



TrendsWatch 2019



Center for the Future
of Museums

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Executive Summary

Each edition of the American Alliance of Museums' annual forecasting report explores five emerging trends, how they are playing out in the world, what this means for society and for museums, how museums are engaging with these issues, and how museums might respond.

TrendsWatch 2019 examines truth and trust, blockchain, decolonization, homelessness and housing insecurity, and self-care.

Truth, Trust, and Fake News

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries selected "post-truth" as the word of the year, defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The term, coined in 1992, was originally associated with political discourse, but now encompasses a broader shift in how we read, how we learn, and how we talk to each other about the world. When we can't agree on how to distinguish fact from fiction, we lose faith in experts and institutions. Indeed, trust in government, media, academia, industry, and even nonprofit organizations is at an all-time low. But even as trust declines across the board, nonprofits in general, and museums in particular, remain among the most trusted sources of information. How can museums retain and build upon this trust? How can they help society reestablish a common framework for telling fact from fiction?

Ledger de Main: How blockchain is transforming transactions

Open your news feed and you are sure to see headlines featuring the terms Bitcoin and cryptocurrency. The underlying technology—blockchain—has been around for over a decade, but in the past year there has been an explosion of experimental applications including refugee aid, educational credentialing, and provenance tracking. Because blockchain tech has the potential to transform major sectors—including finance, real estate, trade, shipping, and education—it's important that people understand what the technology is and how it may impact their lives. This chapter provides a basic explanation of what blockchain is and how it works, an overview of how it's being adopted, and an exploration of how it may affect the work of museums.

Confronting the Past: The long, hard work of decolonization

As we begin to build the 21st century, one of our most profound challenges, globally and locally, is grappling with the enduring effects of colonial practice. Decolonization is the long, slow, painful, and imperfect process of undoing some of the damage inflicted by colonial practices that remain deeply embedded in our culture, politics, and economies. Nations, organizations, and individuals are struggling with how to confront ongoing economic exploitation and dismantle the intellectual and social constructs that justified colonialism as the right and inevitable dominance of “superior” over “inferior” races. Museums, in their cultural roles of memory keeper, conscience, and healer, have an obligation to provoke reflection, rethinking, and rebalancing. Museums can help us deal with the dark side of history, not just emotionally and personally, but in a way that helps us build a just and equitable society despite our legacy of theft and violence.

Give Me Shelter: Everyone deserves a place to live

Housing insecurity is a classic “wicked problem”—a significant social or cultural challenge that’s difficult to solve for multiple reasons. We have incomplete and contradictory knowledge about effective ways to tackle the housing crisis. The potential solutions require buy-in from many players, including voters, policy makers, funders, and corporations. Housing insecurity imposes an enormous economic burden on individuals and society. And it is intertwined with other critical problems including health, education, employment, and social and economic mobility. Housing security is both a symptom and a cause of the deepening inequality of wealth, opportunity, and access that characterizes the start of the 21st century, and solving these problems will require all actors—government, industry, nonprofits, and philanthropy—to rethink their roles and responsibilities. How can cultural nonprofits play a bigger role in finding a solution? And while society collectively works to solve this wicked problem, how can cultural nonprofits ensure that people experiencing housing insecurity can exercise their right to take part in cultural life?

Take Care: Building resilience and sustainable practice

Society owes a debt to everyone who does the hard work of making the world a better place: individuals who speak up in the face of injustice, people who band together for collective action, and those who care for others in need. But that work is often exhausting, debilitating, and traumatic. Self-care—taking action to “preserve or improve one’s own health”—has long been practiced by social activists as a way of maintaining their body and souls. In the face of rising stress and stretched resources, it is more important than ever for individuals and institutions to recognize the need for setting aside time and resources for restorative practice.

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