

# MUSEUMS & SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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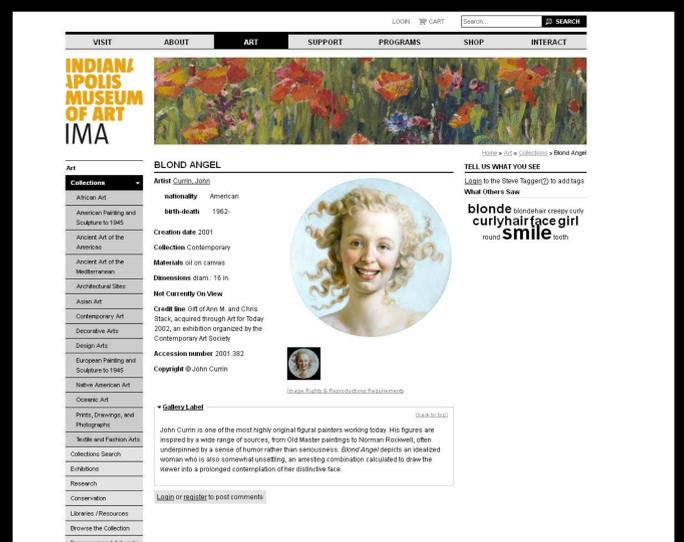


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Museums have historically been key social institutions; in the past largely a tool of the ruling classes but today accountable more to the private sectors. As such, does that mean they are responsible for forming and preserving social capital? Is this a state-driven concern (leading to civic engagement and political participation), or one driven organically by individual and communal needs? Social capital brings people together, creating and maintaining social relations, but it also involves recognizing one's place within a larger grouping. The modern museum has turned from a spectatorial to a participatory institution, partly to accommodate the demands of a participatory culture – identified by its digital youth – and partly to appear more entertaining. Museums are embracing new digital technologies that support what they perceive to be a more active and engaged visitor. Three cases below illustrate how museums facilitate the formation of social capital online. Questions that need to be asked in each case: 1) Is there interaction between museum “users” online? 2) Does this interaction also have a physical component? 3) Do these activities lead to a stronger sense of belonging to a museum community? 4) How do they affect the traditional role and practices of museums, and do they support the trust, authority, and expertise that museums still hold?

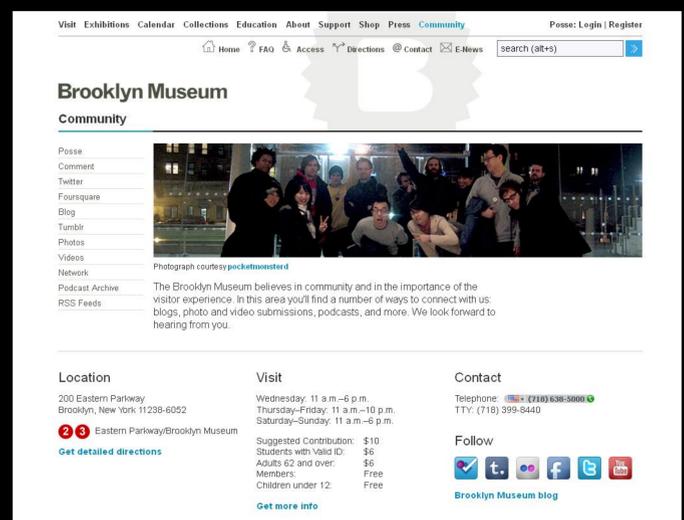
## CASE 1: Social Tagging

Folksonomic or social tagging is a means for people to “tag” objects based on denotative as well as connotative attributes, a vernacular bottom-up classification system by users rather than a formal top-down one by museum experts. The social element of tagging occurs when these “tags” or “tag clouds” are placed on museum websites for the public to search objects in online collections based on these keywords. Taggers are usually required to register and often create profiles.



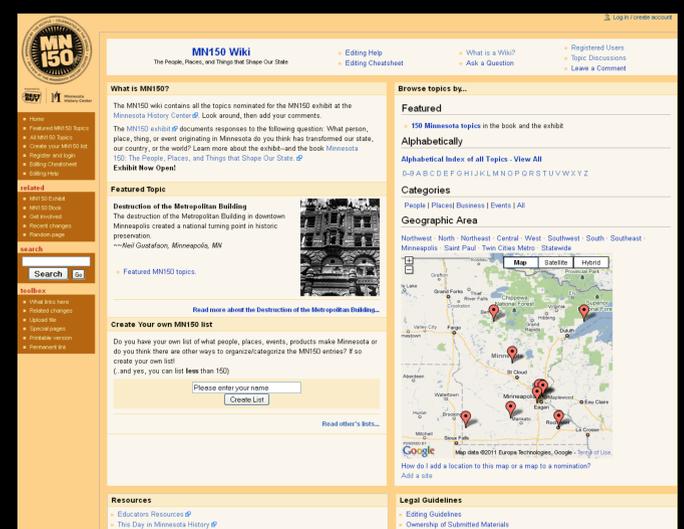
## CASE 2: Social Networking

Museums are taking advantage of popular Social Networking Sites by creating pages/accounts for their different departments and membership groups, with links from their own websites. Users participate on these sites by posting comments, uploading photos/videos, and sharing information with their peers. Users create their own profiles and interact with others that share a common interest in the museum. Some museums organize meet-ups to bring these online groups together at the museum (Brooklyn Museum's 1stfans on Meetup.com).



## CASE 3: Wikis

Pierre Lévy (1997) writes how collective intelligence can strengthen the social bond. Museums establish wikis when they need to collaborate with the public for a specific project. These wikis not only provide a significant amount of information that can be constantly updated, but they also bring people together with common interests who work collectively on the projects by providing information, personal stories, and photos/videos. Contributors are usually required to register and often create profiles.



Concern about the prevailing individualism of the digital age has raised the need to discover new motivations and opportunities for individuals to connect to society and actively participate. Michael Warner (2002) describes a public as being “an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” and Robert Asen (2004) states that “subjectivity emerges through our interactions with others.” A democratic society is based on public engagement (Robert Putnam, 2000) and awareness of belonging to a society with responsibilities. Museums continue to teach the shared values that society upholds (remnants of a universalist heritage from the Enlightenment), however, the modern museum also values socio-cultural differences and individualism. Common experience should not be confused with common culture, and museums in the digital age need to remember their obligation to support individual creative expressions as well as shared, communal practices.