

Scholarly Journals in Museum Studies: A Current Snapshot

John W. East

10 November 2016

Abstract

A study was made of twenty-one currently published, peer reviewed, English-language journals in museum studies. These journals were examined in terms of their mode of publication (whether online only, print and online, or print only), barriers to access (whether open access or paid access), and coverage in databases. The results demonstrate that most of the current journal literature in museum studies is available online, and it is well indexed in the discovery services of certain libraries and in Google Scholar. However there is open access to only a minority of this literature.

Introduction

In 2010 the book reviews editor of *Curator* commented on the ever-increasing volume of books being published in museum studies. He noted that "museum studies programs proliferate, publishers expand their lists to meet the demand (and new publishers turn their attention to museums), and museums themselves continue to grow in size and numbers around the world," and consequently the amount of literature on the subject was growing in tandem (Linett 2010). What is true for the book literature is equally true for the journal literature, as evidenced by the appearance of new journals, such as *The Journal of Curatorial Studies* and *Museum Worlds*.

It is twenty years since Hugh H. Genoways argued that museum professionals had "not created a body of scholarly knowledge sufficient to support a doctoral program" (1996), but there would be few today who would make such an assertion. Nonetheless, museum studies is still an emerging discipline, and students and researchers probably need more assistance to orient themselves in the literature than is the case in long-established fields of academic inquiry.

The author of the present paper was very mindful of this fact when, in 2007, he made a study of the journals then being published in museum studies. The main focus of the 2007 study was the problem of searching the journal literature to find articles on a particular subject, or by a particular author. It concluded that "the deficiencies in the databases that give access to the literature of museum studies are surely a hindrance to the profession" (East 2008). Only nine years have elapsed since that study was conducted, but during that time significant changes have occurred in the journal publishing landscape in museum studies. The increase in the volume of literature has already been noted. Just as significant is the fact that almost all of this literature is now available online.

If the journals are available online, then surely it is now easy to locate relevant literature? Certainly it is much easier than it was, but not everything which is online is easy to find when one needs it, and not everything which is online is freely available to all those who need it. Online publication of academic literature has opened up a new "digital divide" between those working in large, well-funded institutions which can afford the licence fees which permit

access to the riches of the electronic journal literature, and those on the other side of the divide, who work in smaller institutions, or on a freelance basis, and are locked out of the electronic treasure trove.

How do researchers in the field of museum studies find information? It is impossible to answer that question accurately, short of conducting a wide-ranging survey of practitioners, but we can extrapolate from the many surveys which have been conducted in other disciplines. Certainly it is clear that they can no longer rely on personal subscriptions to a small number of key journals in their field: the literature is now too widely dispersed, and at least some of it is published less formally, as reports, blog posts, media releases, conference presentations, etc. It can also be assumed that researchers find it easier to access information online, rather than by visiting a library. It is also certain that they make much use of search engines such as Google when gathering information, and there is no doubt that social media services are increasing the visibility of at least some new publications. Lastly, it goes without saying that researchers do not want to pay to access the information which they need. All these factors have implications for journals in museum studies.

With these considerations in mind, it is now timely to revisit the scholarly journal literature in museum studies and examine how accessible that literature is to the researcher, student and museum professional.

Methodology

In May 2016 a search was conducted to identify English-language journals in museum studies which are both peer reviewed and currently published.

It was decided to exclude journals in the field of museum artefact conservation. Conservation is a technical, specialist subdiscipline, with a very distinct literature. Fortunately for those working in this area, there are two free online databases which index the literature in the field. These are the *Bibliographic Database of the Conservation Information Network*, which is maintained by the Canadian Conservation Institute on behalf of its international partners, and *AATA Online*, maintained by the Getty Conservation Institute.

By focussing on peer-reviewed journals, this study excludes some of the most widely-read periodicals in museum studies. Magazines such as *Museum* (published by the American Alliance of Museums), *Muse* (published by the Canadian Museums Association), and *Museums Journal* (published by the Museums Association, UK) are invaluable publications reporting on new developments in the field. They play a role which is different from, but by no means inferior to, that of the scholarly journals in museum studies.

Having established these parameters, twenty-one relevant journals were identified (Table 1). The author apologises to the editors and contributors of any journals which meet the criteria but have been inadvertently excluded from this study.

Each journal was then examined to determine:

1. Mode of publication: whether the journal is published online only, online and in print, or in print only.
2. Barriers to access: whether the journal is open-access or available to subscribers only.

3. Coverage in databases: to identify which databases most effectively index the journal literature in museum studies. (In the case of subscription databases, this information was obtained from the catalogues of libraries which subscribe to those databases, or from online listings produced by the database vendors.)

The results are summarised in Table 1 and are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Mode of Publication

Librarians working in the university sector have for many years been observing (and sometimes deploring) a mindset that can be expressed in the aphorism, "if it isn't online, it doesn't exist." It is therefore pleasing to report that all but one of the journals surveyed are available online. This significantly increases the visibility of the articles which they publish. It also significantly increases the ease with which students, researchers and practitioners can access those articles, although this is dependent upon the barriers to access, which will be discussed in the next section.

Having said this, it is interesting to note that many of these journals continue to publish a print edition, in parallel with the online version. Generally speaking, university libraries are no longer interested in maintaining print copies of journals, if the journals are available online. This is because the print copies occupy considerable shelf space, require binding if they are to be retained permanently, and are virtually unused once the journal is available online.

In smaller institutions, such as museums, print copies are perhaps still valued as a long term archive of the journal. An online subscription to a journal does not ensure long term access, because online access is purchased for one year at a time. If the subscription is cancelled, all online access is removed, both for current and past issues.

There are no doubt individual museum professionals who still subscribe to print editions of selected journals. The print format makes for easy reading, and a printed journal issue, sitting accusingly on the desk, is harder to ignore than a new issue online. However, as already noted, the literature is now so widely dispersed that it is questionable if this is still an effective method of keeping abreast of developments in the field.

Barriers to Access

Of the twenty surveyed journals which are available online, Table 1 shows that seven (35%) are freely available on open access, and thirteen (65%) are available only to subscribers. The fact that a paid-access model is still dominant among the scholarly journals in museum studies should not cause surprise. It is the case in most disciplines that subscription journals are still considered the most prestigious, and most researchers prefer to publish in subscription journals for that reason.

To regularly produce a high-quality scholarly journal is an expensive undertaking. Professional editorial, production and distribution staff are required, and they have to be paid. Scholarly journals generate little income from advertising, so subscriptions are the main source of revenue for funding salaries and maintaining an online presence. Full credit should be given to institutions, such as the University of Leicester, which are supporting open access

journals in museum studies, but it seems likely that the open access journals will remain in the minority for the foreseeable future.

For researchers and students working in large universities, online access to subscription journals is not usually a problem, because their libraries pay large sums annually to the major publishers to ensure access. However for those working in smaller institutions (such as museums) or for freelance workers, paid access to journal articles can be a serious hindrance to research, although many public libraries have now negotiated online access for their registered users to a range of subscription journals. As a last resort, the option to access articles on a "pay per view" basis may be viable, if the number of articles required is not too large. For example, paid access to individual articles in *Curator* is available on the Wiley Online Library website for as little as US\$6 for 48 hours (on a "read only" basis).

Some of the subscription journals provide a hybrid open access model, which allows contributors to pay to have their articles made available free of charge. For example, *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* will make an article freely available online if the author pays the fairly modest fee of US\$250. The larger publishers however have much higher charges, and to make an article in *Curator* freely available, using the Wiley OnlineOpen option, the author must pay US\$3,000, a figure which is quite outside the reach of any museum professional.

It should also be noted that some of the large publishers have special arrangements to facilitate access to their journals for institutions in the developing world.

When a researcher has no access to the online version of a required journal article, it may still be possible to obtain a copy of the article through traditional inter-library loan services. This is often a slow process, and the costs involved must be met either by the researcher or by the researcher's library.

Coverage in Databases

Abstracting and Indexing Databases

In the 1980s, when most information retrieval resources moved to a digital format, a large number of discipline-based bibliographic databases appeared. These aimed to list (and sometimes summarise) new publications in the discipline, but they were not able to deliver the full text of those publications. For about twenty years, these abstracting and indexing databases were the backbone of academic information retrieval. However as major publishers began to publish their journals online, researchers found that it was more convenient (if not necessarily more effective) to identify relevant journal articles by using Internet search engines, such as Google. This led to a significant drop in the usage of abstracting and indexing databases, and some of them went out of business, while others looked for ways to make themselves more attractive to researchers.

The only bibliographic database dedicated specifically to museum studies was *BMUSE*. It was produced by the cooperation of several bodies worldwide and was hosted free online by the Canadian Heritage Information Network. *BMUSE* was a valuable resource, but it suffered from the problems inherent in any international collaboration between publicly funded bodies. It is now defunct.

One abstracting and indexing database which has managed to survive and prosper is the multidisciplinary *Web of Science*, now published by Thompson Reuters. This database is an amalgam of several long-established resources (such as the *Science Citation Index*) and it offers an innovative approach to information retrieval, based upon the indexing of citations in journal articles. As research evaluation has become such an important part of academic life in recent years, the *Web of Science* has established itself as an essential tool for the ranking of researchers and research institutions, by means of citation counting.

Selection of journals for inclusion in the *Web of Science* database is rigorous, and the journals indexed are generally regarded as leaders in their field. Until recently, only a few journals in museum studies were included in this prestigious database, but in 2015 Thomson Reuters added a new section, the *Emerging Sources Citation Index*. This is intended to provide earlier visibility for emerging journals which are being considered for permanent inclusion, and it is encouraging to note that several journals in museum studies have been selected for this new resource. As shown in Table 1, eleven of the journals sampled (just over half) are now being indexed in the *Web of Science* database.

Unfortunately *Web of Science* is a very expensive resource, and only those working in the larger universities will have access to it. However the increased indexing of journals in museum studies should be beneficial to many researchers in the discipline, because it will reveal further citations to their publications, and so boost the bibliometric ranking of the cited researchers.

Aggregator Databases

As journals moved online, some abstracting and indexing databases transformed themselves into "aggregator databases." These are databases which include the full text of at least some of the journals which they index. The database vendor obtains this content under licence from the journal publishers, and effectively repackages and on-sells it. For the journal publishers this produces additional revenue and also raises the visibility of their journals. However the journal publishers normally seek to maintain their own websites as the primary publication platform for their journals, so they impose restrictions on the content which they supply to the aggregators: typically the aggregator database will not contain the most recent journal issues.

In museum studies, the most significant aggregator database is *Art Source*, produced by Ebsco Information Services. This database is available in hundreds of university libraries worldwide, and also in a few large museum libraries and public libraries. As can be seen from Table 1, six of the journals surveyed are available in full text in the *Art Source* database. However in the case of four of those journals there is a delay of twelve months before the publishers release content to *Art Source*.

Library Discovery Services

Over the past five years, many large research libraries have introduced "discovery services," a new technology which has made it much easier to search library collections, and especially online collections. These discovery services are massive indexes of information resources, each compiled for the collection of a specific library. One of the ways in which the index is generated is by "ingesting" the full text of the electronic journals to which the library currently has access, thus creating a very detailed index of all those journal articles, and an index that is tailored to the collection of the individual library.

It is important to note that most of these library discovery services can be freely searched by anyone who has access to the web. Any researcher can interrogate the discovery service of a particular library to see what journal articles (and other materials) are available in that library's resources. The bibliographic details of interesting references can then be noted and obtained from the researcher's local library, or elsewhere.

Because each library's discovery service is specific to that library's collection, it follows that the discovery services of libraries at universities with strong programs in museum studies are likely to be good sources of references to journal articles in museum studies. Examples of university libraries which have both strong collections in museum studies, and freely accessible discovery services, are Boston University Libraries (USA), University of Leicester Library (UK), and University of Sydney Library (Australia).

Library discovery services are very effective at locating journal articles published online by the major publishers. However their coverage of the open access journal literature is more limited.

Google Scholar

Google Scholar is an offshoot of the web's most popular search engine. It is a database of scholarly content available on the web, whether on an open access or a paid access basis. Google has special arrangements with many of the large online publishers which permits Google Scholar to "harvest" content from the websites of those publishers and create a full-text database which can then be interrogated by any researcher. Of course the full text of the publications will only be available to researchers at institutions that have subscriptions with the relevant publishers. The Google Scholar database resembles the library discovery services already discussed, but it is more up to date, more comprehensive, and has better coverage of open access material.

Table 1 shows that fifteen of the journals surveyed are indexed in Google Scholar. It is necessary to explain what is meant by saying that a journal is "indexed in Google Scholar." The Google Scholar database is constructed by obtaining references from many sources, and often those references are just brief citations. For the purposes of the present study, journals are said to be "indexed in Google Scholar" if the journal is published online at a website which is regularly harvested by Google Scholar.

Google Scholar is now widely used by researchers in all disciplines to identify relevant literature. Large journal publishers are well aware how important it is that their content be easily and quickly indexed in Google Scholar. These publishers employ staff specialists who work on "search-engine optimisation," and ensure that online articles are tagged with appropriate metadata to ensure that they will be easily indexed and retrieved by Google Scholar.

It can be seen from Table 1 that most of the paid access journals are indexed in Google Scholar. A couple of paid access titles from smaller publishers are not indexed, presumably because those publishers lack sophistication in the area of search engine optimisation. Table 1 also shows that at least some of the open access journals are also indexed in Google Scholar. The open access journals which are not indexed in Google Scholar are probably also suffering from ignorance of search engine optimisation procedures.

It should be clear, both from the preceding discussion and from the data in Table 1, that Google Scholar is now the best single database for searching scholarly journals in museum studies. However retrieving relevant material from such a large database is always a challenge, even though Google Scholar employs highly sophisticated search algorithms. Serious researchers would do well to acquaint themselves with the Advanced Search options in Google Scholar. And when relevant references are retrieved, check to see if there is a "Cited by" link at the bottom of the record. If so, click on it to find other publications which have cited this reference. Those other publications may well be of interest.

University staff and students should go to the Google Scholar Settings and click on the Library Links to see if they can set up links to facilitate access to the content to which their own library subscribes. For other researchers, access to the full text of subscription resources remains problematic, although Google Scholar is very efficient at locating alternative open access sources on e-print servers and elsewhere.

Conclusion

This study has examined the scholarly journals which are devoted specifically to museum studies, but of course articles on museum theory and practice are also published in scholarly journals in other disciplines, such as education, heritage studies, fine art, anthropology and natural history. There is now a substantial journal literature in museum studies, and most of it is available online. By and large, this literature is well indexed in library discovery services and even more so in Google Scholar, although there are some smaller publishers who need to work with Google to ensure that their content is indexed.

However it has to be emphasised that there are barriers preventing many of those working in the museum field from accessing much of this journal literature. The open access journals in museum studies are a laudable initiative, but they are still in a minority. The problem of accessing content in subscription journals remains.

And what of the future? Today the continuing relevance of the scholarly journal is much debated. The system of peer review is either lauded as an essential gatekeeper function, or lambasted as an expensive hindrance to the dissemination of research findings. The very identity of the journals seems imperilled, as researchers use search engines to retrieve individual articles in PDF format, disembodied from their parent journals. It is no wonder that younger researchers, who have never seen a printed journal, struggle with bibliographic referencing conventions which were designed to locate printed journal articles in bound volumes.

Nonetheless, new journals continue to appear, and some researchers still find it useful to set up alerts to be advised of all new articles published in specific journals. This suggests that these journals still have an individual identity, and still have a core body of collaborators and readers. As long as there are ideas too interesting and too complex to be reduced to 140 characters, we will need a medium which allows us to exchange and debate those ideas. The social media phenomenon has taught us that in a vast, dispersed, online world people still yearn to create communities. Can our scholarly journals evolve to form the focus and mouthpiece of new online research communities?

Table 1. Selected characteristics of scholarly journals in museum studies

Title and Publisher	Mode of Publication	Barriers to Access	Database Coverage
<i>Collections</i> (Rowman and Littlefield)	Online & print	Paid access	
<i>Curator</i> (Wiley)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source; Web of Science
<i>Exhibition</i> (National Association for Museum Education, US)	Online (but not current issues) & print	Open access (but not current issues)	
<i>International Journal of the Inclusive Museum</i> (International Institute for the Inclusive Museum)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source
<i>Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies</i> (University College London)	Online only	Open access	Google Scholar; Web of Science
<i>Journal of Curatorial Studies</i> (Intellect)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source; Web of Science
<i>Journal of Education in Museums</i> (Group for Education in Museums, UK)	Print only	Not online	
<i>Journal of Museum Education</i> (Routledge)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source; Web of Science
<i>Journal of Museum Studies</i> (University of Oklahoma)	Online only	Open access	
<i>Journal of the History of Collections</i> (Oxford University Press)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Web of Science
<i>Museological Review</i> (University of Leicester, UK)	Online only	Open access	Google Scholar
<i>Museum and Society</i> (University of Leicester, UK)	Online only	Open access	

<i>Museum Anthropology</i> (American Anthropological Association)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source; Web of Science
<i>Museum Anthropology Review</i> (Indiana University)	Online only	Open access	Google Scholar
<i>Museum History Journal</i> (Routledge)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Web of Science
<i>Museum International</i> (International Council of Museums)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Web of Science
<i>Museum Management and Curatorship</i> (Routledge)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Web of Science
<i>Museum Worlds</i> (Berghahn)	Online & print	Paid access	
<i>Museums and Social Issues</i> (Routledge)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Art Source; Web of Science
<i>Science Museum Group Journal</i> (Science Museum, London)	Online only	Open access	Google Scholar
<i>Visitor Studies</i> (Routledge)	Online & print	Paid access	Google Scholar; Web of Science

References

East, J. W. 2008. Searching the museum studies journal literature. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 51 (3): 313–319.

Genoways, H. H. 1996. Museum studies programs are not prepared for the Ph.D. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 39 (1): 6–11.

Linett, P. 2010. Books: A note to my successor—some thoughts on the problems and possibilities of museum books. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53 (1): 11–19.