

THE MUSEUMS THAT MAKE US:

A case study



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Abstract

In 2022, the BBC's Radio 4 launched the podcast, *The Museums That Make Us*. The podcast explores local, regional, and city museums across Britain in order to answer the question "What are museums for in 2022?" In the current case study, we perceive the podcast *The Museums That Make Us* as a social agent and analyse the ways in which it constructs a narrative on British culture through the exploration of museums and engagement with the public (thus aligning with INVENT's bottom-up approach). We argue that *The Museums that Make Us* underscored three main goals achieved by the museums featured in the podcast: addressing past and current social rifts, constructing a local identity, and inspiring young and future generations. In the backdrop of a tumultuous time in the UK (Brexit, COVID-19, austerity), the podcast aimed to emphasise the importance of museums and the cultural sector in the hopes to inspire current and future British audiences.

Keywords: BBC, Museums, Education, Podcast, United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

In 2022, the BBC's Radio 4 launched a new podcast called *The Museums That Make Us*, created and hosted by art historian Neil MacGregor. In the podcast, MacGregor explored local, regional and city museums across Britain in order to answer the question "What are museums for in 2022?" The podcast, which includes 20 episodes in total, covers museums in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and focuses on great national museums alongside smaller, local ones. In each episode in the podcast, MacGregor visits one museum, and invites its staff to choose an object from their collections, which they feel best illustrates their civic role and the way they engage, or strive to relate, with the local audience.

The podcast was initiated, as its host and commissioner explain, in light of the tumultuous time the country, and its museums, are currently going through. Richard Knight, Commissioner for Radio 4, was quoted saying that museums "Find themselves on the frontline of contemporary debates about our past [...] this is a chance for Neil to help us think more deeply about the role of these important and valuable places in curating our shared history" ("Neil MacGregor explores", 2022, n.p). Similarly, host Neil MacGregor claimed that "What's going on in our museums today is at once challenging and exciting, and it can only really be understood by visiting as many as possible and finding out how they have approached what is a vital role in providing a sense of local, regional and national identity" (ibid).

In the current case study, we perceive the podcast *The Museums That Make Us* as a social agent and analyse the ways in which it constructs a narrative on British culture through the exploration of museums. Since the podcast was released this year, it tells a timely story about the UK and its cultural sector while depicting the intersection of identity, heritage and community in the past, present and the future.

This report is structured as follows: first, we introduce the method we employed in order to analyse the podcast: content analysis. Then, we provide the context of our case study. In particular, we focus on the BBC, the funding body and distributor of the podcast. Then, we introduce our research question: "What is the role of the podcast *The Museums That Make Us* as a social agent and how does it construct a British cultural identity?" The second half of the report is dedicated to analysing the podcast through five episodes which feature museums in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Later, we also examine news coverage and online discussions regarding the podcast and its reception by the audience. We then conclude our report by reflecting on the role of *The Museum that Make Us* in inviting a public discussion in regard to the importance of museums in current day Britain and the ways in which such organisations can shape current social and cultural discourse.

2. Methodology

To analyse the podcast's episodes we chose to conduct content analysis. Content analysis is a helpful method in the social sciences and is often used for the examination of cultural texts such as pictures, audio, video, and more. Through content analysis, the researcher is able to detect patterns of recurring topics and themes in a replicable and systematic way. By detecting recurring themes the researcher is able to extract emerging insights from the text (Drisko and Maschi, 2016; Stemler, 2000).

For the purpose of this case study, five episodes were sampled and analysed: *Episode 2: The Tower Museum, Derry Londonderry (Northern Ireland)*, *Episode 5: Museum & Tasglann nan Eilean (Scotland)*, *Episode 10: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton (England)*, *Episode 14: Museum of Liverpool (England)*, *Episode 20: What are museums for?* The main motivation to focus on these particular episodes was to cover the diverse cultural and social makeup of the UK, with geographical representation from Northern Ireland to Scotland and England. The museums covered in these episodes are located in different regions and cities in the UK that are not immediately considered as the cultural epicentres of the country. The last episode of the podcast was also essential for the purpose of our case study as it discussed the cultural and social role of museums in the UK in 2022 more generally.

In order to analyse the episodes, the two researchers coded the emerging themes from the episodes and then compared their coding to ensure a high inter-judge reliability. Since the codes of both researchers were similar, they then continued to compile them into broader themes, which ultimately provide the empirical backbone of this report. Alongside our interpretation of the podcast, the following report also includes direct quotes from the episodes, which allow us to support our insights.

3. Background: The BBC and Radio 4

The Museums that Make Us podcast was produced by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), the UK's oldest national broadcaster. Currently celebrating a hundred years since its establishment in 1922, the BBC is the leading public service broadcaster and one of the most well-known British brands in the world. The BBC began its path as a private radio production company and became a public corporation in 1927 under a Royal Charter (a formal grant issued by the monarch which grants and organisation independence to define its objectives and constitution and govern its own affairs).

It is commonly argued that the BBC has an influential position as a political and cultural force in British society, since its inception and until today (Carter and McKinlay, 2013; Genders, 2020; Schlesinger, 2014). Due to its ubiquity in British culture and since a substantial portion of the BBC's income comes from mandatory fee (television licence fee), it operates under consistent scrutiny and criticism. Throughout the years, the BBC has needed to produce high value cultural content, provide political commentary, and justify its financial allocations while competing with other television and radio networks in the UK (Ramsey, 2018; Robertson, 2008; Schlesinger, 2014). The BBC is, therefore, both powerful and limited: it shapes and

evaluates arts and culture but also has to produce financially successful content to account for its operation.

The BBC offers a wide range of content and services throughout the UK and around the world. In the UK, these include television channels such as BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three, and BBC Four, which provide news and current affairs commentary, as well as programmes on arts and history or scripted series. In addition, the BBC operates network radio stations, including BBC Radio 1, BBC Radio 3, and BBC Radio 4. These stations air musical broadcasts as well as “talk radio” programmes about various topics. According to Pinkerton and Dodds (2009), listening to Radio 4 is “an important daily ritual for many citizens in the United Kingdom” (p. 16). On average, 10.48 million people (19% of the population) in the UK listen to Radio 4, with 11.1 hours per week (“BBC Radio 4”, n.d).

One of the major changes the BBC has gone through recently is digitalization and the non-linear distribution of content. In recent years, as Schlesinger (2014) describes, “The BBC’s mighty online presence has established itself as the corporation’s third arm” (p. 272). For instance, the BBC iPlayer was launched in 2007. This service offers on demand content in a wide range of digital devices, such as smartphone, tablets and smart televisions. Slightly over ten years later, in 2018, the BBC replaced its iPlayer Radio with a new platform called BBC Sounds. With the new service, listeners can consume radio content, music and podcasts all in one place. The intention of BBC Sounds was to reach younger audiences and offer them a “Netflix” experience of podcasts (Berry, 2020).

Briefly reflecting on the history and role of the BBC informs the ways in which we approach and analyse *The Museums that Make Us*. The podcast draws an interesting line between the BBC’s various roles, and the ways in which it had to adjust to social, economic and digital shifts and changes. For instance, Genders (2020) claimed, “As arguably the United Kingdom’s most important cultural and arts provider, the BBC has been enmeshed in debates about how the values of the arts are measured” (p. 59). Such positionality is prevalent in *The Museums that Make Us* which focuses on providing in-depth commentary on the value of the arts in current Britain. The podcast is dedicated to evaluating the importance of museums, and perhaps offer other measurements instead of monetary, economic ones, that the BBC itself needs to provide regarding its financial endeavours. *The Museums that Make Us* is also a part of a relatively new content production, podcasts, which are created in the effort to draw new, more digital-savvy audiences. In this manner, the podcast can raise awareness among younger audiences to the importance of museums. Thus, *The Museums that Make Us* reflects the BBC’s tenets by offering quality, in-depth examination and commentary on the UK’s cultural sector, whilst debating on their merit through a relatively new medium in the BBC.

4. Research Question

Having explained about *The Museums That Make Us* and its context as a BBC-produced podcast, we use this case study in order to ask “what is the role of the podcast as a social agent and how it constructs a British cultural identity?” As explained earlier, in order to respond to this question, we sampled and analysed five episodes from the podcast and paid

particular attention to the stories they tell about British identity and British society. In order to explore the impact the podcast had, we also examined articles written about it in British media, which we will review later.

5. Description of emancipatory practices in *The Museums the Make Us*

In the following section, we review the episodes that were analysed and the themes that emerged from them. Episode 2 visits The Tower Museum at Derry Londonderry in Northern Ireland. Even before listening to the episode, its title already reflects identity and conflict. The city name in which the museum is located is a source of rifts as nationalists favour using Derry, and unionists prefer Londonderry. Thus, despite not being discussed in the actual episode, the fact that the episode uses both city names reflects taking a neutral stance, while still considering both sides of the dispute.

MacGregor opens episode 2 with a brief overview of Bloody Sunday, which occurred in the city in 1972. The events of Bloody Sunday, in which British soldiers shot and killed Roman Catholic civil rights supporters during a protest march, still linger in the city's and museum's identity to this day. The Tower Museum, MacGregor describes, depicts the history of the town in a "deliberately complex" fashion.

As part of the podcast's tradition, the museum's staff was asked to choose one item that represents the museum, a request that led to a lively discussion among the workers. Ultimately, the staff chose a shirt as its prominent artefact. The staff explains that Derry-made T-shirts are well-known across the world. The T-shirt factories in Derry have been widespread since World War Two, where almost a fifth of Northern Ireland were involved in this industry, and remain a major player in the city's economy to this day. Through a discussion about the shirt chosen by the staff, MacGregor learns about civic pride, especially in light of the bloody and tumultuous history of the city. He learns about the ways in which the city's inhabitants endured times of rifts and conflicts and kept their economy afloat. Thus, through the T-shirt, the museum's staff hope to inspire future Derry generations by showing them a significant part of their history. Through learning about their heritage, the museum hopes, youngsters today and future generations could become proud of their Northern Irish identity and, as the staff put it, "sew the future of the city".

In parallel to Episode 2, Episode 5 (Museum & Tasglann nan Eilean, Stornoway) also depicts the ways in which museums operate within historical and current political discord. Located in Scotland, the Museum & Tasglann nan Eilean, is an organisation that represents the complex national identities in the country. This episode highlights such tensions through focusing on two flags, hanging opposite each other: one is a battered Saltire (Scotland's flag), and the other is the Union flag. The flags represent the complexity of national identities in Scotland in relation to their part in the United Kingdom, demonstrating how the Scots fought on both sides of each flag. The choice of this item reflects how national institutions such as national museums are mostly expected to be politically impartial, whilst striving to present national narratives that are complex and ambiguous.

When examining English museums, we chose to focus on the Liverpool and Brighton episodes. Much like previous examples, these episodes tell the story of a museum striving to depict and encourage a local identity in light of different national, social and cultural tensions. For instance, the Museum of Liverpool's staff chose to share in the podcast the city's history of immigration of diverse populations. In order to do so, the artefact chosen by the workers was a Jewish butcher storefront. MacGregor was quite surprised by this choice and challenged the museum's decision to focus on this particular item. The staff, on their side, were happy with the host's bewilderment due to their decision and explained that that was their motivation: to surprise the listeners and the audience by telling a richer story about Liverpool's history of immigration. Despite common assumptions, not only Irish immigrants have arrived to the city in the past, but other populations as well, such as the Jewish community, which is often overlooked when thinking about the city's social makeup. By choosing the Jewish butcher storefront, the museum was able to tell a story about Liverpool which depicts it as a port city that is, and always will be, welcoming to immigrants of all kinds of backgrounds. In light of the recent exit from the European Union (Brexit), such narrative is political in nature and paints the museum and the city as a pluralistic and open haven for all.

While the Liverpool episode discusses immigration, Brighton's shares a story about another timely issue: the LGBT+ community. Much like the Liverpool episode, the one about the Royal Pavilion and Museums in Brighton provided a platform for the museum, its staff and its audience to tell the story of the city's identity. This special episode depicted an event of a lesbian wedding that took place on the museum's grounds. Since Brighton has established itself as an LGBT+ friendly city, the museum, which used to be the summer home of King George IV, also chose to highlight its queer identity for the podcast listeners. Thus, the examples of these English museums both describe how cultural venues tell a story about the city's past in order to impact its present and future. Both museums chose to highlight timely topics that still form rifts and discord in British society and campaign for them through the podcast and the items and events they chose to highlight. By doing so, as the staff of both museums claim, the venues hope to create a sense of belonging, heritage and pride in one's city.

The concluding episode of the podcast, called *What Are Museums For?* ties the narrative that was constructed throughout *The Museums That Makes Us*. In this episode, MacGregor elaborates on the podcast's main conclusions. According to the host, museums are "agents of change"; they do not only show us who we were, but also who we can be. He argues that museums make us better citizens, better informed and allow us to form a more cohesive society. Museums create a sense of belonging among their audience, while continuing to depict historical and current social rifts. For example, the episode dealing with the Scottish museums raises the awareness of the British flags, which ties together England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, a tie that is still a source of controversy.

MacGregor argues that the goals set by the museums are not possible without the participation of audiences who form together the narrative and the identity of the museum. MacGregor explains that the museums he visited were all in dialogue with the public and

invited the visitors to become “the co-creator of the display”. Without the public, museums would not be able to tell the city’s story. Furthermore, according to the host, governments and municipalities should invest in museums because of their essential role in creating a sense of identity, belonging and pride among the citizens. Museums, he explains, “tell the story of us”.

When examining the podcast's role as a social agent and the ways in which it constructs British identity, we found that *The Museums That Make Us* actively searches for tales about museums that negotiate the local identity in light of political and social turmoil in the UK. Museums such as The Tower Museum in Northern Ireland or Museum of Liverpool in England were able to discuss and make a stand regarding current, or ongoing political issues through reflecting and representing the past. In a different example, The Royal Pavilion was also able to support current LGBT+ causes by hosting a gay wedding in its grounds. Thus, the podcast explicitly and intentionally paints a complex picture of British culture and society and highlights the role of museums in forming a sense of pride, identity and belonging among the visitors and the local community.

Another important issue that is underscored in the podcast is the importance of maintaining a bottom-up approach. This outlook is maintained, according to MacGregor, through incorporating local citizens and visitors in the creation of the museum’s psyche and narrative. This approach was exemplified in the Royal Pavilion that opened its doors to host a lesbian wedding. By doing so, the museum was able to provide a striking venue and scenery for the couple, and the couple provided the museum legitimacy as a gay-friendly establishment. Such corporations, the podcast argues, are essential in maintaining museums’ role as agents of change.

6. Analysis of Impact

To examine the impact of *The Museums that Make Us* we turned to coverage the podcast received in national and local news outlets (Collins, 2022; Green, 2022; Leszkiewicz, 2022; McGinty, 2022). When depicting the podcast, reporters particularly praised the fact that the host travelled to museums outside of London (Collins, 2022; Green, 2022). Such emphasis demonstrates the public and media’s interest in exploring the cultural offerings in the country that are beyond its capital city. The podcast was also promoted by the museums and cities which MacGregor visited (“Food Museum”, n.d; Green, 2022). Such museums, which are, quite often, small and located in Britain’s periphery, were excited to being given the opportunity to promote their operation through a widely circulated podcast.

News articles written about the podcast also paid particular attention to the ways in which MacGregor ties the past, present and future when exploring British museums (Leszkiewicz, 2022; “*The Guardian* view on Museums”, 2022). In particular, *The Guardian* (2022) published an opinion piece about the role of museums, inspired by MacGregor’s podcast. In the article, it is argued that even though it is reminiscing and being nostalgic is tempting, museums cannot hang only on preserving the past. Even though there is a fear that national history will be erased, museums should also reflect on present time, as well as the future. They should

expand their role, and become an active “marker for change”. The article uses examples from *The Museums that Make Us* and commends museums that pay particular attention the educational role they play in the lives of young people in the UK. Due to their educational role, *The Guardian* opinion piece argues, the government must continue to support the cultural sector and museums in particular.

The Guardian article inspired by *The Museums that Make Us* received traction and stirred a lively debate, with 164 comments posted by readers. In the comments, readers debated the role of museums, and the importance of local museums and nostalgia versus innovation. For instance, one reader commented,

Every town should have a museum. But to look to the future is not their function. A local museum should explain the place it is in. Tell the story of its origin and development. It should accept and embrace the more questionable activities that happened and place them in context. Specifically, that the present is no longer like that and to celebrate the progress that local people have made. Above all, museums should foster an identity for their community.

Thus, even if not all commenters and readers have listened to the podcast, *The Museums that Make Us* has been impactful in inviting journalists and audiences alike to reflect on the role of museums.

Exploring the media coverage of the podcast reveals its impact in raising public debates in regard to identity, heritage, education as reflected in the British cultural sector in general, and in museums more specifically. The articles and comments point to listeners who find the podcast interesting, emotionally moving and highly relevant to the post-COVID cultural era, with consumers constantly asking themselves about the place of museums in their cultural and social life.

7. Conclusions

In this case study we examined a BBC podcast production, *The Museums that Make Us*. The podcase, which was released earlier this year, offers a timely illustration of the state of museums in the UK nowadays and the kinds of challenges they face. Because the podcast is current, as well as expansive in its geographical reach, we found it a suitable case for INVENT. When examining the podcast, we asked to explore the ways in which it functions as a social agent, which constructs, shapes and reflects the role of museums in the UK. In order to answer our research question, we sampled five episodes of the podcast, which take place in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. We analysed the episodes via a thematic analysis approach, which allowed us to highlight the main themes that emerged from the episodes.

The Museums that Make Us podcast underscored three main goals achieved by the museums that he visited: addressing past and current social rifts, constructing a local identity, and inspiring young and future generations. First, the museums MacGregor visited all dealt, in their own way, with political and social discord that occurred in their region. While depiction

such social tensions, the museums strived to construct a current local identity which reflects the history of the city or region but is also comprised of the future that could come into fruition. By doing so, museums attempted to inspire children and teens, conjure a sense of pride in their heritage and motivate them to contribute to the sustainability of their local community. The importance of museums that was proposed in the podcast indeed made an impact on the audience, as was reflected by the various opinion pieces and articles that were published following the release of the podcast.

The examination of *The Museums that Make Us* should not overlook its production company, the BBC. As reviewed earlier, the BBC is one of the major cultural bodies in the UK. Since it is partially funded by public funds and ubiquitous in every British home, the BBC is both powerful and limited at the same time. As the national broadcaster in the country, the BBC has constantly faced with public scrutiny and criticism and has been required to justify its endeavours. Therefore, the production of a podcast that attempts to articulate and define the importance of museums in the UK is not surprising. The podcast could be understood as part of a broader project to account for the crucial role of arts and culture in the UK today.

To conclude, *The Museums that Make Us*, a podcast produced by the UK's leading broadcasting organisations, is a product of its time. It was produced during time of austerity, a slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, Brexit, and a conservative party regime. In the backdrop of such a tumultuous time, the podcast aimed to emphasise the importance of museums and the cultural sector in the hopes to inspire current and future British audiences.

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