

## On-the-Ground Communications Strategies

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Photo caption: Transport for Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* arrives at LACMA; photo courtesy of LACMA

At 4a.m. on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012, a stretch of Wilshire Boulevard in downtown L.A. was swarming with people. Smartphones lit up the crowd and cheers swept through the street as a motorcade slowly made its way past the throngs of onlookers.

The boulder – a 340 ton boulder, to be exact – was in the final stretch of its journey via a modular rig 295 feet long 27 feet wide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and people were out in droves to witness it.

These people were out to see *what at what time?!*

That would be a boulder, at 4a.m.

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Incredibly, only months prior, the transportation and opening of this major outdoor artwork by Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass*, was a project fraught with tremendous controversy – particularly with regard to its \$10 million dollar budget. Comments to an October 2011 *New York Times* article<sup>1</sup> covering the technical issues surrounding the transport of the boulder included:

- *Let them eat cake*
- *10 million to move and display a rock for the sake of art! In this economy this is [an] obscene waste of money!*

As evidenced by the flood of people that came out to view the transport though, it is clear that the controversy surrounding *Levitated Mass* had, for the most part, given way to marvel and celebration.

At the 2013 CAM Conference in Santa Barbara, members of LACMA's communications team shared their experience developing strategies for navigating these shifting tides of the public's perception and understanding of *Levitated Mass* through a communications approach that incorporated traditional and modern media methods. Although art organizations have for several years recognized the importance of a multilayered communications approach, LACMA's strategy with *Levitated Mass* was particularly noteworthy because of its incredible nimbleness.

Oddly enough, small arts organizations, which often count nimbleness as a benefit afforded through their size, can be at a loss when it comes to that level of light-on-their-feet responsiveness in the realm of their communications – they simply do not have the infrastructure and resources to support such efforts. However, working with conference presenter Alex Capriotti, Director of Marketing at LACMA, to distill the strategies and lessons learned from the museum's experience with *Levitated Mass*, I aim to provide a case study outlining clear methods that can be adopted by organizations of any size to position themselves to be more adaptable in their project communications.

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<sup>1</sup> Nagourney, Adam. "How Do You Move a 340-Ton Artwork? Very Carefully." *New York Times*. October 7, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/arts/design/los-angeles-county-museum-moves-a-340-ton-rock.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/arts/design/los-angeles-county-museum-moves-a-340-ton-rock.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). March 25, 2013.

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### **Establish Methods of Intra-organization Communication**

The first step in ensuring nimble execution of any communications strategy is to establish methods of effective communication within your own organization. Having systems in place for disseminating information to all staff – whether they deal directly with communications or not – will make dealing with any bumps or shifts along the way that much easier to handle across the organization. For example, in preparing for the many variables involved with the transport of *Levitated Mass*, LACMA's communications team informed museum staff ahead of time that the best way to keep up-to-date was to follow LACMA's Twitter account. Although not a traditional method of intra-organizational communication, Twitter was in this case the fastest and most efficient means of conveying transport details that were not only interesting to *Levitated Mass* enthusiasts, but helpful for staff back at the museum fielding questions and coordinating plans based on those updates.

For smaller organizations, establishing methods of internal communication could be as simple as agreeing to stay in touch during on-the-ground situations via text, or sharing information in a daily roundup through a private message board system. The preferred system will most certainly vary from organization to organization, and in fact, is likely to vary from project to project too. The system itself does not matter, as long as it is decided well in advance, so that when your organization is knee deep in the project, everyone is on the same page and able to stay in the loop.

### **Give Social Media its Due**

The inclusion of social media as part of an overall communications strategy is a given these days, and has been for quite some time. It is surprising then, how consistently social media is given second-rate treatment, whether consciously or unconsciously. For LACMA, social media was a key resource in managing its *Levitated Mass* communications. Although a whole case study in itself could be written about effective social media use, the most pressing points to consider include:

#### **Social media as a powerful public perception management tool**

As previously mentioned, early press made it clear that *Levitated Mass* was a controversial project. There were concerns over the project budget –*\$10 million in this economy?!* – and

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whether it was going to disrupt commutes during the lengthy transport – *Really?! In L.A. traffic?!* To combat this negative public perception, LACMA’s communications team took to social media. On the museum’s YouTube channel, the team posted videos showing men and women at work in the quarry and assisting with transportation of the boulder – subtly, but effectively, conveying the message that *Levitated Mass* was contributing to the economy by providing jobs. To alleviate traffic concerns, the team applied a two-fold approach that incorporated an initial thrust of traditional outreach in which the team worked in-person to raise early awareness of the project and alleviate concerns among communities along the route, and modern media for on-the-ground communications via Twitter, which afforded the invaluable ability to provide real-time updates of the transport’s progress.

### **Don’t leave social media to interns and junior staff**

Although social media might seem like something ideally suited to younger staff, it is in reality a highly visible platform for communications, and therefore requires the attention of senior staff. For *Levitated Mass* in particular, careful framing of communications was crucial (see “Controlling Your Message” for details). Junior staff or interns unaware of the issues with which the museum was contending might not have approached social media with the thoughtfulness it required. In the hands of senior staff, social media messages were consistent and took into account both project and institutional communication needs.<sup>2</sup>

Small organizations with a lean staff may be particularly tempted to place social media management into the hands of interns. Although interns and junior staff certainly should not be excluded entirely from participation in an organization’s social media strategy, it should occur under the guidance of staff thoroughly familiar with institutional messaging and possessing a deep understanding of project particulars.

### **Additional social media tips:**

- There are a plethora of social media platforms out there, with more bubbling up into fashion every day – don’t feel you have to be a part of them all. Instead, pick one or two on which to focus your energies.

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<sup>2</sup> This isn’t to say you have to be completely staid in your social media messaging – social media is an ideal forum for colorful commentary, and a great way to show a more accessible side of your organization.

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- As a rule, do not create separate social media accounts for exhibitions or projects. Once the project is done and there aren't regular updates to post, you risk losing the audience you worked so hard to accumulate. Instead, integrate project-specific messages into your organization's existing accounts.
- If someone posts a negative comment, do not engage in an online argument. Only respond to inaccuracies.

### Controlling Your Message

From early on, *Levitated Mass* was frequently referred to as “the rock.” Although a catchy – if not always affectionate – nickname, it was not a term favored by the artist Michael Heizer. As an artwork intended to “[speak] to the expanse of art history, from ancient traditions of creating artworks from megalithic stone, to modern forms of abstract geometries and cutting-edge feats of engineering,”<sup>3</sup> the term “rock” in the eyes of the artist was a gross misrepresentation. Additionally, from LACMA's perspective, “rock” carried with it other negative implications – namely, that the piece was simply a rock, and therefore not worth of the project price tag.

Despite the fact that museum communications remained firm in their representation of *Levitated Mass* as a megalith, and further, that the megalith was itself just a component of the piece (which also incorporated a 456-foot-long slot over which the megalith would be placed), the media and public had latched on to “rock” and were not letting go. For the most part, this was not a tremendous issue – as Twitter accounts like @LACMARock, and other such channels of “rock” mania turned up, the museum took it to be an indication that their communications efforts were at least yielding positive results in terms of public enthusiasm. However, a small problem did crop up when the Local Business Association in Bixby Knolls (a neighborhood in Long Beach that was one of the final stops en route to the museum) announced that it was throwing a “Rock Party.” If the artist was not keen on referring to his work as a “rock,” a “Rock Party” surely was not the way the museum would have ideally chosen to celebrate it. However, rather than fight it, the communications team tried to use the situation to its advantage. Staff was on hand, in force, to provide a museum presence and answer questions (a process made easier by donning bright shirts printed with “ASK ME”).

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<sup>3</sup> “Levitated Mass.” Los Angeles County Museum of Art. <http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/levitated-mass>. March 26, 2013.

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Smaller organizations, while not in a position to canvas a party of 20,000+ (yes, that is how many people showed up for the “Rock Party”), can still control their messages despite “rogue” communicators throwing curve balls into the mix. As was the case with @LACMARock and the “Rock Party,” these efforts are often well-intentioned, so instead of stressing, embrace the enthusiasm. With social media and the web, this can be particularly easy. Keep on your radar the individuals and/or organizations sharing your work, and insert yourself (through comments, etc.) as necessary – usually to clarify information or share exciting updates. Not only does this build camaraderie between your organization and these entities, but it offers the chance to subtly reinforce your own message. If any in-person situations arise (it might not be on the scale of Bixby Knolls’ “Rock Party,” but it could be a community member organizing an – unofficial – offshoot event to celebrate your project/exhibition/etc.), try to be on hand in a capacity similar to LACMA’s at the “Rock Party.” If time or resources preclude this level of involvement, reach out to these individuals and offer to provide print materials – press releases, etc. – to ensure that your organization and project remain the focus as much as possible.

### **Remember to Capture Information**

Museums are already well aware of the importance in capturing information from visitors. However, when circumstances take a turn for the unexpected and staff is scrambling to keep up, information capturing can still easily fall to wayside. Although the communications team out at the “Rock Party,” did a wonderful job of engaging individuals and sharing information about the project, they did not have a plan in place for gathering e-mail addresses and other pertinent information that would enable them to retain this new audience through continued communications. To remedy the situation, the team later sent out an invitation across all its media channels announcing that everyone in specified zip codes (the areas affected by the transport of the boulder) would be given free admission to the museum the week following the opening of *Levitated Mass*. While this was a great way to re-engage this new audience, Capriotti admitted that it wasn’t the ideal scenario. Now, she says, the communications team makes a point of integrating information capturing strategies into all of their planning.

Lacking the built-in broad-base brand recognition of larger institutions, smaller organizations in particular need to keep information capturing in the forefront of their communications planning in order to build their audience. As with previous suggestions, the process need not require the latest technology, and really could be as simple as always having a clipboard at the ready with

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blank newsletter sign-up sheets. With each project, carve out time during the planning stages to assess what system might work best, and have the necessary materials waiting in the wings for those moments when plans take a sudden change of course.

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Despite best efforts, the course of communications rarely runs smooth. Using as a model LACMA's experience with *Levitated Mass* – a project riddled with variables at every turn –and translating the salient components of their strategy to a smaller scale, organizations of any size can become better equipped to not merely weather the bumps and shifts in tides that arise, but ultimately view these situations as opportunities for expanding the reach of their communications.

### About the Author/CAM Fellow



**Alison Konecki** graduated with a B.A. in Art History and English from Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y. and received an M.A. in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. While in D.C., she worked as the Development & Community Outreach Coordinator for Transformer, a non-profit alternative art space, and was Co-Founder of Knowledge Commons DC – a free, self-generating “school” designed to provide non-traditional community learning and instruction. After transplanting to the West Coast in 2012, she became the Development Associate for the FOR-SITE Foundation in San Francisco, and a Fellow with Emerging Arts Professionals/SFBA. An aspiring travel and arts writer, she is intent on experiencing as much of the world's cultural wealth as possible. She recently received a Narrative Travel Writing Award from *Transitions Abroad* for her piece “An American Girl in El Salvador.”