

Hot Topics and Relevancy

Bridging the gaps between museums
and their audiences

Fiona Cameron

Research Fellow, Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies
Centre for Cultural Research
University of Western Sydney

Bringing important challenging and controversial points of view in a democratic, free-thinking society for many was seen as a key role for museums– one of the few places where these debates can happen.

“Museums aren’t just for showcasing surface aspects of culture.”

(visitor, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver)

“Museums are a public forum for issues that should challenge society.”

(female 30-39 years business owner, Sydney).

“if museums don’t do it who will.”

(visitor, Australian War Memorial)

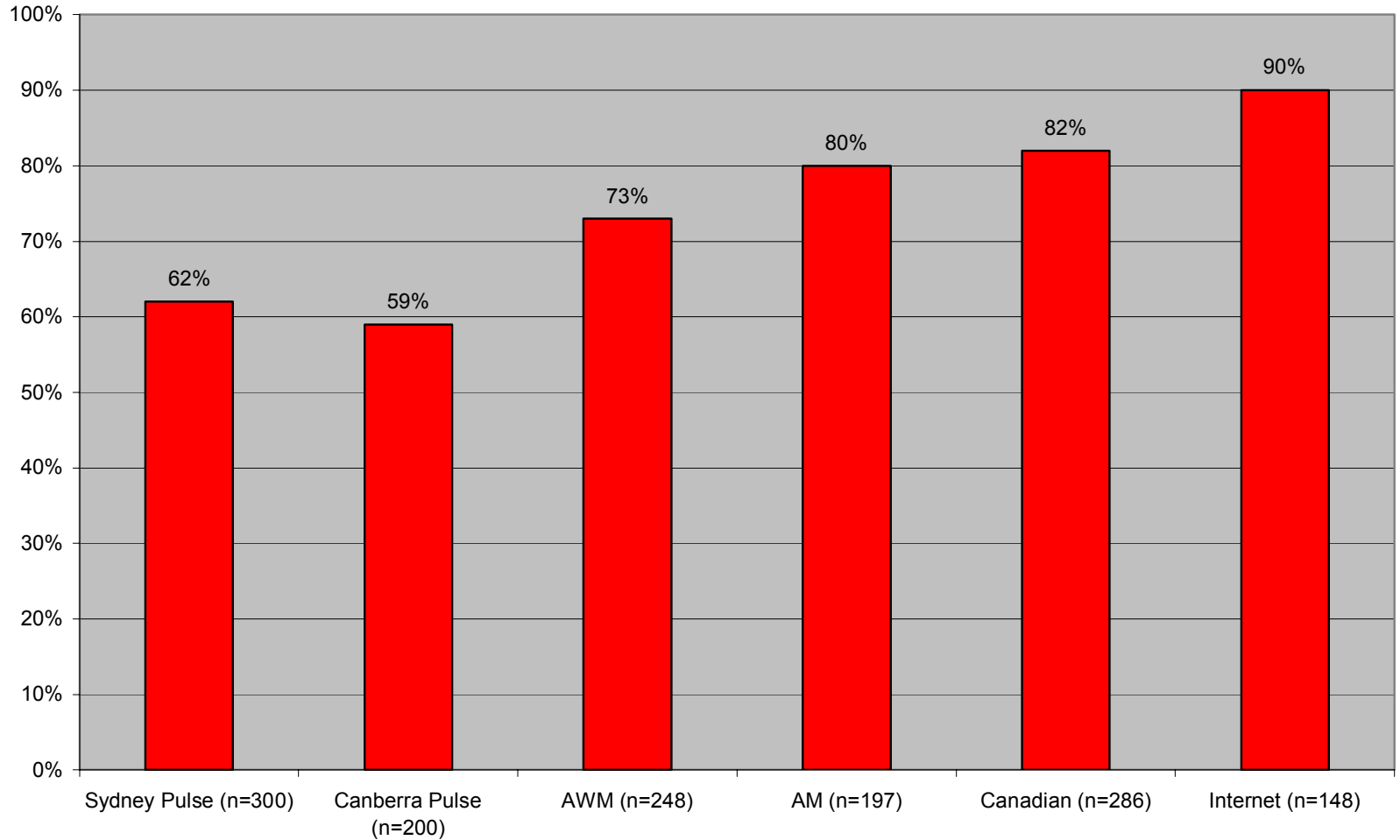
“controversy is just one factor in diversity and people have a choice to attend an exhibition or program.”

(visitor, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver)

“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, Ottawa)

Do museums have a role in developing exhibitions on taboo & controversial topics?



Relevancy – social agency

Reflection

“Museums are reflective, there is ...an opportunity to reflect on the past.” (Sydney, Adults 30-49).

“...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 50-64)

Contextualisation and Diagnosis

“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 50-64)

“It is important to get some reference to where you sit in the scheme of things - where is my place in all this.” (Canberra Adults 18-30)

Activism and social change

“If museums are to continue to exist as people friendly institutions, they have to have programs to educate people's about the history of terrorism, why it happens and the role of civil society to combat terrorism. ...it can be very beneficial to the whole community...” (Canberra Adults 50-64)

“I like the idea of an exhibition being empowering – in presenting good ideas and how do you turn that into action.” (Sydney Adults 18-30)

Relevancy: the political/apolitical dilemma

Information sources

"The museum has always been factual – we can rely on it." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a)

"If history is facts why cloud it with viewpoints. Museums have artefacts why cloud it with opinions." (Contested Sites Canadian War Museum survey)

"...museums have a reputation like university professors, and you expect to show things which have the backing of scientific method. It is not just some ratbag sprouting some propaganda, it's a well thought out established viewpoint." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b)

Impartiality

"In principle the whole concept of dealing with something that is overtly confrontational in a non-judgmental way – which is really the sense of how a museum should operate...it's not there to manipulate, its simply there to say here it is." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a)

"Museums give a non-biased view of events and issues and allows people to form their own opinions. "My concern about a lot of topics is that there is tremendous scope for social engineering" (Contested Sites Canadian War Museum survey)

Relevancy – the political/apolitical dilemma

Access

“an exhibition about asylum seekers ...people might use it to push their own political angle...you’ve got to be very careful.”

(Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b)

“Museums should present for the largest number of people and not for certain categories.”

(Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e)

Safeness

“Museums are a protected environment you can’t get anywhere else for dealing with contentious topics.” (Contested Sites Museum of Anthropology survey)

"museums should be places to vent controversy to present a range of emotions and opinions in a non-threatening environment." (Contested Sites Australian War Memorial survey)

“The challenge for museums is to putting something that holds up to all our values and truths.”

(Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a)

Moralising and reforming mandate

‘Since recreation is necessary to Civilised Society, all Public Exhibitions should be rendered subservient to improvement of morals, and to the means of infusing into the mind a love of the Constitution, and a reverence and respect for the Laws...’(Colquhoun 1806, 347-8, quoted in Bennett 1995)

“museum boards and politicians, often funders, tend to be conservatives...active in politics and socially upwardly mobile. They support their own sets of values in their work to get approval. Everything comes down to values, will, determination, money and politics.” (Contested Sites Interview Transcript UK#b)

"The current government is very pro-business, right-wing. It is now possible in Ontario to clear thousands of hectares of forests but there's no way that this museum could talk about that because we get so much money from the province. In the environmental community this is a very serious issue." (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#a)

Moralising and reforming mandate - audiences

**“We had a controversial issue about the number of people who died in the airplane that hit the Pentagon, we said 64 and the families said they did not want the terrorists counted in that number, we changed it to 59 innocent people. The idea of not making the terrorists a big part of the story was pretty universal. They wanted to remember what happened to Americans...not to give terrorists credence...The American public also did not want us to explain to them why Islamic fundamentalists hate Americans – not on September 11th” ...it's not a role that the museum could play at this moment.”
(9/11 exhibition team, National Museum of American History)**

**“presenting this topic could give legitimacy to something that has no legitimacy.”
(Sydney Adults 30-49)**

Relevancy: audience institutional engagement

- shared authoritative approach
- authoritative information and a range of perspectives
- Opportunities for dialogue with institutions and with other audiences - framing and contributing to debates through feedback mechanisms and interactive spaces
- Increasing role for participatory media – blogs, wikis, message boards, podcasts, vlogs to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives
- Link debates more directly to the public sphere
- Conceive audiences as self-interested – creating their own autobiographies from museum information