Exhibit Controversy: Can It Be Avoided? Can We Help?

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Museum exhibitions have become subjects of public controversy to an unprecedented degree over the past several years. This seems to be especially true of those exhibitions that have chosen to reinterpret recent, or fairly recent, history. Probably the most visible and widely reported of recent examples concerns the Enola Gay exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. Other examples include such diverse exhibition subjects as the opening up of the West, the role of science in American life, the impact of the work of Sigmund Freud, and the life of slaves on southern plantations. Each of these topics was interpreted, or re-interpreted, by major institutions with long histories of successful exhibit development, unimpeachable credibility, and depth of scholarship second to none. But each was also the subject of public controversy.

This phenomenon deserves our close scrutiny. It can, I believe, tell us something important about the way many modern history exhibitions are planned and developed and about the way at least certain elements of the public often respond to those exhibitions. The role of evaluation studies in the development of such exhibitions will also be examined.

When public controversy occurs, a fairly predictable response has been forthcoming from both within and without the museum community, but especially from those who are normally responsible for the development of such exhibits - curators and academic scholars. The banner they have been quick to raise is one that has considerable emotional appeal since it touches on two very sensitive issues -- "academic freedom" and "censorship". The cry has been that outside forces are trying to, or being allowed to, interfere with the integrity and scholarship of those responsible for these exhibitions.

One rather dramatic example of this kind of response came from a member of the Smithsonian's Exhibition Advisory Board in connection with the Enola Gay controversy: "... we have allowed the arrogance and

ignorance of members of Congress -- acting as if they were commissars in a totalitarian state -- to threaten a public institution, in effect, to press for the regulation of public memory." (Linenthal, 1995). Emotional statements of this sort are, I think, counterproductive and can only damage the credibility of the entire museum community. They certainly do not represent the kind of measured response that could possibly lead to a resolution of the problem.

What might be done, in the development of an exhibition that has the potential for controversy, to avoid this kind of acrimony? My thoughts on this subject were focused and enriched in a rather accidental way. Because I happened to be in the right place at the right time, I was invited to attend the Moscow opening of an exhibition called "Prisoners of War: Soviet Prisoners in Germany - German Prisoners in the Soviet Union" that was originally prepared in Germany by the German post-war history museum in Bonn, the *Haus der Geschichte.*

When I heard who had developed the exhibition, its subject matter, and where it was opening, I immediately thought to myself, "Another Enola Gay, only worse!". One could hardly imagine a more controversial subject than this, as anyone even marginally familiar with World War II history will recognize. The enmity between these two countries was of historic proportions, and the treatment of each others' prisoners of war nothing short of barbaric. That a museum in Germany could prepare an exhibit on this subject that would be accepted both in Germany and in Russia seemed remote indeed. Yet, that is precisely what took place. Having a chance not only to observe the exhibition closely, with an English translation of the text to help me, but also to talk to its German developers and their Russian counterparts, gave me insights into how this achievement was able to be realized.[1]

In thinking about this experience, five ideas keep occurring to me that seemed to capture what it was that enabled the developers to avoid official or public criticism in either Germany or Russia. These ideas are "captured" by the following terms: *Balance, Objectivity, Non-confrontational, Non-dogmatic,* and *Conditional.* While somewhat overlapping, these notions seemed to me to reflect the philosophy and way of thinking that guided those who prepared this exhibition.

Balance. This was achieved both conceptually and physically by treating each sub-area within the exhibition as it was experienced by both German and Russian prisoners, and doing so on opposite sides of the central pathway that ran throughout the exhibit space. Using a distinctive

color for each nation also helped to keep visitors aware of which one they were looking at. Each subject (e.g., camp living conditions) was thus treated twice and given approximately equal amounts of space on both sides of the central aisle.

Objectivity. This is, of course, a goal that is never fully realized since we all work from our own (largely hidden) set of preconceived ideas. It was at least earnestly sought after by using a wide variety of sources of expertise in collecting subject matter, including historians and victims from both Russia and Germany. Speculative or politically-driven interpretations of events were avoided, as were statements that could not be supported by adequate documentation.

Non-confrontational. Emotionally charged statements were avoided, but statements of fact, even unpleasant facts, were presented without hesitation. Here are some examples from the exhibition's texts: "Germany ignores the international conventions for the protection of prisoners of war", and "According to Stalin's orders, male and female Soviet soldiers must fight until self-destruction, otherwise they are declared cowards and traitors".

Non-dogmatic and Conditional. These terms may well be at the heart of the ability of this exhibition to avoid the heat of controversy. It was clearly noted in several major text panels that the final chapters had not been written about the subject matter, and that there is a good chance that documents yet to be released by both countries may shed important new light on this period of history. In fact, the orientation panel to the exhibition is quite up-front about this, saying, in part: "This exhibition shall initiate discussions and give an impulse to further study and treatment of this subject". Also, "Exact figures are not always available".

In short, nowhere in this exhibition does one have the feeling that a particular point of view or position is being promoted, or that the "authors" of the exhibition are speaking *ex cathedra*. The doors of discovery are still open; further dialogue is not only expected, it is encouraged.

I believe that these principles are often violated in many contemporary history exhibitions, where an authoritative, if not dogmatic, posture is taken without acknowledging that there are other points of view that have their own legitimacy and their own proponents. To those audience members who are not aware of this, the exhibit becomes propaganda. To those who are aware, the exhibit can become a source of anger and frustration, leading to the kinds of overt action that can result

in serious consequences for the exhibition, its developers, and its supporting institution.

A museum is not a university, an exhibit is not a book, and an exhibit developer is not a scholar sitting in an ivory tower. Unless a controversy erupts that exposes the inner workings of the exhibit development process, exhibit developers are neither accessible nor accountable to the general public for what they do or say. Books are signed, exhibits are not. Books are also challenged by other books. Exhibits are, to my knowledge, never challenged by other exhibits.

There is another important benefit that could derive from this more open and honest approach to historical interpretation - it informs the visiting public that history is not an exact, agreed-upon "science," but that it evolves as our knowledge and understanding of events evolves and as our *Zeitgeist* changes over time. Historians seldom agree with each other on almost any subject, yet they appear to present a "solid front" in the museum environment. The visiting public is thus given a false image of the historical process. The recent disclosures by the then Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in his book, *In retrospect: The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam*, are a good example of "history in process." History exhibits should embrace this characteristic so that everyone may share in the true excitement of history as storytelling (perhaps even converting a few visitors from the prevailing view that history is boring).

Where does visitor studies fit into this picture? Traditionally, exhibit evaluations have tended to emphasize the educational effectiveness of an exhibition -- "Is this subject matter understandable to the visitor?" -- rather than the believability of the exhibition -- "Is this subject matter presented in a way that is consistent with the belief system of the visitor?". I think that our exhibit evaluation methodologies can be useful in dealing with both kinds of questions. For example, finding out early-on what may or may not be controversial about a particular interpretation of a subject matter, and to whom, would be an appropriate role for front-end evaluation. It would be especially important to include any special interest groups if it is felt that they may have a unique "need to know" or command a prominent place in the subject matter domain.

Later in the development process, formative evaluation studies would be able to reveal whether or not a particular way of presenting that subject matter (hopefully based on what was learned in the front-end evaluation) has or has not been successful in avoiding or reducing controversy. If not, corrective action could be taken and the revised

materials retested. And finally, of course, the completed and installed exhibition can be tested in either a summative or remedial study to see to what extent the earlier steps did, in fact, result in a "controversy-free" exhibition with its intended audiences (with opportunities for corrective action if the answer is "no").

This is, of course, our standard exhibit evaluation model with the same basic rationale that has been applied to countless exhibitions of all kinds over the past 30 years or so. What is unique about the use of the model in this particular context is its emphasis on the potential for controversy, along with its more traditional use in determining the educational effectiveness of the exhibit.

Perhaps it would help clarify the potential role of evaluation in this arena if we made a distinction between exhibits that are intended simply to enlighten the visitor in areas in which they are ill- or mis-informed and exhibits that want to replace deeply held beliefs with contrary beliefs. A factually based exhibition on global warming or AIDS may take strong positions, even ones with which some visitors would not agree, but very few would find such exhibits to be objectionable. In point of fact, visitor studies of major exhibitions on both of these subjects showed a high level of support and acceptance from the majority of visitors, even though both exhibits contained information that was not only new but no doubt contrary to the initial beliefs of many of those same visitors. Visitors seemed to believe, correctly I think, that they were being *informed*, not *brainwashed*. Many came out of these exhibitions with new and accurate information replacing old and inaccurate information.

An example of an exhibit that created its own special kind of controversy and the "after the fact" role evaluation played, can be found in connection with the *Science in American Life* exhibition at the National Museum of American History. It was the subject of widely disseminated negative comments, but they were coming not from the general public but from certain elements within the scientific community itself. It was their strongly held and widely expressed belief that this large and well publicized exhibition was not a balanced presentation - that it dwelled far too much on the negative aspects of the impact of science on American life. Some scientists apparently feared that visitors would be unduly influenced by the negative content and argued that the script be "sanitized" of these kinds of comments; the museum's objective was to present issues and points of view that visitors may not have been familiar with but that they considered important for them to know.

Pre-testing of prototypes of elements of this exhibition showed no such negative impact on real visitors, nor did a comprehensive summative visitor evaluation of the completed exhibition reveal any problems. The summative report said, in part:

> *"We found that the 16 minutes, on average, that visitors spent in the exhibition did not change their strongly positive attitudes towards science and technology nor their opinions on the key issues presented by the exhibition. On average, there was a nearly 75% level of agreement between the opinion of visitors and the opinion of the curator on these key issues."* (Pekarik et al., 1995)

Should this exhibition have been modified to take into account the concerns of some members of the scientific community? This is a difficult question to answer. It is entirely possible that by pre testing the exhibit with representatives of that community certain adjustments could have been made that may have avoided the controversy without doing damage to the original concept of the exhibition. What we do know is that the concerns of the scientific community were not supported by the data from visitors.

The Enola Gay represents yet another kind of controversy, and one in which the potential role of visitor studies would have been put to a severe test. If, as I believe was the case with this exhibition, those responsible for its development treated their interpretation of the subject matter pretty much as a "given," it is not easy to see what value any kind of visitor study would have had. One must remember that the period in history dealt with in this exhibition was not only familiar to many of those who ultimately would have visited it, it was an intimate and emotional part of the very lives of many of them. World War II veterans and their families are not, as a group, some fringe element of fanatical hotheads, but a sizable proportion of the total population of typical US citizens who happened to share an important historical event. To take a deliberately non-traditional (I would even go so far as to say "confrontational") approach to this subject matter should have sent signals to the curatorial staff that great care must be taken to present this material in a way that would be at least considered by that audience, if not actually accepted by them. It may (should?) have occurred to them that they could not rely on the strength of their own convictions, however deeply felt and

academically based, but that they needed to get reactions to the story they wanted to tell from their potential audiences, and use that information to make whatever changes may be appropriate in order to give that story at least a high degree of credibility, if not believability.

Given the frame of mind of those who wanted to tell this particular story, none of this kind of "testing of the waters" was done. When a copy of the Enola Gay script was finally obtained by the very people who would be most likely to take serious exceptions to it, namely veterans' groups from World War II (and especially the Air Force Association), the result was predictable and inevitable. The characteristics that were noted earlier seemed to these people to be absent from the proposed presentation -- it was not balanced, it was not objective, it was confrontational and it was dogmatic rather than conditional. In addition, the exhibit was to be installed in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC as part of the 50-year celebration of the end of World War II (a venue, by the way, well known for its celebratory and commemorative, if not jingoistic, exhibit presentation style). Given this context, even the slightest intimation that the United States was wrong in using the bombs and should feel a sense of shame for the results of their use was too much to bear. At that point, several efforts to "correct" the script were futile; I believe that no amount of visitor data could have "saved" the exhibition at that point in time.

The really unfortunate part of this series of events is that there are important "non-traditional" points that need to be made about the first use of atomic weapons and the consequences of their use. Alan Friedman, Director of the New York Hall of Science expressed it to me this way:

> *"I am not at all sure myself whether that decision [to drop the atomic bombs] was right or wrong. But I do think the decision and how it was made created a turning point in our culture's relationship with technology. I believe we desperately need more public examinations of how we deal with technology, particularly on life or death issues. This exhibition could have added to that broader examination. The present smaller and blander exhibition does not."* (personal communication)

But of course, Dr. Friedman's exhibition would be a very different kind of presentation than the one originally proposed or certainly, as he

notes, the one finally produced at Air and Space. If his exhibit followed the principles outlined in this paper, it would most probably be accepted by the general public, including World War II veterans and members of Congress. Most importantly, it would present a variety of important, contrasting, but little understood notions about the role of science and technology in our society, and would encourage the visitor to examine these issues as they relate to the use of atomic weapons. And, of course, this exhibition would have front-end, formative, and summative visitor data to insure not only its acceptance by the public, but its educational effectiveness as well.

There are those who argue that avoiding controversy in contemporary history exhibitions is not a desirable goal since the result will be more bland, uninteresting and unchallenging history exhibitions. My argument is that it is possible to present controversial subject matter in exciting, interesting and challenging ways without creating a controversy. I have used the Prisoner of War exhibition to support this point. I have tried to describe those characteristics found in connection with the development of that exhibition that seemed to me to account for its ability to be successful in avoiding controversy. I have also shown the various ways exhibit evaluation studies can play an important role in this process.

My answers to the two questions posed in the title of this paper are: "Yes" and "Yes."

References

Linenthal, E. (1995). In P. Nobile (Ed.), *Judgment at the Smithsonian* (back cover). New York: Marlow & Co.

Pekarik, A., Doering, Z. & Bickford, A. (1995). *An assessment of the "Science in American Life" exhibition at the National Museum of American History.* Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, Institutional Studies Office.

Footnotes

[1] A related article in this volume by Hermann Schäfer discusses in more detail both the development and content of this exhibition.