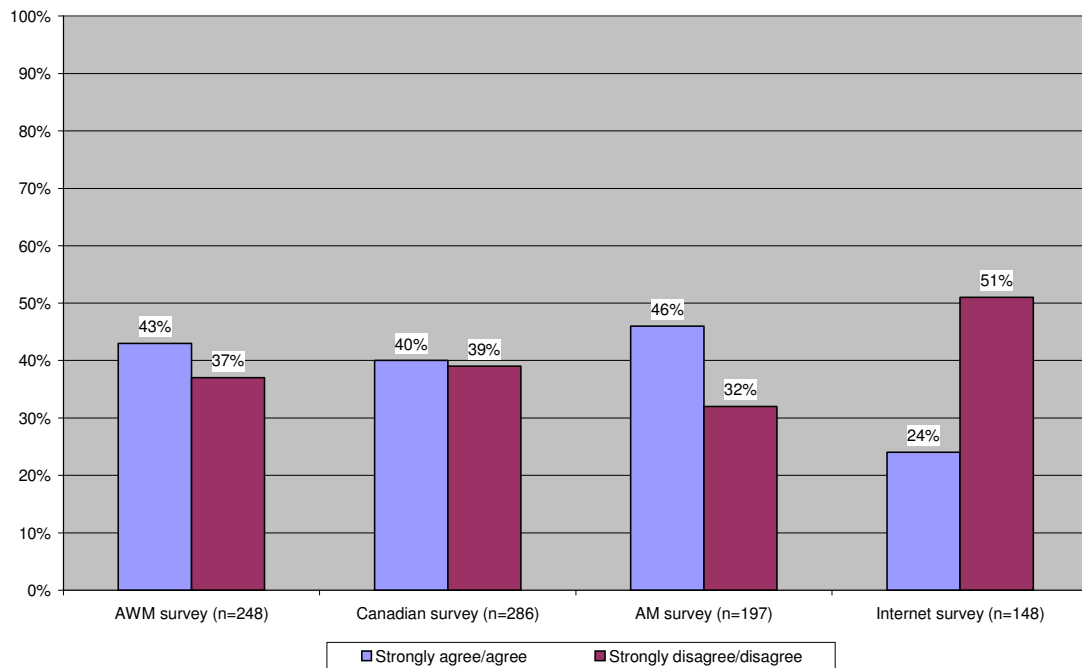
And that's the traditional stereotype of museums as being stuffy factual places which aren't much fun (Sydney, 18-30 years).

It was felt that there needs to be a balance between being dramatic, popular, entertaining as well as 'intellectual', with some people expressing more support for some of these over others: "I go along to be entertained. I certainly don't go there to feel uncomfortable and I certainly don't go there for education" (Canberra, 50-64 years).

My doctoral research is showing that adult museum visitors view learning, education and entertainment quite differently. Findings also indicate that entertainment is a concept that can work in positive ways for museums, rather than in conflict with it. People felt that entertainment can *add* to their learning, not take away from it (Kelly, 2003). Parents, in particular, value the entertaining and fun aspects of museum learning: "[museums can] present history to kids who are otherwise not going to be able to see it except in a school text book, which is pretty boring, or on the computer, which is pretty boring too" (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

But there was recognition that that museums have multiple roles, from simple to complex: "... there's many roles from as simple ... as entertainment, just a visual experience, through to something that's more political and in your face ... I'd prefer to go to museums to see works of art, beautiful things" (Sydney 18-30 years). And a staff respondent: "Although I advocate the museum as a place of inquiry I hope we never abdicate our role as a place for pure aesthetic enjoyment as well" (Internet respondent, USA, senior management, small gallery). People don't necessarily want museums to be non-challenging. Responses to the statement *Museums are places for a non-challenging social experience* show support for both, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Museums as places for non-challenging social experience



Some of these responses relate to whether people perceive museums as currently being challenging or not: “I strongly agree that they’re non-challenging at the moment, but they certainly could be [more challenging]” (Sydney parent, 30-49 years). Some of it depends on how this challenge would happen:

I want to be challenged. If a museum had a speaker like Aung San Suu Kyi, and I think this would be a marvellous place to have a speaker like that rather than the Town Hall. I would go, I would be interested. (Sydney, 50-64 years). It also depended on how they interpreted the word challenge: “[I saw] non-challenging as in non-threatening. I see that as unbiased presentation of the facts, not a skewed one.” (Canberra, 50-64 years). In response to this question one participant noted that: “It’s nice to just potter around and let it drift over you. (Canberra, 50-64 years).

Learning

The final piece in the decision making framework (Figure 1) addresses learning—how it

happens, how visitors see themselves as learners and where museums fit within an individual's learning life (Falk and Dierking, 1995, 2000; Kelly, in preparation). Through providing choice, challenge and control (Paris, 1997) visitors take charge of the learning that happens during and after their museum visit. This framework is also one that focus group participants were using when talking about ways to engage with difficult topics. One strong finding from the focus groups is that visitors do not want museums to be telling them 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 parent, 30-49 years). Staff echoed this view: "It's great to present controversial topics as long as they're well researched and present information that visitors can access to form their own opinions, rather than visitors being told what to think" (Internet respondent, New Zealand, curatorial, large museum). Drawing your own conclusions, often some time after the visit, was something reiterated throughout the group discussions: "I like to absorb, go away and think about it and make up my own mind" (Sydney, 50-64 years). My doctoral research has also shown that people don't want to be told what to learn and want the opportunity to make their own meanings from what they have experienced under their own terms and in their own time and place (Kelly, in preparation).

Yet, the quantitative data shows that visitors are generally amenable to the point that museums shouldn't be afraid to change audiences' views about important topics. Seventy-two percent of Australian War Memorial visitors; 81% of Canadian visitors; 85% of the Australian Museum sample and 82% of Internet respondents agreed or strongly agreed that museums should be *Places that shouldn't be afraid to change*

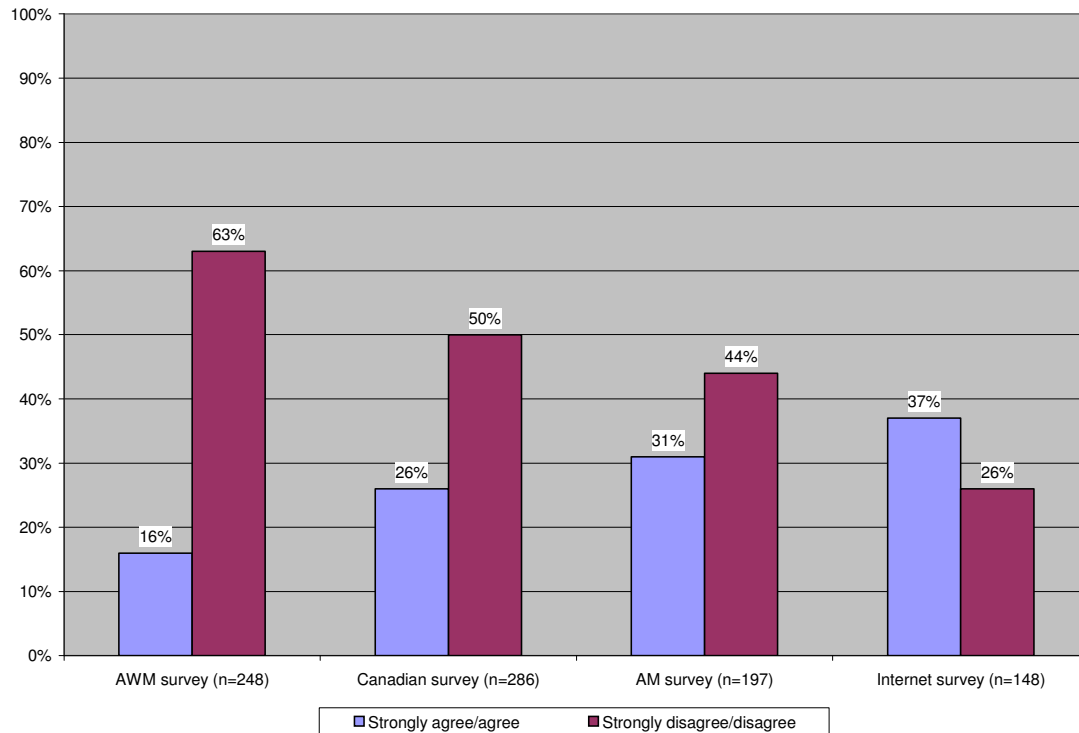
audiences' views on important topics. The focus group data tells us that it is the way that this is done that becomes critical: "I think we should draw our own conclusions and make those opinions, rather than them giving us their opinion. (Sydney parent, 30-49 years), or as another stated: "I'm not sure that I like that word "lead" [as in lead public opinion]. I think perhaps "inform" would be better" (Canberra, 50-64 years).

Could this be the educational role of the museum? To provide visitors with information about issues that museums are best equipped to deal with in an open, honest and truthful way through providing object-rich learning experiences?:

... if you've got something that's beautiful, or that's an important part of our culture then it's no good putting it in a cupboard, especially if it's something which makes people think, or changes the way people look at things. It serves different functions, like art, education, and sometimes they're political and it's part of the culture, they can be part of the cultural heritage (Sydney, 18-30 years).

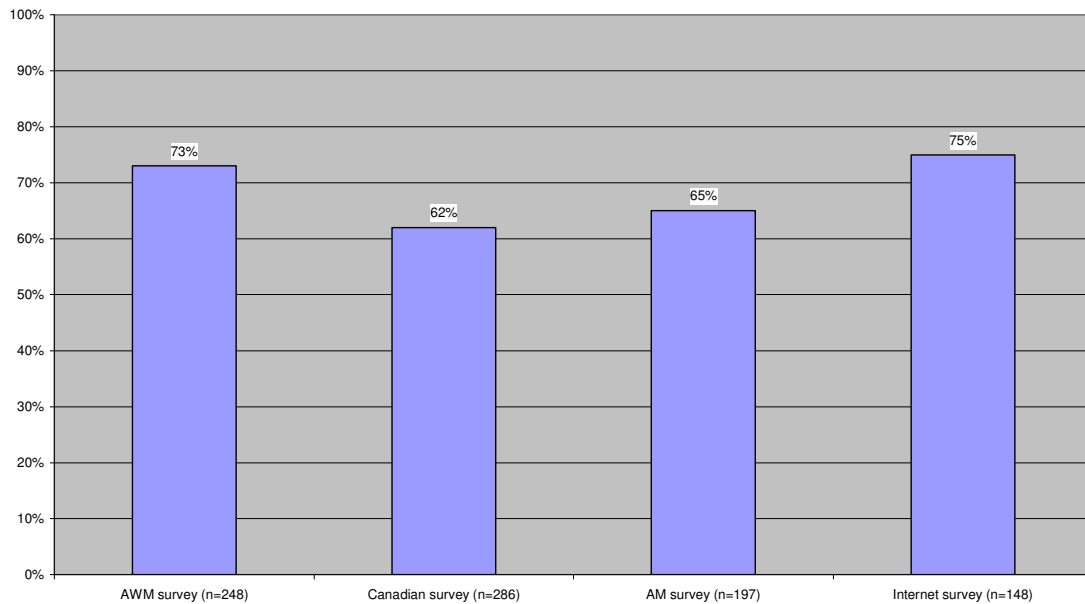
However, the role of museums in changing society was less supported by visitors and staff as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Museums as places to take an active political role to bring about change



The learning impact of a museum is not just the immediate, or surface, learning that happens when visitors leave an exhibition. It is the interaction between what they came with, how they engage with an exhibition and then how they use the information later or choose to follow up issues, which can be explained using a framework of sociocultural theory (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Kelly, 2002b, 2002c, in preparation; Leinhardt, et al., 2002; Schauble, et al., 1997). Research has shown that exhibitions can make a significant impact on visitors both in the short and long term (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998; Kelly and Gordon, 2002, Leinhardt et al., 2002), and the survey data indicates that people generally believe museums are *Places for visitors to resolve important issues in their own minds* as shown on Figure 6.

Figure 6. Museums as places to resolve important issues in their minds



Conclusion

Although participants in the focus groups were clear about the general educational role of museums, particularly in children's learning, the results suggest that when presented with difficult and controversial issues the ways they see museums dealing with these needs serious reflection on our part about the capability and authority we have to do this:

I think the museum in many ways provides a taster and actually galvanises people to think they might want to explore this further. But for it to be there and try to represent a very broad view of something to a very wide spectrum of people [is] tremendously difficult. I have grave concerns about their ability, their capacity to do it (Sydney parent, 30-49 years).

Some of the key questions that visitors raised that are worth further thought and reflection are issues about authority, whose voice/s are being represented and trust. Finally, in engaging audiences in ways that they like to learn through finding the

right balance between being popular and being populist; being controversial and critical; between providing information and generating knowledge; and recognising the relationship between learning and entertainment need to be considered. The crucial role that leadership plays also needs further reflection. In conjunction with this, the willingness of museum management at all levels to embrace a truly visitor-focused agenda must be questioned.

Overall, focus group respondents felt that people will make of their visit what they want to, choosing how they engage with a topic on their own terms, based on their own interests and prior experiences:

Museums are pretty much as challenging or non-challenging as you make them. You can walk through the War Memorial and look at the models, look at the submarines and walk out. Or you can take a tour and have someone tell you about it, or you can read about the stories, so it depends what you want from it. You can walk in and go “Gee”, or you can find out a lot of information. So it depends on what you’re looking for or what you want from it (Canberra, 18-30 years).

This is the wonderful and unique nature of the museum experience: that it appeals to and engages a huge variety of people on so many levels. Museums are strongly viewed as being one of a wide range of information sources and as an important catalyst for learning, being accessed and actively used by many different kinds of people. Visitors recognise and value this role, and trust that museums will do this to the best of their ability. Whether we take up this challenge is up to us—the ball is now in our court.