Abstract

The use of social media and digital tools has recently been promoted by museums as a move toward creating more democratic, participatory spaces. This paper addresses the effectiveness of these digital efforts by focusing specifically on the case of the online mapping project, “Mapping Our Heritage” at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in New York City. The project is a web-based interactive map that allows visitors both to access material from the museum, and to contribute their own stories and media. Looking specifically at the youth program associated with this map (called Community Youth Action Committee – CYAC), I examine how particular ways of describing the museum may limit the participatory potential of these digital projects. I draw from the perspective of social construction for this analysis – concentrating specifically on the metaphors of ‘mapping’ and ‘heritage’, and how the museum’s conceptions of these ideas shape, constrain, and structure how the program is currently run. While project aims to create a complete, more ‘truthful’ map of Chinatown for its visitors, I argue this becomes impossible since the creation of the map shapes the very realities the participants wish to correct. Therefore, rather than trying to offer a corrective, I suggest the best way to understand the project and the museum at-large is as a social organization that is enacted through a network of conversations. Shifting back to the overall efforts of digital museum projects, I conclude by illustrating how a social constructionist perspective may allow us to reconsider the role of museums in a networked world – rather than being keepers of artifacts, they may now be understood as generators of community discourse and knowledge.