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# Museum Audience's Texts: Toward a Contextual Conceptual Reading

Chaim Noy 

School of Communication, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

## ABSTRACT

Museum scholars and professionals agree that audiences' texts are under-researched and are often approached anecdotally. This state limits the ability to advance effective theorizing of, and interventions in, audience participation and engagement with museums. The article addresses this lacuna by promoting a contextual media-centered conceptualization of both audiences' texts and the media that elicit and mediate them. The article responds to the mediatic turn in museum studies and to the recent call for on-the-ground research of media-related museum practice. Taking comment books as a case study, the concept of response vehicles (RVs) is offered, defined as onsite institutional media, serving to elicit, record, and display audiences' texts. The study employs data-rich qualitative methods to depict the participatory affordances of two RVs in two history museums, and to analyze the texts they elicit and display. Four reading strategies ("keys"), tailored specifically to evaluate audiences texts as forms of participation, are demonstrated.

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## Introduction

Museum comment books are simultaneously mundane and fascinating artifacts. Dating back to early modern museums, comment books are the oldest audience feedback instrument in the "media ensemble" that museums offer (Drotner et al., 2019, p. 1). Defined laconically by The Cambridge Online Dictionary as books "in which people who are visiting are asked to write their name, address, and anything they would like to say about their visit,"<sup>1</sup> comment books are in fact a rich "socially situated cultural product" (Macdonald, 2005, p. 131). Comment books still serve as a common mechanism for museums to solicit feedback about exhibition content and to afford communication with audiences (Knutson, 2019, p. 103), offering, as a result, a "remarkable insight into the needs of museum visitors and their expectations of the institution" (Ross, 2017, p. 100).

The value of examining this medium is noteworthy especially in light of persisting concerns in Museum Studies – and in Visitor Studies more broadly – regarding accessing audiences and assessing their views, experiences, and forms of participation and engagement (Anderson, 2019; Macdonald, 2005). Concluding a literature review on the topic, Kirchberg and Tröndle (2012) critically note that in Museum Studies "rarely are

the experiences of museum visitors a focus of interest” (p. 436), and Rosner and Rogers (2017) add that “voices of visitors have been notably silent from scholarship about museums” (p. 31, also Kerr et al., 2017).

Despite the theoretical and practical value that the study of comment books can offer for understanding institutions and their audiences, and despite their noteworthy longevity, little systematic research has pursued this direction. Academics and professionals alike agree that comment books and similar media have been “relatively little used” (Macdonald, 2005, p. 131), are “under-analyzed” (Coffee, 2013, p. 166), and have remained “uncharted territory” (Ross, 2017, p. 100). In popular media, too, museum audience comments are presented anecdotally, as a sensation and curiosity, which further hinders a thorough conceptual understanding of their function and complexity. According to Kirchberg and Tröndle (2012), this lacuna in the research literature results from an overemphasis on theory, and because, methodologically, assessing experience is notoriously tricky (Miglietta et al., 2012, p. 91).

In response, this article promotes a conceptual toolbox in the shape of a systematic examination of museum audience’s texts, and necessarily tied to them, also of the media that elicit and mediate them. This dual conceptualization takes comment books as a case study, and yet its process and results can be fruitfully applied to other feedbacking, commenting, and participatory media. The inspirations for this conceptualization rest mainly in the mediatic turn in Museum Studies and Museum Visitor Studies, and more broadly in the media and communication tradition therein (Drotner et al., 2019; Drotner & Schröder, 2013; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 1995/2013; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2011; Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2014; Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). This body of literature views museums as primarily *institutions of mediation*, directing research to ask such questions as which, how, and to what aims are media employed institutionally, and complementarily, how they are used by their audiences – and to what purposes. All this, in the wake of the turn museums have been taking during the last decades, from information-centered institutions to audience-centered institutions, centrally pursuing audience interaction, participation, and engagement. Indeed, a media and communication studies approach accords with museums’ current *modus vivendi*, focusing on contexts and ecologies of mediatization, rather than on collection and preservation (Drotner et al., 2019).

This paradigm shift (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010), with its stress on audienceship and participation, beseeches a close examination of “opportunities for visitors to participate in the museum” (Bandelli & Konijn, 2015, p. 133). This is viewed as key to advancing *richer and more effective theorizing of audience involvement and engagement in museums (and beyond)*. Methodologically, the shift to audience participation promotes research that examines “media-related museum practice *on the ground*” (Drotner et al., 2019, p. 1, my emphasis), benefitting the advantages of using nonintrusive, empirically-rich qualitative data collection methods.

### **Comment books as response vehicles (RVs)**

Attending to the proliferation of onsite media in museums calls for a few distinctions, and I therefore open with a brief terminological clarification that is aimed at a broader

conceptual focus. Consider a handful of terms currently used interchangeably by museum professionals, scholars, and cultural observers to address comment books: comment logbooks, log, records, documents, catalogues, visitor/guest registers, genres, autograph albums, visitors' album, little books/booklets, journals, visitor books, and signing books. This multiplicity results from the manifold functions that these media serve (and have served historically), their polysemiotic nature, the differences between the institutions that employ them, and the intellectual traditions from which the terms themselves originate. The terms share two general weaknesses: they usually denote a specific object (such as a book), and relatedly, they over-emphasize the artifact, downplaying the contexts and the practices associated with its actual operation.

At the risk of exacerbating this terminological maze, I promote a conceptual framework for addressing these devices, presently termed *response vehicle* (RV). RVs are defined as *onsite institutional media which serve to elicit, record, and publicly display audiences' texts*. RVs possess four essential qualities, which underlie the kind of mediation and mediatization they accomplish:

- i. RVs are *public media*. Katriel (1997) observes that audiences engaging with RVs in fact “inscribe themselves into the museum text” (p. 71), and Macdonald (2005) adds that by using RVs audiences' comments become an “integral part of the exhibition” (p. 119). In this capacity, RVs serve in transforming audiences' texts into a public display, much in line with the museum's view of ‘publicness’. As such, questions of mediation and mediatization emerge forcefully, directing us to ask “exactly *how* the public is to be represented,” whereby, “self-representation by members of the public is a key site of struggle in the relation between contemporary public institutions and their audiences” (Thumim, 2009, p. 618, emphasis in the original). Note that not only are audiences' texts public, but so are their interactions with the RV, which allows members of the audience to read others' texts as well as to observe them interacting.
- ii. RVs are *institutional media*. This quality seems obvious enough, yet its implications are often neglected when approaching audience's texts anecdotally. Stressing the institutional dimensions of RVs, and their embeddedness in institutional infrastructures (Hetland et al., 2020), suggests that despite the seemingly spontaneous, authentic, and at times empowering character of the interactions, museums meticulously design, install, and carefully manage these media and their products. The institutional dimensions are part of the political and economic environment that museums supply, and they bear consequences on issues of agency and power-relations with respect to the museum-audience interaction (Noy & Hamo, 2019; Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). In other words, at stake here is more than museums' expertise at designing and curating displays (interactive media included), but also issues of ethics and politics concerning the museum-audience interaction (Kidd, 2018);
- iii. RVs are *documenting media*. RVs' function inevitably includes documentation processes, initially in the form of writing (pen-to-paper), and growingly also through varieties of digital and hybrid technologies and uses. Indeed, the implementation of different technologies is an interesting issue for inquiry precisely

because they present different participatory affordances (Noy, 2016), which result in different *documentary products*. This points at institutional media ideology (Gershon, 2010), whereby contents are treated differently on the basis of the value of their mediatization – by both institutions and users. Through acts of documentation, RVs serve to stabilize audiences’ texts, which can make them public (point i above), and as a result (intended or not) generate a collection of the same;

- iv. RVs as *interfaces*. The notion of *response* in the term “response vehicle” highlights the *essentially interactional* nature of these media, the textual practices they prompt, and the texts they elicit (Skulskiy, 2019). The communicative nature of audience participation calls attention to who is communicating with whom, and to what is actually being responded or reacted to. A media and communication orientation suggests that audiences are not so much commenting *on* museums, as they are responding to them, employing various types of discursive resources to “re-enter the museological process” (Macdonald, 2005, p. 131). This brings to the fore issues of both audience and media literacies.

RVs are usually employed in relation to the museum or the core exhibition as a whole, but are sometimes also employed in a more limited capacity in relation to a specific exhibition, gallery, or even artifact (Gibson, 2017; Noy, 2015b; Skydsgaard et al., 2016). This is further complicated as museums sometimes hold several RVs, simultaneously serving different aims and functions. Lastly, like other museum artifacts, RVs are offered within designated installations, which highlight their presence, and frame the meaning and function they seek to accomplish. These response installations supply the *immediate context* within which RVs operate. Hence, in what follows, I begin by describing two response installations in two museums. The aim is to illustrate a contextual approach to RVs and audience’s texts and interactions, which can help avoid a narrow textual focus, on the one hand, and a decontextualized object-centered view of media, on the other hand. Later, I turn to describe and discuss the RVs themselves, suggesting four reading strategies or “keys” for analyzing the social actions that audience’s texts perform: entitlement, addressivity, intertextuality, and multimodality.

## Two response installations: Eliciting hope; eliciting patriotism

The response installations and texts presented below are taken from two research projects that focus on museum-audience interactions in history and commemoration museums in the United States and in Israel. I first supply a brief synopsis of the museums, and then discuss the research projects and methods.

The Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM) is located in the touristic downtown of St. Petersburg, Florida. Established in 1991, the FHM is a typical medium size US Holocaust museum, whose charter is to “honor the memory of millions of innocent men, women and children who suffered or died in the Holocaust.”<sup>2</sup> The FHM has nearly 20 staff members, who serve about 30,000 visitors per year, and proclaims to be among “the largest and foremost Holocaust institutions in the country.”<sup>3</sup> The museum’s main exhibition is housed in the ground floor, portraying the roots of mediaeval European anti-Semitism,

moving chronologically from the Middle Ages to the events leading to the rise of the Nazi Party and the Holocaust. Most of the visitors I observed took about an hour to circle the core exhibition (the recommended duration of the visit).

The Ammunition Hill Museum (AHM) was established in 1974 as part of the Ammunition Hill National Memorial Site in East Jerusalem. It is located on the grounds of a historical battle that took place between the Jordanian and the Israeli armies during the 1967 War. The museum's ideological charter concerns the commemoration of the 37 Israeli soldiers who died in that battle, and more broadly, the 182 Israeli soldiers who fell in the Jerusalem Front. The AHM's narrative boasts the heroic sacrifice of the Israeli soldiers, which have led to the "liberation and unification" of the Old City of Jerusalem and the Western Wall. The museum holds a special place in Israel's symbolic landscape of ethnonational commemoration and identity, and in 1990, the Israeli Parliament formally recognized it as a National Memorial Site. The site received 25,000 visitors in 2006 (nowadays the figures are quadruple, reaching 100,000).

My research in these museums focuses on the museum-audience interaction. Of RVs I ask: how are they framed and what participatory affordances they possess (what activities and uses they encourage/discourage)? Of audience's texts I ask: what communicative functions and social actions they perform, and what textual practices they present? (For more detail please see Noy, 2015a, 2015b). I spent approximately three years (FHM) and six years (AHM) on and off studying these museums and their RVs, initially negotiating institutional access and securing gatekeepers' trust, and later collecting data. The literature in museum visitor studies notes the enduring insufficient use of qualitative research (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010, p. 141), and the particularly fruitful gains that methodological triangulation may hold (Macdonald, 2005, p. 123). Triangulation concerns combining methods, and more generally fruitfully juxtaposing different methodological traditions, presently: textual, observational, and interview-based methods.

Qualitative data collection consists of documenting audience's texts, observing audiences' interactions with the RVs, and conducting interviews with museum staff. All the comments in the books that were publicly available when my research commenced, were digitally documented and fully transcribed (2,749 and 1,032 texts at FHM and AHM, with average lengths of 16.3 and 16 words per text, respectively. Cf. findings by Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2003, p. 38, who report average of 13 words per text). In both museums, a third of the visitors I observed read the book, and about 10% of those also wrote in them (cf. Macdonald, 2005, who reports on 20%). That said, estimating the number of visitors who engage RVs is tricky for a few reasons: a. school groups are often rushed through museums with no opportunity to stop by the RVs (they are counted as visitors but are not afforded an opportunity to engage), b. most of the texts are written jointly (several visitors produce a single text), and c. depending on their physical location, not all visitors arrive at the RV (at the AHM, for instance, many visitors did not reach the inner hall where the RV was offered).

In each museum I observed dozens of interactions of visitors with the RV, which I noted in field-booklets. Observations are ideal for understanding processes (over products), and are especially beneficial for observing activities that are *not reflected in the texts* (on qualitative research in museums see Eardley et al., 2018; Noy, 2011). Interviews with museum staff were conducted in order to gain insights into their views on museum-audience interactions, and their considerations when employing various RVs (media ideologies).



Figure 1. Response installation and RV at the FHM.

### ***“Be the change that you want to see in the world”: Hope at the Florida Holocaust Museum***

The response installation at the FHM is positioned near the museum’s exit. This is a typical location, where texts and interactions serve as “audience-contributed gestures of closure” (Katriel, 1997, p. 71). The installation is positioned in a narrow corridor, where visitors *must pass*, and thus while reading it is optional and writing is voluntary, the RV itself can hardly be unnoticed. Furthermore, the FHM RV is a book, and because it is usually open, visitors are bound to see the texts therein (Figure 1). The response installation includes a pedestal on which the book is offered, and where a sign addresses visitors directly: “Tell us about your Museum experience!” and in smaller letters: “Thank you for your visit.” This institutional text specifies an instruction that is followed by a thank you token (which also serves to symbolically mark the end of the visit). The sign clarifies the purpose of the RV, which it does in part because RVs are not familiar to all museum audiences, and in part because the museum seeks to frame and manage how the RV is used and what messages it should communicate—remediate. Audience members are encouraged to publicly elaborate on their personal and inner (otherwise unseen) “experiences.”

Figure 1 points at an additional component of the response installation: a special wall against which the RV’s pedestal and the book are positioned. The wall presents engraved moral sayings such as, “Be the change that you want to see in the world. Mahatma Gandhi.”<sup>4</sup> A quote by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is displayed nearby: “For the Dead



**Figure 2.** Response installation and RV at Ammunition Hill Museum.

and the Living We Must Bear Witness.” In this way, visitors who stand by the RV must literally face the “writing on the wall,” where famous inspirational quotes supply a context (con-text), that is meant to inspire and inform ideas and formulas for their texts. The engraved idioms are short and optimistic, and convey hopeful moral messages, sometimes revolving around memory and the need to remember (or not forget). They reflect recent trends in Holocaust commemoration, which emphasize hope and agency. I stress that audience participation is framed morally (“We Must Bear Witness”), suggesting that at stake are not only the contents of the texts that they will compose, but also the *value of participation* as such (I often heard docents encourage school-age visitors to write in the book: “Don’t worry, we don’t check your spelling! It’s not school. We just want you to write” – here, too, value lies in participation as such).

### ***Contextualizing patriotism and commemoration at AHM***

Contrary to the location of the response installation at the AHM, the response installation at the AHM is not positioned at or near the museum’s exit. Instead, it occupies the

*symbolically opposite location* – at one of the museum’s innermost and “sacred” commemoration halls, near the flickering eternal flame and the Golden Wall of Commemoration (where names of fallen soldiers are engraved in gold). In this intensely emotional and ideological space, the installation is the main object (Figure 2). The installation is a monument-like structure, made of black steel, which also has a sign that addresses visitors directly: “Students, Soldiers, and Visitors. Please indicate your impressions in a concise and respectful manner. Kindly, regard the guest book in a manner appropriate to the Ammunition Hill Site.” The sign requests visitors to engage, as it elaborates on what should be communicated (“impressions”) and how (“concise and respectful”). As with the FHM, this too is a site of museum audience participation and literacy. Note that through the sign the museum also seeks to secure the connection between audiences’ texts and the exhibition.

Framed in this way, the RV is not set as an interface that invites closure, but is part and parcel of the political apparatus of mobilizing national commemoration and patriotism. Accordingly, the RV is ornate: it holds one-hundred thick parchment (not paper) pages, each of which displays a column of symbols (Figure 3). The symbols are arranged hierarchically – the symbol of the State, of the Capital (Jerusalem), of the Israeli Defense Forces, and the Ammunition Hill logo. The symbols echo the amalgam of national-cum-military symbolism profusely displayed throughout the museum, and specifically the large flags that are hung above the RV (Figure 2). In this way, the response installation is part of the museum’s ideological design, and the connection between the two is accomplished not only by its location, but also symbolically – *from inside and within its pages*. The printed symbols also result in that anything written in the book, is already juxtaposed to these national motifs. (Consider how, in Figure 3, audience’s texts avoid writing over the imprinted symbols).



Figure 3. Ammunition Hill ornate RV (comment book).

In relation to the different locations of the response installations and RVs at the two museums, Stamou and Paraskevopoulos's (2003) findings are revealing. These authors examined two RVs in an eco-tourist reserve in Greece, one located near the entrance, and another located inside near a predator feeding attraction. The findings show that significantly different types of texts were elicited in the different locations: more touristic-themed texts near the entrance, and more ecologically-themed (ideological) texts near the feeding location; the lengths of the texts differed as well, as did the visitors who wrote them (the different response installations were accessed by different visitors). The point is that even within a single site, the physical/spatial and textual/symbolic framing of RVs bear observable consequences on what is written – indeed, what is writable – on what type of engagement is pursued, and even on who is participating.

### **“If I could see you I would have told you this”: Four keys for reading audience's texts**

Moving from contexts to texts and from museums to audiences, I turn to offer four interpretive strategies or “keys” for reading audiences' texts. The keys encompass specifically tailored qualitative textual tools to appreciate these texts and the social actions of participation and engagement that they perform. I stress that my focus is on presenting an analytical framework (a toolbox), and not on an analysis of the texts as pertaining to themes associated specifically with these museums (such as discourses of national identity and Holocaust commemoration. But see Noy 2015a, 2017, 2018).

### ***Signatures and entitlements***

Signatures are the *basic currency* that RVs manage. Signatures are the most rudimentary and essential tokens of participation that audiences can produce and lastingly “leave” during the visit. Signatures are taken to be physically (indexically) connected to their signers – what anthropologist Hull (2003, p. 295) calls the “inimitable biomechanical act of signing” – thus possessing a special value as an authentic personal contribution and evidence of audience's actual presence onsite. This form of presencing echoes museums' own notion of authenticity, where physical traces of past activities are widely displayed. Additionally, signatures express a basic and minimal form of engagement with, and support of, the museum. In my interviews and observations, several accounts were suggested for why some audience members chose to leave only signatures (with no accompanying text), including having no time to elaborate (at the end of the visit they are rushing to the next point in their itinerary), issues of literacy (they know how to write their full names but not more elaborate texts), signing collectively as a group, and seeking to show support – yet one that is minimal and confined.

On several occasions I observed family members adding their signatures to texts that their relatives wrote, sometimes actually dictating the texts (so another, literate, family member wrote it, and they supplied the signature). Similarly, I observed multiple occasions where teachers wrote a text and instructed the class to sign it individually.

Signing RVs entails a tripartite convention, indicating full name, place of living, and date of visit. This convention is richer than might initially seem, and should not be

seen as nominal: signatures index gender, race, ethnicity, heritage, and other visitor characteristics. For instance, in Findlen's (1994) analysis of early European museum RVs, almost all the signatures index male patrons, which sheds light on women's historical restricted travel opportunities. Abaidoo and Takyiakwaa (2019) focus on race and nationality in sorting audience's texts at a dark tourism museum in Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. In my work, issues of ethnicity and masculinity in Jewish-Israeli society and military play out in audience's signing practices (Noy, 2015a).

As conventions go, signing allows improvisation and manipulation. I noted several such variations at AHM, which were written by right-wing Jewish settlers as a matter of political protest. Disputing Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip (in 2005), a few signatures indicated not one's current place of residence, but *past places* which were not anymore under Israel's sovereignty: "former Gush Katif" (which is a name of a settlement that was relocated/evicted), or "Hebron – currently Kiryat Arba" (Kiryat Arba is the politically preferred term for the city of Hebron, used by Jewish right-wing settlers). These variations show that audiences recognize the *mnemonic and performative power* that signatures possess. To rephrase, writing one's name or place of living carries not only representational meanings, but also performative ones: it re-instantiates names, dates, and places as manifest locations that are part of a collective, national/historical topography – whether real, imagined, or remembered.

At the FHM, variations are not manipulative or blatantly political. Holocaust survivors and historical witnesses interestingly wrote names of places associated with World War II and/or birth dates near, or instead of, the date of their visit: "Arnold [surname] b. 5/12/1925 in Nuremberg." It seems that for these special audiences at *this* specific museum, where they were born or where they spent the War is part of their identity as performed in signing. Such is the case when audiences add ethnic identifiers to the signatures, such as "A. Gallippo – Fellow Jew" (also: "proud Jew," "also a Jew" and "Jewish"). Another notable variation entails signatures that index *institutional association* that the visitors deem relevant. These signatures do not mention where their authors live, but instead where they work or what office they hold: "Dr. [surname]/Director of the state archives/of Salzburg, Historian and/teacher of the University/of Salzburg, Austria," and "Michel [surname], secret.-general of the/Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance/in Mechelen, Belgium." Through improvising on the signing convention – that is, by not signing with one's name and/or place of residence and/or time of visit – these audience members position themselves and engage the museum differently than "ordinary" members.

As such, variations on signing conventions shed light on another function that signatures accomplish, concerning *audience entitlements for participation*. Norms of signing – knowing and abiding by them, or alternatively improvising on them – are audiences' means of publicly marking their relation to the museum and forms of participation therein. If, for the general audience, "speaking from experience is a communicative entitlement in its own right" (Montgomery, 2001, p. 452), for different audiences in different museums, signatures are resources to distinguish themselves *apart* from the general public and establish their own special individual or group participatory entitlements and corresponding forms of engagement.

Improvising touches also on issues of privacy and anonymity. Winter's (2018) study reports that about a quarter of the interviewed visitors preferred to withhold

information about themselves. At the AHM, it was mostly Ultra-orthodox visitors who consistently avoided signing, or indeed signed fictitiously. Additionally, none of the protesting texts were signed.

Along these lines, audiences' improvisational and manipulative practices direct our attention also to texts that are disrespectful of the site. Politically protesting in a site that commemorates fallen soldiers (and does not present itself as political/dealing with conflicted issues), raises the question as to whether these visitors are using or abusing the RV. This research's findings show that explicitly disrespectful texts are *very few*: none such texts appear in the data from the FHM, and less than 1% in the data from the AHM (more on this below).

### **Addressivity**

The concept of addressivity was introduced by Bakhtin (1986) in order to capture a crucial element of communication that concerns who is/are addressed, and by whom. Addressivity structures build on an essentially dialogic and responsive view of communication, and have been studied productively in "conceptualization of audiences as publics" (Barber, 2007, p. 202). In relation to museums, Allison (2013) concludes that "museums possess addressivity," and that "individuals and publics may dialogue with them" (p. 149).

The concept of addressivity is central to RVs because they are asynchronous media, with no immediate receiver. This brings to the fore questions of mediation and mediatisation, mainly who are the audiences communicating with (or who they imagine they are), and how they mark this fact publicly. This in turn indexes how audiences understand their roles in museums, and how they perform different forms of participation and audienceship.

Consider the following typical variations in addressivity structures of audience's texts. At the FHM, nearly *all* the texts are addressed to the museum. This is marked by occasionally mentioning the word "museum" (or names of guides and docents), but mostly the museum-as-addressee is inferred in an "open addressivity" structure (Noy, 2015a, pp. 87–91). Open addressivity concerns texts where the addressees are not explicitly specified but may be inferred contextually. Consider several variations (FHM).<sup>5</sup>

- i. Thank you for sharing./My group enjoyed the museum/very much./Highlands University/Preparatory School
- ii. It couldn't have/been explained/any better. I loved it!/Now to the one/in D.C./!-Elise/[surname]/April 1, 2013
- iii. Thank you Debbie/our wonderful guide ... /A truly moving experience./2/25/13 [surname] Family
- iv. God forgive/us for we know/not what we do!

Written near the museum exit, right in front of the sign and the engraved wall, it should not come as a surprise that almost all the texts that this RV elicits address the museum explicitly (by employing terms of address) or implicitly (open addressivity). The texts establish the museum as the accountable agent for the experience visitors

had, and for the knowledge they have gained. It is therefore *the museum* who is the addressee of their appreciation and gratitude.

Texts i-ii evince an open addressivity structure, where gratitude is extended to the museum and is inferred by linking “Thank you for sharing” with “My group enjoyed the museum.” Text iii specifies an addressee, namely the guide Debbie, who stands as a metonym for the museum: she is the addressee and the institutional agent who is established as accountable for “A truly moving experience.” Text iv evinces a different type of addressivity, aimed not at the museum but at God. Relatedly, the text does not offer gratitude, but requests forgiveness, which builds on a confessed sense of bewilderment and moral wrongdoing.

At the AHM, texts present quite a different picture: the most widespread addressivity structure (63% of the texts) does *not* have the museum as its addressee (examples are originally in Hebrew).

- v. To the soldiers who have died, because of your deeds/we’re here. We’re so/proud in you/for sacrificing/you lives for our country./And if I could see/you I would have told you/this. Elijor, Maya, Shimon, Guy/and Etnaya [surname]./Israel’s 58th Independence Day.
- vi. Thank you to all the soldiers ... /Because of your deeds the People of Israel are alive./Ariel [surname]

Text v opens with an explicit address directed at the *dead historical figures*. The soldiers are heroized as righteous warriors, whose past “deeds” enable life in the present. The argument echoes the museum’s ideological narration, pointing at the veneration of the soldiers’ patriotic sacrifice. There is no mentioning of the museum or of those engaging in commemorating the past whatsoever. Rather, gratitude is *redirected* from the here-and-now of the museum/exhibition, to the then-and-there of the historical events and the figures who populate them. Such an addressivity structure establishes communication with the dead as a viable possibility, performing a causal moral connection between the mythicized past and the mundane present. The last clause, right before the signature (“if I could see you”), acknowledges the essentially mediated nature of RV communication, bemoaning the lack of direct access to the historical figures.

Text vi expands the previous text, whereby not (only) dead historical soldiers are addressed, but also ones who are alive, i.e. all soldiers or the military complex. The argument is similar, but the addressed protagonists do not occupy the realm of the past, but reside in the present. The RV emerges as a stage, an amplifier, for expressions of patriotism and national allegiance.

Infrequently, texts have *other texts*, and their authors, as their addressees. This addressivity structure implies that audiences read others’ texts before composing their own (which accords with observations; more on this below). At the AHM, several textual chains are apparent, consisting of 3–4 separate texts, each of which addresses the text before/above it, adding to it or critiquing it. In one occasion, a text written at the very bottom of the page, on which political oppositional texts were previously written, reprimands the visitors who wrote those texts: “For those who haven’t matured yet/the Israeli society needs to mature/Pay more respect to the site/that marks the unity of the nation/and not its divisiveness across/different political opinions/If not for that we wouldn’t have existed./An

impressive museum.” This text addresses the authors of the argumentative texts, depicting them in a negative light as immature and disrespectful. Their texts are seen as social actions that are dangerous because of their “divisiveness,” threatening in fact the very existence of the national Jewish collective (“we”), and running against the AHM’s message. The opening words “Pay more respect,” echo the words in the museum sign (“respectful manner”), drawing a connection between addressivity and entitlement.

Finally, consider the addressors of the examples above. Each of the texts i-v evinces a *different type of addressor*: a group (unspecified members), an individual, a family (unspecified members), an unsigned text, and again a family (specified members). This variation is meaningful both in terms of the “social space” RV offer (Simon, 2014, p. 123), and in terms of indexing different forms of participation. Consider the addressors in the unsigned text (iv): these are a generalized – collective and imagined – “we,” which is thrice repeated, likely standing as a metonym for humankind.

#### **Four circles of intertextuality**

Intertextuality concerns linkages between texts, which establish associations between different contexts. The term was introduced by Kristeva (1980), who influentially argued that texts are always and in essence mosaic, containing bits and pieces of other texts, which they reference by overt or covert means. Intertextual strategies are essential for audiences, who “must always draw on other texts [whose role] must be considered as central parts of the process” (Prior, 2004, p. 168). Intertextuality serves as a *literacy resource* for visitors, one which is specifically useful when faced with the task of quickly producing short, coherent, and relevant texts. I describe four types of “circles” of intertextuality.

The first circle of texts that serve as resources for audiences include previous texts. All the visitors I observed writing in RVs *read beforehand* texts that were written there previously (this is consistent with earlier findings: Reid, 2005, p. 679; Rosner & Rogers, 2017; Skulskiy, 2019, p. 414). When I inquired about it, visitors supplied one of two accounts: they wanted to know who was writing (who is the public they will join if they write), and they wanted to see how it is done (a question of literacy).

The second circle of texts that serve as resources for audiences are those which are displayed in the museum response installation. In fact, the *majority* of the texts at the FHM include words that appear in the museum sign, and each of the words “experience” and “thank you” appears in a fifth of all the texts (the word “museum” is just a little behind). Hence, for visitors, the sign supplies not only instructions but also an *intertextual resource* for composing replies. (This finding is not repeated in the AHM, where only few texts incorporated words from the sign, such as “impression,” perhaps because the location is more formative than the sign. But see “Pay more respect to the site” above). My observations at the FHM include instances where one visitor read out loud the inspirational quotes, while another wrote them, with some variation, in the RV. Here, again, the inspirational texts are offered as resources for onsite composition of texts.

The third circle of intertextuality includes texts that are displayed elsewhere in the museum (not in the response installation). Most of the texts in both museums’ RVs include references and sometimes direct quotations of texts that are recognizably drawn

from related discourses. At the FHM these are usually the slogans: “Never again!,” “Never forget!” (“never” is the fourth most frequent word in the book), and “I will always be a witness!.” Macdonald (2005) contends that these texts are clichés that perform “a talismanic activity that can contribute toward warding off a bad future” (p. 170). Clichés are clearly intertextual, and their employment shows that audiences know what texts they need to re-produce and that they are able to do so. At the AHM, this type of intertextuality includes quotations from mostly religious Jewish and national-Zionist sources, which affirm the *ethnonational* (Jewish) character of the site.

The fourth and last circle of intertextuality entails *importing* texts into the museum, which are not necessarily associated with its mission, and which may even not accord with it. These texts can be simply unrelated to the museum’s discourse (noise), such as “So long and thanx for all the Fish!! P.S. Still here 2.2.06” (AHM. The text is a famous goodbye quote from the book *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*). In other times intertextuality supplies resources for composing *protesting and resisting texts*: “I enjoyed very much but/My power and the strength/of my hands have produced this wealth’/where is God’s name [mentioned]?” (AHM). Here the biblical quote (Deuteronomy, 8:17) is employed to criticize the museum’s arrogance, and to reprimand the attribution of the war’s victory to military might and not to divine intervention.

### **Multimodality**

The fourth and last key concerns multimodality, or mediation that involves several channels of communication. The argument that underlies the turn to multimodality has emerged against the background of an excessive western focus on verbal expression (Jewitt, 2009; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). It propels scholars to consider non-verbal signs, and combinations of verbal and non-verbal communication. Kress (2003) observes that “language and literacy now have to be seen as partial bearers of meaning only” (p. 35), and the visual design of the message – from letters and words, to contexts – are all seen as part of a larger multi-modal meaning-making activities.

All of this is not new for museum professionals and scholars, whose appreciation of the richness of visualities and materialities of signs in museums is elementary. Yet the production of multimodal communication holds *also* for audiences, whose texts both reflect and extend the “hybrid association between text and symbol which is apparent in the museum” (Noy, 2008, p. 73). I differentiate between orthography (style of handwriting), simple visual signs (iconic emoji-like hearts and smilies) that are added to textual messages, and more elaborate drawings, which sometimes comprise the entire message. Consider that at the AHM, half(!) of the book’s spreads evince at least one drawing, usually of national symbols or weaponry. This abundance of iconic images echoes their profusion in the museum. Considerably less imagery is found in the RV in the FHM, probably because Holocaust commemoration discourses have not generated a multiplicity of simple iconic images. Most of the visual signs are small and express sympathy and compassion (hearts and smilies), or Jewish identity (Stars of David). In both museums women tend to draw more images compared to men, and the images they draw are more romantic and idealist – including flowers, hearts, clouds, and balloons, which they draw more colorfully and in more detail.

The multimodal quality of audience texts is interesting to observe when looking beyond the level of the single text, i.e. at the book page as a whole (in the case where the RV is a book. See [Figure 2](#)). The book's pages are a collage that possess texts of different orthographies, colors, and other visual features (stress, thickness, etc.). Add to this that RVs may have visual markings inside them (such as at the AHM), and anything written therein becomes, instantly and inevitably, multimodal. As sociolinguist Blommaert (2013) proposes, "it is very often the graphic shape of a text that serves as first pointer toward its genre" (p. 447), which suggests that the spreads of the RVs amount to a *visual genre*.

On multiple occasions I heard audience members discuss *visual and esthetic qualities* of the texts they saw or sought to write. Sometimes they discussed the location of their texts in the book and even on a certain page. In one memorable case, a father and his teenage son (both observant Jews from a small northern town) debated the location of the text they were coauthoring it. The son argued that it should be positioned right after the last text already written in the book ("we'll write it inside the book"), while the father insisted that it should be the first text to populate an empty page ("open a new page, a new page!"). This exchange lasted a few minutes – after which the father's argument prevailed. In other instances, male visitors asked their female companions to write the texts that they themselves authored ("your handwriting is prettier"), which in several cases were pursued as the men dictated the texts word by word, while the women were writing and signing them.

## Conclusion

Because they are short, seemingly self-evident, and easily detachable from their production context, audience's texts are misleading. This article fleshes out the complexity of audience's texts by promoting a conceptualization that is based on a dual approach: it offers a nuanced and contextual view of the media through which the museum-audience interaction is pursued, on the in hand, and an understanding of the social actions that these texts perform, on the other hand. Simply put, the article puts the texts back into the medium. This approach accords well with museums' (and other sites') *modus vivendi*, where meaning and meaning-making practices are highly dependent on context and framing. It demonstrates that the institutional context shapes, hinders, constrains, and impacts on audience participation and engagement on multiple levels. Audience's texts are appreciated not as reflections on experiences, thoughts, or feelings, but as *public instances of participation*. Engaging museum RVs is fundamentally a public activity, which is integral to the museum visit and to the roles of museum audienceship. It concerns what audiences *do* in museums, where their texts are media products that amount to "socially situated performances" (Macdonald, 2005, p. 122).

The conceptualization and keys that the article promotes address RVs in museums whose medium of choice is a comment book. For these museums' curatorial and educational teams, the choice is deliberate and meaningful, as it resonates with numerous paper documents on display, offering a familiar, time-honored interface. In other museums, the choice of media, their affordances for participation and engagement, and how they are framed through response installations, varies considerably according to

institutional and curatorial aims, resources, preferences, and ideologies. The materialities and technologies of various RVs are clearly consequential, as different media – from paper notes and cards, to hybrid interfaces, to fully digital media – possess different interactional and participatory affordances. Additionally, response installations supply the immediate contexts for reading audience’s texts (audience’s own reading included), and as the article shows, they are framed strategically.

Serving as onsite media, comment books are advantageous because they are relatively easy and inexpensive to maintain and store, they are familiar (clearly the most known and used RVs in museums, according to Winter, 2018), they possess a time-honored aura (James, 2012), and are intuitive and easy for use. Arguably, the comment books themselves endow the sites which present them with a notion of respectability, and amount to an interactive attraction in and of themselves. This is notable in museums and sites that engage history, culture, and heritage, where collections often include multiple documents, and where comment books nicely fit into these institutions’ materialities and media ecologies. Research also suggests that comment books are best suited for sites where contentious and challenging displays are presented (Black & Reynolds, 2020; Gibson, 2017; Macdonald, 2005). In such sites, they offer audiences an opportunity to respond onsite, with relatively little limitation of space, and to share experiences, opinions, and even short biographical and testimonial stories and images.

While this article focuses on comment books, the conceptualization and the keys it proposes apply to a range of RVs and to various media in different sites. This includes interesting cases of the hybridization of comment books and other “old” media. Recent studies show that augmenting older media with newer technologies, such as supplying audiences with digital pens or with user-friendly scanners to upload texts they wrote on paper, offer especially engaging activities for audiences (Anderson, 2019; Noy, 2016, 2020). It is a nice way for museums to undertake the digital turn, while retaining symbolic and material connections to their past.

Lastly, studying RVs illuminates a complexity that is inherent to the museum-audience interaction, namely that the aims of the institutions and their audiences are not necessarily or always congruent. One challenging manifestation concerns texts that are disrespectful of the site, where audiences “misuse” the RVs. This is a thorny issue because the boundaries between legitimate, if harsh, critique, on the one hand, and disrespectfulness, on the other hand, are necessarily negotiated and shifting. To add, different stakeholders hold different views of norms of use and public expression, and in my research, views differed not only between stakeholders, but also within them. For instance, higher level museum staff members were more liberal and tolerant to disruptive texts, while on-the-ground staffers and volunteers were less so. Likewise, as shown above, these are sometimes members of the audience who take on themselves to reprimand others’ texts (to “flag” them), when deemed inappropriate. Another aspect concerns media affordances, specifically how fast can such texts be identified and addressed by the museum – it is easier to delete a digital comment or one written on a sticky note, than to remove a text from a comment book (though I have encountered those as well).

The study’s findings indicate that explicitly disrespectful texts are *infrequent*. This could result from the fact that visitors act more responsibly when using onsite media,

compared to, say, online alternatives. Yet more generally, Bandelli and Konijn (2015) turn the question to museums and propose that their “fear of engagement” – the fear of encountering negative and disrespectful comments – is exaggerated and acts as “one of the main obstacles faced by museums for implementing public participation” (p. 133). The present study promotes the view that, for museum professionals and scholars alike, attending and responding to disrespectful texts needs to be part of a larger agenda that entails a more nuanced, context- and media-centered conceptualization of audiences’ rich forms and varieties of participation, not to mention democratization and openness to diversification.

## Notes

1. See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/visitors-book>, retrieved January 18, 2020.
2. <https://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/mission/> retrieved August 18, 2016.
3. <https://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/about/fhm-history/> retrieved August 31, 2017.
4. The wall was constructed a few years ago, replacing a plaque containing the museum’s donors’ names. The Chief Curator told me that with changing museum trends, the older installation was deemed less relevant and was replaced by one that faces the audiences.
5. Transcription retains misspellings, grammar and capitalization mistakes. Forward slash/marks a line break, and [square brackets] mark added clarifications and missing words. To maintain anonymity, authors’ surnames were replaced with [surname] (when indicated).

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## ORCID

Chaim Noy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2801-9120>

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## About the author

**Chaim Noy** is the Chair of the Israeli Communication Association (ISCA), the Vice President of the International Association for Dialogue Analysis (IADA), and the incoming Chair of the School of Communication at Bar Ilan University. He is a member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and of the Israeli Museum Association. Noy regularly speaks about museums and audiences in invited academic and nonacademic occasions, including keynote talks at the annual meetings of the Israeli Museum Association and interviews at the New York Times and local Israeli newspapers, television interviews and podcasts.

Noy's research interests include language and social interaction, media and communication studies, and museum and audience studies. He examines the nexus of discourse, materialities, and technologies, through qualitative and ethnographic approaches. He has published over eighty academic books and articles. Noy's recent book, *Thank You for Dying for Our Country: Commemorative Texts and Performances in Jerusalem*, appeared in Oxford University Press (in 2015), and his recent articles appeared in the journals *Critical Discourse Studies*; *Discourse, Context & Media*; *Discourse & Communication*; *Convergence*; and *Language in Society*. Address correspondence to Chaim Noy, School of Communication, Bar-Ilan University, Max and Anna Web Street, Ramat Gan, Israel. E-mail: [chaim.noy@biu.ac.il](mailto:chaim.noy@biu.ac.il)