

A podtour of the Museum of Modern Art in New York has been remixed by guerilla podcasters. Don't panic. This is a very good thing



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When I learned history at school no fact was obscured by opinion. My history master wrote out facts

on, say, the 1832 Reform Act, dusting us with clouds of slowly settling calcium. Then he turned to address us.

Museums used to be like that. The facts were laid out in labelled ranks in a wonderful taxonomic hierarchy. In the 1980s, building on the experiments brewed in the basement of the Science Museum and learning from American hands-on museums, we started on the road to fun. Entertainment and involvement replaced (or complemented) education and presentation. We moved from the instructive to the interactive.

But the game has changed again. The internet, iPod and high-speed wireless networks have ushered in a new world of anywhere-anytime access to information. We're now in the age of social and knowledge networks, of Wikipedia, of communities that create their own meanings. It's a more complex, interconnected world, where the digital media has become a new currency.

So far the sector's response to this has been limited. The new channels have been used to communicate old content, but there is only a slow movement beyond museum podcasting. Yet a revolution is afoot. Art Mobs in New York has already created unofficial podcast tours of the Museum of Modern Art under the

title "Remix MoMA". It is now inviting wider participation: anyone can send in their material for recreation in what is the cultural equivalent of audio-sampling. The Tate, under its director of media, Will Gompertz, has started to embrace this and is beginning to look like a portal into a wider arts world.

But we are still far from the mediated museum. In a mediated process all visitors would have a tailored individual experience. They would be able to create their own narratives, select their own meanings, make the museum's subjects truly personal. This issues a profound challenge to the idea that truth and the institution are the same thing. Compared with the academic sector, museums and galleries, with their glacial speed of development, have been relatively insulated from debate and challenge. As they become mediating institutions, more plural and more open, this will change.

A more fundamental challenge still is that these processes hold out the prospect of the "universal" museum. When the institution sees itself as facilitator across different cultural groups, the level of debate it will spark will rise dramatically. The new technologies make this a real prospect.

The idea of museums being centres of debate and builders of social capital is enticing. They might at last take a firmer place at the centre of social and cultural networks rather than always having to argue from the periphery.

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