

Creating Anti Oppressive Spaces On line

nikhil trivedi: We're living in a tough time right now. We're in the midst of maybe electing one of the most *publicly* misogynistic, racist people ever for president of the United States of America. We're watching indigenous people from across the Americas gather in North Dakota to demand one of the most basic human protections, that of their water and their lives, only to be met by police, military, and militarized police. We're watching the systemic police violence that has a long history in this country be brought to light every few weeks with new names of lives that have been taken. We're watching hyper masculinity ravage through our communities, with mass shootings and sexual violence every few months with no end in sight. We're watching our climate getting destroyed more and more every day, also with no end in sight, yet we're all here in New Orleans, right now, talking about museums and about tech.

What's the point of all that we're doing this week when the worlds around us are falling apart in so many ways? We're seeing a lot of awful things right now, and museums are places that have seen their fair share of awful things, as well. Many of us work at institutions that may very well have participated in and benefited from some of the awful things that they've seen, and that's a problem. But as people who work in museums, and specifically in with tech, I think we all have an opportunity. As people who work somewhat outside the confines of our physical spaces and the limitations of our institutional histories, we can try things that no one would've ever dreamed of our institutions doing. We can fight against capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, imperial histories and work to dismantle the oppressions that affect so many of ourselves, our visitors, and our non visitors every day. We can do this work with the projects we're already doing. We could start this fucking week.

This session is a result of the six of us brainstorming to come up with specific practices we can do every day to actively work towards a more just future. These ideas come from a caring place with the intention to think about as many visitors as we can, and this work is about seeing the humanness in people that oppressions stop us from seeing.

Let's get started. We've got a little bit of a help today for this session. Blair is going to be tweeting out additional resources and articles and whatnot for the things we're talking about. Kate is going to be our note taker today. She's going to be documenting questions, issues, criticisms that come up so we can follow up on them after the session. Mariam is going to be our mic runner. There's a mic at the table, I think, over there, so when we get to that point.

Real quickly, we're going to do a round of intros for the six of us. We're going to say our names, our pronouns, if we wish to share them, where we're from, and why we're here talking about this. Sarita, do you want to get started?

Sarita Hernandez: Hello. My name is Sarita Hernandez, and I'm the Publication Coordinator for the "Fwd: Museums Journal," which is a journal critiquing, challenging and re imagining museums and the work inside and outside of them.

My pronouns are she, him, he, her. You can mix it up. I'm here today because I believe that anti oppression work should be linked to everything. Any type of work that is done, especially in museums where they should be about the communities around them and rooted in them.

Trish Oxford: Hi, I'm Trish Oxford. I am most recently working for myself on my own projects, but I fuel those passions when I'm being a part of the program community of MCN. I'm co chair this year and will be next year, very happy to hear your inputs, so that's a side.

My pronoun is she. her, I'm happy to be a part of this conversation for my work in museums fueled by my own experience, seeing how much we actually have power to set the tone of some discussions that we have every day, whether it's for the public or with their own staff. Is it why museums? Are we talking about that too, or no? There you go.

Eric Gardner: Hi everyone, thanks for coming. My name is Eric Gardner and I'm a Digital Publication Developer at the Getty Museum. My pronoun's he. I'm here because I love museums. I think they represent a lot of what's really great.

But as our keynote speaker mentioned earlier this morning, if we can't change them and make them more accessible and more relevant to the lives of most people, then they are in danger. I want to talk about ways that we can make these institutions better and save them from an uncertain future, otherwise.

Sina Bahram: Hi, everyone. My name is Sina Bahram. I'm from Prime Access Consulting. We're based out of North Carolina. We do a lot of work, really privileged to work with so many awesome museums on inclusive design and making this experience better for both persons with disabilities and then without, for everyone.

I suppose why I'm here is because even though I, from a really early age, loved museums, because I'm blind, about 99 percent of museum experiences truly suck.

That's something that I really want to change because I feel like there is this amazing opportunity that is singularly available in museums that so many people don't have access to, whether it's because of the issues we're talking about today or others. Anything we can do to change that is a really good thing. Pronoun is he.

fari nzinga: Hi, everybody, my name is fari nzinga. I am adjunct professor at SUNO, that stands for Southern University at New Orleans here in New Orleans. I teach Intro to Museum Studies. Shout out to my professor Haitham Eid in the front row. My pronouns are she.

I am interested in being here and having this conversation because I think that museums are supposed to be places where we celebrate the best of humanity and human achievement, and we can't celebrate that if we don't honor everybody's humanity and we don't value everyone's human achievement. That's why I'm here.

nikhil trivedi: I'm nikhil trivedi. I work at a museum in Chicago and my pronouns are he and him. I'm here because I've made a personal commitment to end all forms of violence in all the communities I'm a part of. I feel like there are a lot of ways in which our institutions, and our communities and people who work and visit our institutions have experienced trauma.

I feel like there's a lot of important ways and there's a lot of important work in creating a space for us to heal from those traumas, whether they're things we've experienced in our lives, whether they're histories that have been passed down over the past few generations. I feel like this is important work towards that direction.

There were some handouts on the chairs that you all are sitting on. On one side of them is some definitions, just to set some common language for some of the things we'll be talking about today. We didn't have enough for every chair, so if y'all could get a little friendly and share, that'd be amazing.

We're going to dig into just a few of those definitions real quick today this morning, in particular anti oppression. We just want to make some distinctions between why we're using the language anti oppression versus diversity and inclusion. fari, do you want to take that one?

fari nzinga: Sure. Diversity and inclusion seems to be having a hot moment right now in terms of the commercial space, in terms museums. On the one hand, it can be very easy to talk about diversity as just a numbers game and making sure that you have representation, or making sure that out of every handful of white people you have a person of color, or out of every handful of men you have a couple of women.

I think that having those conversations doesn't get to the point which is you have to understand, in the society we live in, that there are groups of people that are struggling under oppression. Not historical oppression, but current day oppression, like right now.

If we're not going to really go to the baseline issue of why it is we don't see people included in these spaces and we don't hear people's voices included in these conversations, then there's really a limit to how much we can change and how much we can improve.

I think that starting from a lens of anti oppression really takes the conversation to a deeper place, it takes it to a more impactful place, and it takes it to a more honest place.

nikhil trivedi: Yes.

fari nzinga: Is that cool?

[laughter]

nikhil trivedi: Does anyone have anything they want to add to that?

[pause]

nikhil trivedi: Cool, and we also want to make a distinction between equality and equity. This is a common meme that has been going around for a number of years describing the effects of distributing equal power among parties versus equity, which is taking into account varying needs and distributing resources based on those varying needs.

Generally we're going to be talking from a place of equity versus equality. Does anyone want to say anything more about the distinction between those two?

fari nzinga: I think the important distinction between equity and equality really rests on the fact that equity is about fairness and it's about justice. When you see the people on their boxes, it's equal that they all get a box, but it's not fair that they all get a box. I think keeping that in the center of our minds is really important.

nikhil trivedi: Then a variation of this meme is kind of useful to look at, too. The reality is kind of interesting, right? It's an image of the tallest person on the left, standing on a huge stack full of boxes and the shortest person on the right is actually standing inside a hole that's been dug into the ground. Then liberation removes the fence all together. I think ultimately, that's what we're shooting for.

Around the room on these windows, we put up common myths. These are some of the things that have informed the work that we're doing and create the context in which we're having the conversations.

We're going to take some of the myths. We're not going to spend a lot of time on them. We're just going to say, "For myths, we're going to let them sit in awkward silence for a few seconds and then we're going to say another one." Then we'll jump into the real meat of what we're here to present you today. That's this checklist for tech projects.

The first myth, it's already up there, "Those people," in quotes, "don't come to museums." Awkward silence.

nikhil trivedi: The next common myth, everyone feels welcome in museums and is motivated to visit. Sit and linger.

The next one, museums are neutral authorities.

Then the last one, white people have the most to contribute and have contributed the most to the art world.

Let me get myself organized here. A few quick questions, if I can ask for a show of hands or ask a neighbor to raise a hand for you. If you do raise your hand, can you also say the word yes? For how many of you, is this your first conversation on anti oppression? I see maybe five hands up. That's great. That's awesome.

How many people are actively working to create more equitable space in person or online?

Audience: Yes.

nikhil trivedi: Almost the entire room. That's awesome. Can I just get a few people to shout out one word of how you're feeling right now.

Audience Member: Frustrated.

nikhil trivedi: Frustrated.

Audience Member: Overwhelmed.

nikhil trivedi: Overwhelmed.

Audience Member: Alone.

Audience Member: Ready.

Audience Member: Alone.

nikhil trivedi: Alone and ready. Hopeless.

Audience Member: Hopeful.

nikhil trivedi: Hopeful.

Audience Member: Excited.

nikhil trivedi: Excited.

Audience Member: Intrigued.

nikhil trivedi: Intrigued. Great. I'm going to jump into the meat of what we're here to talk about to you guys right now.

We've created a checklist that we want to encourage folks to use at the beginning, to take five minutes out at the beginning of a design process to evaluate how our projects are working towards anti oppressive ends.

This checklist is very much a work in progress. We're looking for contributions by folks like you in this room. The checklist is available on GitHub. That's going to be the place

where we have conversations about questions, concerns, and criticisms, about the checklist.

The work that came out of the six of us in the session here has turned into a collaboration with The Inclusion. They were working on a similar sort of checklist on thinking about these issues at an organizational level and we decided to combine our two efforts.

If you're looking at the GitHub pages right now, you'll see both pieces of the work on there.

Today, we're going to be focusing specifically on the tech project checklist. The first thing that's on that checklist is the question, "Are your sign up forms respectful of people outside the norms of name, gender, sexuality, relationships, ethnicity, and ability?"

There are two graphics up on the PowerPoint here. They're both form fields for gender. One shows two radio buttons, male or female with an error noting that the field is required. You have to enter it in and there are only those two options for you to enter in.

The next one is just an open text box. People are going to enter in whatever they want to and it's not required and there aren't any restrictions on what can be entered into that field.

There are a few examples of people doing this on the web right now. Metafilter has had an open field text box for their gender field for about 10 years now. Something like this allows us, as the people collecting data, to get real information on how people identify with their gender.

We often want to restrict the values of things we're collecting so that we can more easily discern percentages from them. That doesn't always accurately reflect the people that those numbers represent.

An open field text box for things like name, for things like gender, for all fields that we collect gives us really more accurate information on the people that we're asking these questions to.

Sina Bahram: One really quick story, there was a form from an institution that shall go nameless. One of the things that they had on there was, "Do you need assistance?" This is for a disability thing. There was a set of radio buttons and you could select what things you needed help with, like audio description or something like that, except the form itself wasn't accessible, so if you needed help, you couldn't figure it out.

I think when we're talking about just online forms, just making sure that it's the same thing that Nikhil was saying about gender, that preventing someone from being able to even tell you something is a great way of just not being able to find out.

You see this all the time on the web with contact forms about complaints. Then it's not usable by the people who have a complaint. Something to keep in mind.

nikhil trivedi: Does anyone else want to add?

nikhil trivedi: Yeah, Eric?

[crosstalk]

Eric Gardner: The first point we made is about the context of collecting information. I want to challenge this crowd, which is a crowd of museum technologists, people who tend to get excited about collecting data to maybe not collect some of this data in the first place.

I think that people are very excited about analytics and metrics. That's a way that has traditionally been thought as something that validates what we're doing or should be seen as a metric of success. I guess I want to push back against that notion a little bit. I think that what's happening, a lot of this stuff, it started out very innocent.

We're increasingly living in a world where everything that people do online and more and more in physical spaces as we get Internet of Things and all that, where all of these things are tracked. All of this data is collected. We can either be complicit in that and help people just accept that, or we can push back and say actually, maybe there are places where less is more.

Less data is more. We shouldn't be collecting some of this personal information at all. I think there are times when you need to collect these information. We should really be upfront about that. We should think very carefully about that. Even things like Google Analytics on a website, that information might help Google a lot more than it helps you.

It might not be the kind of thing that really helps your visitors at all. It might just slow their page down and, otherwise, break...All this stuff has side effects. Again, I think there are a lot of legitimate reasons to collect information.

The item on the checklist here, as we're phrasing it now, is, "Why are you collecting each piece of data? Is your intention conveyed to users? Does the project respect the privacy of others?"

These are questions that have to be asked, that answers are going to vary from project to project. I think in 2016, it's no longer OK to just collect everything that we can and think that that's OK because that data might be taken somewhere else. Someone else might have access to it. We're responsible for that.

We don't want to expose our visitors. That's violation of their trust. As our keynote speaker was talking about earlier, there's a problem of institutional trust right now. This is one way we can work to overcome that.

Audience Member: [indecipherable 19:51] ?

nikhil trivedi: Yeah.

nikhil trivedi: I think between the first two points in the checklist, a useful analogy is to only ask people things you would ask at a dinner party. At a dinner party, you might ask someone what their name is. If they decided to share their gender with you, cool. You wouldn't ask, "Are you a woman? Are you a man?" That'd be kind of awkward.

Just out of the respect of the relationships that you build with people online because there are people behind the forms that were asking them to fill out. I feel like that's a useful gauge to see what is actually appropriate to ask and what isn't.

nikhil trivedi: Trish.

Trish Oxford: Just one quick thing about that last point there is that if you're going to collect the data, being transparent about it, if you're putting it out there and letting people know what you're collecting, then you're allowing yourself to be able to be...holes to be poked at you and to be scrutinized as Catherine [indecipherable 20:49] mentioned. I think that's huge, too.

I know the reality is a lot of us who work in marketing, a lot of these analytics push initiatives forward. Maybe one counterbalance to that is just the transparency of collecting, letting everyone know the data that you're collecting on them.

[background conversation]

Eric Gardner: Sure.

Eric Gardner: One final thing about privacy too, another thing that we've learned in recent years is a lot of stuff that happened online is under surveillance. Part of privacy also, it means encryption. It means they're very simple tools. I won't go into depth right now. There's a thing called Let's Encrypt. It's very easy to install on most servers.

Otherwise, if you're a museum and you're putting up a controversial exhibition, say about LGBT artists or something, and somebody wants to access that page from Iran, or Saudi Arabia, or some place where that might be a crime, you're protecting your visitors a little bit more if you can protect their privacy even if they're visiting from another country.

[applause]

Eric Gardner: The next point that we have here is about community standards. Another thing that's kind of, in this day and age, we have to be really mindful of is there's a more naive idea that the dawn of the Internet like, "OK, we'll just build this common space. It'll be great. There will be this wonderful sharing of ideas. Then everyone will just come there."

In 2016, we know better than that. Again, there was some discussion earlier in this room about Twitter. They've had all these challenges to implement a platform where people feel safe, where they don't feel under attack constantly by trolls and things like that. Nikhil was talking at the beginning of this panel about violence.

A lot of these stuff amounts to violence, essentially. If you create a space on any of your projects for comments, for public forum, you're really responsible for what happens there even if it's totally anonymous users that are saying these harmful things. Again, there's not like one answer that solves this in all cases, but you have to be on top of it.

If you create a space for comments, you're responsible for what happens there. Unless you have a very strong moderation policy and clear guidelines, and are actively involved in this community space you're creating, it could turn rancid very quickly. I challenge people to look at things like the Contributor Covenant on GitHub.

This is in our repository. There's a link to a website called Discourse, which is a commenting platform. They have a very good template for rules and etiquette in forums.

To think about codes of conduct in your projects, to think about what enforcing those codes means, and to think about how you can create a culture of collaboration and respect in the spaces that you create, because just letting the weeds grow or whatever is not a good solution. It puts some people at risk.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: The one thing I would add to that is I don't think that any of us are saying that the solution is, "If this is hard, don't do it."

We saw this recently with Berkeley when they were challenged that their online courses were inaccessible. They just took their toys and went home and decided to say, "If we're going to be forced to make these materials accessible, we're just going to take it down and not give access to anybody."

I think that's the opposite of the approach that we're advocating for and speaking about. Just realizing that these things are sometimes hard and difficult, and that failing forward is a thing, is really important. That's something I'm pretty passionate about.

Sometimes, you don't get it right the first time. That's OK, but being on top of it, like you were saying, is really important so that you're cognizant of these issues and that you're improving it on every new version.

Eric Gardner: Once again, we have links to some templates in the GitHub repository and on the forums and stuff that have been floating around. I just encourage people to take a look the next time you are going to create a space for this.

[background conversation]

Sarita Hernandez: Next on our checklist is, "Do icons, photos, or graphics assume things about gender, race, or ability of users?" Right here, we have some sort of working or helpful tools that have been used before for icons.

With Twitter, for example, they have an egg. Then also iPhones will have initials instead of...Sometimes I've seen graphics where...Especially when they ask for your gender. They don't really ask but they assume and they give you those two options.

They have the bathroom signs appear on the graphics, which is super uncomfortable for people. It's not cool with them. For me, I know, personally, I really hate when I have to be given a certain icon when I choose something that I don't even agree with in the first place because there wasn't a blank box for my gender category.

It's something to keep in mind to have using these non gendered, race or abled users icons can be helpful. Here's some other icons that have been used if other folks want to chime in.

[background conversation]

fari nzinga: I think this is where our understanding of intersectionality can really help because I know that sometimes when you have an icon after you've checked the box and you said that my pronouns are she, then I get this lovely lady with the low flip hair. As a Black woman, my hair does this. It goes out. Where's my icon for that?

I think just thinking about looking at all of the aspects that inform how that person identifies. They might feel like this is the icon for them in one aspect and then not in another.

Trish Oxford: I just have a short thought that this has all brought to me because I know that, at some level, people might dismiss this as a small detail. I think as all people who work in the digital space, that we're trying to translate the identity of our institutions, what it's like to be there.

We have to realize that these decisions, the way we're interpreting our world, binary ways of interpreting, have really important meaning behind them. This is kind of pulling that apart and teasing that apart might seem little but very, very meaningful.

[background conversation]

Sarita Hernandez: Also, I said before, using these non gendered, race or abled user icons are helpful. Even allowing people to personalize their own is also another helpful way because we don't live in a neutral world. That also could be another option too.

Sina Bahram: I just wanted to echo something that Trish mentioned about a binary interpretation. When you have binary interpretations, it makes it very easy to then facilitate things like oppression and discrimination because there's a very clear other.

When you start realizing that there's a continuum of many things, whether it's ability, cognitive ability, gender, whatever the case may be, it's a lot harder, I feel, to have this discreet other.

We've noticed this a lot. I can speak personally from North Carolina with gender and bathrooms and the law they're in. It's one of those things where you have that other. It makes it really easy to then facilitate discrimination and oppression.

nikhil trivedi: I'll just share a quote from Shareef Jackson, who presented at AlterConf Chicago, which is like a social justice tech conference.

[applause]

nikhil trivedi: Quote, "When the default is white and you have options for characters of color, the default implies a preference." He was talking in the context of games and creating avatars for games and stuff.

I think it rings true for user icons in the ways in which we graphically choose to represent our users as well. Just to clarify the last three examples, the middle one is from Slack. They take an abstract version of the middle, their logo, and change it into different colors for each user who hasn't uploaded their own user icon.

The fourth one is Flickr. They have icons of different cameras. There's a smartphone camera. There's point and shoot cameras. There's old DLR cameras. Is that what they're called?

[background conversation]

nikhil trivedi: Yes. Their default is a variety of various cameras. The one on the right is from WordPress. It's a various collection of polygons in a uniform, symmetrical pattern. OK, and the next one is...I'll let fari take that one.

fari nzinga: Our next item on the checklist is also about graphic representation, in this case, looking at photos of your institution in terms of programs or advertising within the walls of your museum. Am I supposed to...?

nikhil trivedi: If you want to.

fari nzinga: The question asks, "Have you staged any photos that inaccurately reflect the diversity of your visitor ship or staff?" What I was saying earlier was that it's always wonderful to have the aspiration to have an audience, or to have a staff, or a board, or a volunteer corps, that is diverse in terms of skin color, in terms of ability, in terms of gender, and so many more aspects.

But when that's an aspiration that you're putting out there in a photograph, it sets up an expectation from the visitor's standpoint that this is in fact what they will see and feel when they arrive on site. You don't want to create opportunities for people to be disappointed, or to feel resentment, or to feel like they've been duped in some type of way. I just want to be mindful of that.

nikhil trivedi: Do you want to talk about the photo?

fari nzinga: Oh, so in the background you see a photo. Seth, raise your hand, he's in the photo. He and I were colleagues at NOMA. Most of the people in this photo are actually staff members, and we're just pretending to be customers and shopping at the gift shop.

It sets up an idea that you're going to show up to this museum and you're going to have this range of people that you might encounter while you're there, which may or may not be the case based on special programs, or the exhibitions that are put on, and so forth.

It's kind of similar to when you're applying to college as a woman, or as an immigrant, or maybe a differently abled person, or a person of color, and they set up a specific weekend for recruiting you. All of a sudden you get there and everybody is just like you.

There's this great continuum of diversity that's represented, and you really feel like you're not the only one. Then, say, you go ahead and accept. You're accepted there, and you show up, and you're like, "OK, so where is everybody? What happened? I went to the weekend. I made friends. We had all these different cultural activities. Where are those activities now? Where are those people now?"

You just don't want to set up an expectation that your institution is not able or willing to really deliver on.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: Say yes if you've heard the term "inspiration porn" before.

Audience: Yes.

Sina Bahram: OK, few folks. This is the idea of like, "Oh, my God, this person in a wheelchair did a marathon. That's so inspirational." Or, like in my case, like, "You're blind, and not dead. Therefore, you're really inspirational."

[laughter]

Sina Bahram: Whatever the case may be, right? I've got friends who have stories just up one side and down the other on this. There's a difference between embracing inclusion and anti oppression, and a true amount of diversity.

If you have a school of, for example, blind children that came to the museum and they were able to have a touch tour and everything, that's great. You should own that and really use that as a win. But at the same time, if it's just not reflective of the truth, which is I think what you were saying, and it...

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: ...yeah, that's actually a great point. You said it's a one off. If that only happens once every three years, then it's not necessarily indicative of what individuals

who identify with that image, or that story, or that podcast, will experience when they come to the institution.

Being cognizant of, I guess, two things. One, being honest, and two, not necessarily assuming that because someone is different, inspiration then immediately follows. Am I actually the next one?

[background conversation]

Trish Oxford: The next one on the checklist, can I use yours to read so I don't have to read off the...? "Have you been sure not to make businesses decisions based solely on existing analytics? Do you have a clear plan on how to measure the business decisions you've made through analytics or otherwise?"

I feel really strongly about this point, because being from a small museum with a staff of two in the communications department, and being the only one doing digital marketing, among other things, there was a lot of responsibility put on me and my department to bring results regarding attendance.

When you're limited in resources and time, and you might have heard me ask about this during the keynote, it's easy to use the tools that are power steering as far as analytics and looking at who your audiences are on your social media platforms, and who's already coming to your website, to just go ahead and hone in on those people and use them as influencers to their communities.

Then that way, and I have very real experience with this, where you hit your goal for your leadership, people are coming through the door. Before you know it, they all look exactly the same. This happens often. It's actually an accident, I think, in most cases, just because you want to do your job well and you want to hit your goals.

What I think, what I learned, and what I wanted to put into this and discuss with everyone about in this checklist is that it has to become an institutional priority. It has to be given from the director level. They have to buy in and make sure that success, and this was mentioned during the keynote discussion, looks different.

It's not always about the number of people walking in the door. That's part of making the decision and the intention before you look at the analytics, and then looking at the analytics to see if you're successful. Does anyone have anything to add on that?

[background conversation]

Sarita Hernandez: Another item we have on the checklist is, "What modes of communication do your teams use, and is that working for everyone?" I think this is a particularly really important question to ask, because I think all a lot of the times we get stuck in just talking back and forth on email.

Which can be helpful, if you are having really meaningful conversations and actually acknowledge that you're talking to another person. That that person is a person, and going through things potentially, and really wanting to build a relationship that way, I think, is helpful.

But having that awareness that these are not just your coworkers, but also, people have lives outside of work, outside of the organizations that they're working with. But also emphasizing trying to have face to face, or outside of the computer, communication.

Really talking to each other about the work that's going on, or any troubles, or, really, things that are done well that you want to talk about. I really think it's super important to meet people face to face if you can.

Or just in a closer proximity, because it really changes the conversation. Or just even integrating a meaningful conversation within email beyond like, "I hope you're doing well." I just wanted to say that. Does anyone else want to add...?

[background conversation]

Trish Oxford: I think that I can assume that most of us do a lot of our communicating across peers, as well as within our institution, via email. I think it can start to look a lot like driving, and road rage, where you sit back from your computer and you let out whatever response you have to the email.

Then it's like, "OK, I'm going to respond." It can be a very...how many times have you spent time crafting the words where it's like, "This is not...this is what I want to say, but I can't say it because it's email."

I feel like it's easy to get kind of caught in that, I can never say the word, anonymity of email. I think that this is a great point to just critique that and think about not going through just the motions of communicating that way.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: The next one is, "Is the digital project accessible to older people, younger people, people with disabilities, people without?" Oftentimes the term that's used here is universal design. I like to think of it as inclusive design.

Universal design's a little bit of an older term, and more targeted towards some disability stuff from the '60s. Inclusive design, I think, indicates that it's sort of a ongoing goal, which is really important. The things that you can do here are wide and varied but part of it is simply assuming that you're going to be wrong about the audiences that you expect.

The folks who are going to be using whatever creation you're making, whether it's going to be something like written narrative, or whether it's going to be a digital project, like an interactive, or a website, or a mobile app, they're going to have all sorts of different abilities.

Whether or not it's because of a disability, or because they're driving and shouldn't be looking at their phone, or because they happen to be on crutches because of a skiing accident, and therefore are going to be temporarily disabled for a couple of weeks, this has an impact on basically all of us.

As we get older, regardless of race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or anything along those lines, disability is one of those things, and difference in ability is one of those things, that can affect every single human.

Keeping these things in mind is beneficial from that perspective, because it's critical for someone who's not able to use it. But it's also beneficial, in an emergent effect way, to everyone. You can think of the cliché example, of course, is curb cuts.

Some of you've heard me talk about this where it's fantastic, if you're a wheelchair user, or have a mobility impairment. But it's mostly used by parents with strollers, and people with grocery carts at the grocery store, or luggage at the airport. Just realizing that these things have benefits for everybody, and they enrich the experience for everyone, is important.

The only other thing I would mention here is that by thinking of things in a more inclusive way, you oftentimes find ways of being really innovative. We hear a lot at conferences like this one, and other museum conferences, about innovation and about other terms that basically amount to the same intangible cloud of concepts.

But one of the things I've found is, when you start challenging some of the assumptions we make when doing digital creation, some real innovation tends to happen. Because it means you can't just glance at the really sexy 60" touchscreen and call it done for innovation.

Because it really isn't usable by somebody who's only three feet tall, or somebody who can't see it, etc. Thinking about inclusive design and universal design in learning during digital projects, I feel, is really important.

[background conversation]

Trish Oxford: The next one is, "Is all the writing, including curatorial content, at an accessible reading level?" I think we could do a whole session on this. There are a lot of different aspects of how to approach label writing, or any print writing, regarding what we do in museums.

But I think it's a question worth asking. There's lots of approaches. From my position as somebody in digital marketing and communicating in that sense, people always want to talk about audience. I think that can be a slippery concept, as well, for reasons that I mentioned before as far as targeting, assumptions.

It essentially leads to assumptions about who's coming and who's not coming, which goes back to the myths of those people. I think that I would say make a decision. Again,

whether it's always best if it's a leadership decision, but as a whatever role you have at your museum about what is your goal.

Then critique the writing that you're putting out there to those terms. Really think about what it is, what is the goal. Which I hope, if you're here, I'm assuming it's about access and inclusion, and trying to consider those perspectives when you are making those decisions and evaluating the writing.

[background conversation]

Trish Oxford: Did you want to add to that?

Eric Gardner: I'll say something. I think this is a really important point. Earlier in this room, when we were having the follow up conversation with Catherine, our keynote speaker, something that came up was the problem of expertise. I think it is a real problem, because museums have a lot of expertise, whether it's art museums, science museums, and that's great.

But if that expertise is communicated by incomprehensible text that people read it, and they don't have a PhD in art history, and what they really take away from that is, "This isn't for me," then that's not really a good form of expertise at all. We need to rethink what it means to have to be a repository of knowledge or information. I think that this is an area that we could do a lot better in.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: The other thing that comes to mind when we talk about reading level and cognitive disability, and people being on different places in the cognitive spectrum, is that if part of the mission is to educate and edify, it doesn't mean that you can't use terms of art and that you have to quote unquote dumb everything down.

I think there is this common impression that when we talk about reading level, it means, "Oh, we have to make everything sound dumb, or sound like non enriched, and use incredibly simple words." That's not necessarily the case.

The reality of the situation is that there are actually numerous techniques to use lower reading grade language, but to then introduce words that folks can feel empowered to go look up, or go and feel empowered to learn more about even at your institution, even during that visit.

You're able to get people to basically a better place after they're done reading, as opposed to feeling as you were saying, that, "This is not for me," or, "That this is completely inaccessible, because it's just using words of art that I don't know well."

[background conversation]

fari nzinga: I also wanted to say one thing about the language that we use. I think especially riffing off the idea of using your communications to gain people's trust, you

don't want to use too many euphemisms. You don't want to shy away from some of the uglier truths about the contexts in which you're displaying this piece of art, or this scientific discovery, or whatever it is.

I think, especially as a museum visitor of color, when I look at some of the ways in which cultures and heritages are discussed and spoken about, we really want to be very, very intentional about listening to how people talk about themselves, their own communities, their own historical memory.

Then trying to bring that into the conversation with the expertise that your museum offers around whatever the subject matter is. But I would encourage people to not euphemize and to not shy away from some of the uglier truths when you're writing about whatever it is you're exhibiting or displaying.

nikhil trivedi: In terms of grade level reading scores, there's some really easy to use tools online where you can just copy and paste a bunch of text in. It will use a bunch of different metrics to gauge what the grade level reading score is, I think, a readability score is of your text.

Someone at the National Museum publishing seminar actually took a bunch of texts from different exhibition websites of a bunch of different museums, and most of the text that he looked at was beyond high school reading level, beyond college level in some cases. If those are the entry points to our institutions, that's ridiculous. I think this is an important thing to consider.

[background conversation]

Sarita Hernandez: I also wanted to make a point about translation. When translating labels, if you have visitors who speak the language that you're translating it to, to really take their feedback. Because I have a home girl who told me that she was at this museum in Chicago and she was interning with them.

She's been speaking Spanish since she learned how to talk, that was her first language. When she approached the administrator about it, she was so resistant to my home girl's feedback. I think it's hard, when you're receiving constructive feedback, but at the same time it's really important especially when doing labels, or writing in museums, and translating that.

Because if you really are going to be open to the different audiences that come to the museum, you should really be open to hearing that feedback, especially in terms of language and translation. I wanted to make that point.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: This last one on the checklist is, "Who is not part of the design process?" I think it's really easy to get excited about moving forward on projects. nikhil opened this session with taking five minutes to just consider the topics on these checklists.

Some of them might result in other meetings, or other approaches. Some of them are going to become secondhand things that you do. But taking a moment to realize who's not part of the conversation is a really great approach.

In some design practices, one of the things that's done is personas. When you do personas, oftentimes, at least in the classical sense, they tend to be rather along these binary distinctions that we've been talking about and talking about the negative implications of. "Jane is 23 years old and she's visiting the museum because she heard about it from a friend."

You do these different personas and that helps flesh out certain ideas, which is fine. But I feel like including different abilities from a universal design point of view, including different backgrounds, whether it's ethnicity, and race, identification with gender, and then thinking about the institution, not just the particular project, when considering new design tasks is really important.

We were doing this exercise with an institution out of Chicago. One of the things that we found really interesting was that we had a room full of 30, 40, people out of the museum, split them up into groups, and had them think of all of the nonstandard personas that might visit the museum.

It started out by everyone deciding, "Wow, this really sucks." Then it led to here are some really easy wins for how we could make this better. That was only a single afternoon just thinking about the institution and little things folks could do, from across all different departments, when designing future things.

[background conversation]

nikhil trivedi: We've got maybe seven minutes here. We have a bunch of more content on the GitHub repo, including a list of more broader ideas that our group is advocating for and definitions and then the organizational checklist.

Right now, let's open it up to questions, criticisms, and whatnot. Can everyone who has a question raise their hand? I see one. Let's go for it.

Miriam Langer: Going to Erica.

Erica Gangsei: You guys, thank you so much for this. This is awesome and fascinating. I want to talk about this myth over here: "It costs too much to change." I, personally, have found that accessibility initiatives like translation or audio descriptions are often the first thing to be put on the chopping block the second budgetary reductions start.

At the same time, every time I've tried to do it on the cheap, I end up being a little bit disappointed by the results. Can we talk about just practical solutions for doing things in order to make our content more accessible to more audiences and suggestions you have for ways to pull resources?

nikhil trivedi: You're asking specifically about translation?

Erica Gangsei: I guess not just translation but any kind of accessibility affordance. I guess maybe in particular translation, but I've also had the same issue with captioning. I have been through the whole process of creating an eyes free experience with an interactive touchscreen, which basically involves re coding the entire interface.

I'm wondering, on the one hand, how we can advocate for that, and on the other hand, maybe you could just help me dispel this myth to my institution's leadership that it costs too much because often when they see those line items they freak out.

[background conversation]

Sina Bahram: Do I answer? I can go first, but others might have stuff to...There's a couple of things. From a practical point of view, I think that there's several things that came up in what you were talking about. There's usually two categories of cost associated. I'll speak to accessibility since you mentioned it.

One is doing it ahead of time in this part of the design process and the other one is doing it after the fact.

It's not a surprise or at least it shouldn't be from a logical point of view, to think that accessibility is going to cost more if it wasn't considered up front, just like how ripping up the floor and changing it from carpet to marble, is going to cost more after you've already rolled out the floor. Doing things ahead of time is definitely one way of controlling those costs.

In our experience, I would say that the difference in the cost is somewhat staggering. It can be as low as maybe only two times less expensive. I've seen it to 25 to 30 times. That starts to make a difference. \$3,000 turning into \$90,000 is a really big deal. I don't care how big your institution is that, that matters.

Doing things ahead of time and concentrating on items on this check list not only for accessibility, but inclusion in all respects, and anti oppression in all respect I think is incredibly important.

As far as practical tips, because you asked about that specifically, I would say that there are ways of institutionalizing accessibility, so that...and inclusive designs, so that everyone in the institution feels like it's part of their responsibility and part of something that you should be proud of.

We've done projects that I can talk to you a little bit offline about image description or captioning works, a little bit of crowd sourcing, and obviously you have to worry about quality and you have to worry about some management costs associated with that.

But possibly as a better route for one institution that is able to throw that kind of resource at it but not able to throw the dollar a minute or whatever rate you've negotiated with a captioning service.

As far as other practicalities go, when you're making a website just don't use the mouse and see if you can use it with the keyboard. It doesn't mean your website's accessible or that you've solved everything.

But it's a simple thing you can do that doesn't involve an accessibility consultant or any kind of online subscription, to a testing tool that you can just try. Pretend that you...put some earplugs in and go consume some of your media and you'll start noticing some of these issues clearly.

The only other thing I would say is that, realizing that this is an ongoing thing, I think is important, so that not letting the enemy be the perfect of the good, is important.

For a lot of cases, and I'll speak specifically just from a personal point of view to persons with disabilities, if the offering is absolutely nothing, and you're at least...let's say 25 percent better than zero, you're still infinitely better than zero.

I don't want to make that argument as a way of encouraging people to settle for less, but even a little bit helps. So I would encourage you to take those easy wins upfront and then build on them with other people, like minded folks in the institution to try to roll them into budgets and into other collaborative efforts down the road.

Eric Gardner: We are doing exactly what you described on some projects, so we rolled out a scene where it wasn't a budget constraint but it was a time constraint where we had to get some things out.

We knew that we were probably missing some things and accessibility. But once things quieted down, it was like, "Well, OK let's go back." We had a new staff member and we said, "Go through these things of the screen reader. Go through these things and use no mouse and let's see if there's any low hanging fruit."

Is it an ultimate accessibility solution, no, but is it an improvement? Yes, and it's something that you can probably do very soon, so I want to second that.

Sina Bahram: And engage with your community, so it doesn't necessarily need to be a formal process. Just get some practical tips and tricks from the community that you are potentially ignoring.

Going back to that who's now part of this design process, including folks from the community, and identifying those people who can bring them in and who can allow them to be part of the conversation is a big thing.

fari nzinga: Quickly, I would encourage you to try to re frame the conversation for the museum leaders to ask them, "What is it costing our museum that we do not have this group of people represented within our membership and our visitor ship?"

Sometimes, that might take a little extra work. You can go find some information about how much money are you missing out in terms of market share, what is the demographic population in which you find yourself in?

From this age to this age, these people are doing this with their money, and we are not getting any of that because of X, Y, and Z.

Another way to think about re framing the question from an anti oppression standpoint is why is it that when we are courting a donor we're able to roll out the red carpet and budget be damned, wining and dining them and we haven't even had the confirmation that they are going to donate, this is just in the hopes that they might.

So if we are going to be able to invest that type of resource into people who we are clearly seeing you are adding value to our institution, then what does it mean when we are not willing to put in the type of resources?

What are we saying to this folks, you don't add anything to our community, you don't add anything to our institution. I would think about trying to re frame it in that way and maybe use some statistics or some pretty graphics to help make your point.

nikhil trivedi: Can I get a quick show of hands and or ask a friend to raise a hand for you and say yes if other people have experienced the same challenges within their own the institutions?

Audience: Yes.

nikhil trivedi: OK. I see a lot of people agreeing. We have a few more hands up and we are right at 2:16, so I'm sorry when I fail to take any more questions, but we are going to stick around a little longer.

Feel free to get in touch with us, and if you do have more questions or concerns, please submit issues to the GitHub account. We are going to be in communication with each other and we'd love to be in communication with you all after this very moment.

Audience Member: I have a small question.

Facilitator: Do you want us to settle that to the [indecipherable 1:00:13] ?

Audience Member: Yeah, [indecipherable 1:00:15] paper. We don't have the accounts.

nikhil trivedi: It was tweeted out. You can get it on Twitter or you can just tweet us and we'll share the info with you.

Facilitator: The MCN was retweeting my tweets, so follow MCN then find after [indecipherable 1:00:32] then find their way.

[applause]

nikhil trivedi: Thank you so much.

[applause]

Sarita Hernandez: Also I want to make a quick announcement that the Forward Museum's Journal had just came out with the first issue, and is available here for a donation of 10 to 20 or for free and some call for submission fliers, so please check that out at the table on the left or your right, thank you.

[applause]

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