CIVICS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND MUSEUMS, PART 3:

A 2023 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

"I think the existence of museums encourage learning, but I'm struggling with the connection to civics because I don't think it's not our purpose to promote an agenda."

Language. It is so tricky.

The words we use may have dictionary meanings, but the meaning we make of them is personal and varies in ways that matter deeply. Instead, different organizations and audiences use different words to describe the same ideas in ways that have others perplexed.

And that makes it so much harder to have effective conversations.

Case in point:
Civics and our Civil Society.

When we developed the 2023 Annual Survey of Museum Goers, we chose "civic participation" as a theme that cutting off a couple of great rows of potential data points. We felt that this topic would help us to find a space where people with widely divergent views could come together to explore important issues, such as understanding, learning, connection, and civic empowerment.

**In fact, we deliberately used language and data in the survey to underscore that we had been seeing over the past several years is written in research and in our own data that "civic" comprehension is perceived as a

desire for civic dialogue, exposure to viewpoints, and common ground.

Well ... our hopes of a more unifying theme were dashed to pieces.

For a small, but significant, segment of Museum Goers, the "civics" and "civil society" are now perceived as a "hot button" issue of political opposition, "propaganda" and the things they explicitly asked for in the survey, "understanding, learning, connection, and civic empowerment" finding common ground.

Let's back up. First of all, civics is about our responsibilities and rights as citizens, and civic society is used to describe how our society and our communities actually work.

Both of these things are almost personified and used to describe our values ... but the values can be interpreted in a diverse projection, with different backgrounds, ages, experiences, and, of course, what we are going to do with our lives. Civics is encouraging someone to vote, to be informed, to volunteer, and to express their values. Civics is not telling someone to vote for a specific party or candidate.

Because of that small but significant percentage of people that doesn't perceive the difference, and who are using the words as a proxy for terms to describe differences, we have been confusing and creates tension.

"We ended up exploring yet another topic that is fraught and hard for us as a society to talk about.

First, a quick reminder: When we combined results in the civics and civil society questions, we found about a quarter of museum-goers were resistant to this content in museums.

Attitudes about Civics and Civil Society Content in Museums (2020 estimates)

Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Agree + Strongly Agree**
14%	**11%**	**25%**

Most of the people who are conflating civics and civil society with partisanship are people in the "Anti-Civics" Museum group. And while they are only a relatively small percentage of all U.S. adults, they tend to be rather vocal, and have a platform to shift our conversations, political, and civil discourse.

"Museums should be a place where people can learn about the past and the future, be free of judgment, and be a place where people can feel welcomed and learn what to do with time. The role of a museum is to be neutral and educate and not indoctrinate us."

Does everyone feel this way?

Of course not!

Most people use "civics" and "civil society" in the same way they have been using them (though they are increasingly affected by the definition creep, as we'll see).

"Many people take certain policies because they are not part of life. Depending on their elected mission, museums can be a place for civic engagement and building a strong community. It is imperative that museums encourage civic learning and/or participation."

People are characterized as "Open" on the most likely to define the words in non-partisan ways, and have the ideas of civic empowerment and civil discourse as a priority. Open is the largest group of museum-goers, and they are the most likely to be resistant to this content. They are the most likely to be open to museums using their platform to shift our conversations to engaging in these activities, and they are the most likely to be open to trying and work museums to put their social capital behind them as a way of supporting our communities and our democracy.

More Open people sometimes even respond to the negative connotations of civics and civil society with a shrug and a "meh" and a "whatever" and a "I don't care about that right now and I'm focused on my neighbors and community members.

People in the middle of the spectrum, however, were much more complicated in their response. They have concerns.

"I think an educated populace is an important part of a democracy. Encouraging people to think and ask questions is a good thing. I think any action that could even be misinterpreted as that should be avoided. Misinterpretation can lead to negative press, reduced funding, etc., and might not be using the people who could benefit from a museum the most."

For the most part, they agree with more liberal respondents about what these terms mean, but have more three main areas of concern:

- They are concerned more likely to be misinterpreted as a way to raise good points (even if they agree with everything).
- They are much more likely to be aware of Resistant positions on civics and other topics, and they are sensitive to the controversy a museum could generate, and it is that museum goes down the civics path, in short, they fear the backlash of more Resistant people.
- They are the most likely to express frustration about the politicization and polarization of our daily lives and our society, and they are concerned that museums will be put into a position they find difficult to accomplish when so many of us are so "open to and and let's "political" topics.

"Government I want to go to museums for a respite from the world and I want every staff to be a lecture in activism. I really want to observe and relax."

A small percentage of more Open people did voice some of the same concerns as people in the middle, especially backlash from of how Resistant people might respond to civics and civil society content.

That's where the definition creep of "civics" and "civil society" raises the most concerns.

Because Resistant people are much more likely to politicize civics and civil society, and do so publicly, people who are more ambivalent or supportive of this content are noticing and adjusting. That is, the **false consensus** effect is kicking in: when people follow a perceived norm that most actually disagree with (for example, that civics is partisan indoctrination).

All of this means that, as practitioners, we are constantly scrambling to use the right words at the right times, and keep up as definition creep sets in. We can either find new words to say what we mean ... and the cycle repeats, or we can stand up for these ideas as non-partisan tools we can all benefit from, publicly rejecting the definition creep. Either way, dealing with definition creep is exhausting.

To be clear, this is a societal issue. Those who are pushing back on these ideas likely have actively been conditioned to respond defensively and negatively on the topic.

But this larger issue is deeply affecting museums:

How are we supposed to talk about climate change if encouraging people to reduce carbon is considered political action?

How are we supposed to explore the founding of this country in the lead up to the America250 commemoration if championing democracy is being called biased indoctrination?

And how are we supposed to share and welcome the experiences of all humans (and community members), including different cultures, backgrounds, perspectives and lived experiences if inclusion is weaponized to maintain exclusion?

The answer is we can't do these things without pushback. It's unavoidable.

Instead, we have to think about how we can bring the facts and the stories that may consider those facts and truth biased. That also means understanding what the pushback could be, and deciding what is non-negotiable and what should be calibrated (and how).

We are, however, committed to helping you navigate this increasingly fraught landscape as we continue to share research results and put new research in the field.

"The educational role that museums play in this critical world-making environment that is so polarized and saturated by informative facts and pundits, museums have the opportunity to be a place where carefully contextualized information is presented, theorized, and the skills to think critically and assess facts are taught. This is a better service to the public, especially to youth. Preparing our youth to be critical thinkers, questioning and not just sound asleep to either side of the political spectrum where classes and opinions are so entrenched that it is difficult to see what lies underneath to work together might help us work some societal progress."

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Data collected by Blue Lion Consulting
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