

# Communicating decolonisation guidance



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# Introduction

# 01



Image credit: © University of Cambridge Museums

**Communication has a key role to play in any museum’s decolonisation practice. A strong communications strategy can insulate you from risk and help build a stronger brand in the process.**

**This guidance is meant to be a starting point for building a robust communication strategy to support your work. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach because across the museum sector there is a diversity of capacity, size, and tactics. Take what works for you, and what’s possible institutionally, and embrace it. The more we do this work together, the stronger our work will be and the easier it will get next time.**

## Ethics

The Museums Association (MA) [Code of Ethics](#) for Museums is a useful resource to support embedding these ideas internally and externally. Decolonisation work is an important part of meaningful public engagement and public benefit — there is a strong ethical position to make as part of your strategy. Our guidance, [Supporting Decolonisation in Museums](#) will be a helpful resource for this work. Museums are in an important position of trust for audiences, local communities, donors, source communities, partner organisations, sponsors and funders and we must make sound ethical judgments in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust.

## Self-censorship

Self-censorship is likely to play a role in determining your comms strategy. The instinct to protect the organisation from negative press or feedback is natural but pushing through those hesitations is essential. Remember, we must be brave in this work. Be ready to challenge norms and encourage taking risks within your institution. Sometimes ethical practice may not align with traditional ‘best practice’ standards. To allow self-censorship to become the modus-operandi of a museum means undermining the role of the museums to challenge audiences with new and different perspectives. When you’re taking on a decolonisation project, be prepared to work through some discomfort but do it knowing that this work is vital. That said, we recognise that some organisations will be limited due to governance and organisational censorship.

# Developing your strategy

# 02



Maasai representatives working with the Pitt Rivers Museum on the care of sacred Maasai objects. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, John Cairns

**Investing time in setting a communications strategy means that you have the space to test your messaging and language internally before going live. If your organisation has a comms team, get them involved early. It will vastly improve the performance of your launch.**

## Setting objectives

Setting clear and achievable objectives is a crucial part of developing the communications strategy for your decolonisation practice. Knowing what's possible and getting internal buy-in helps pave the way for smoother internal communications and simpler decision making.

Some projects may have clear objectives that translate into actionable communications plans from the start. For example:

- Improving understanding of our collections' origins
- Increasing meaningful engagement with communities
- Raising awareness of a repatriation effort

However, if your objectives aren't immediately clear, reflect on the following questions:

- Where does this project fit within our larger organisational strategy?
- Who is this project for?
- How does this communications plan contribute to long-term storytelling about the institution?
- What metrics mean something to your institution? How can you build those into your objectives to enable future buy in?
- How do we want our audiences to act/feel after engaging with the project?

These objectives will serve as a foundation for the rest of your communications work so make sure they inspire and/or challenge your team. They should feel specific, but not restrictive.

## Case study:

### What to do about Thomas Picton? | Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales

Amgueddfa Cymru and the [Sub-Saharan Advisory Panel \(SSAP\) Youth Leadership Network](#) have been working on a project to reframe the colonial narrative around the portrait of Lieutenant-General Thomas Picton. Picton is a controversial figure previously hailed as a public hero, but who is today equally notorious for his cruel treatment of Black enslaved people and free people, and for sanctioning torture during his governance of Trinidad.

The project was initiated as a workshop and discussion between some of the young people as part of [Hands on Heritage](#), a youth engagement programme funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund.

It was agreed to remove the painting and to commission two artists, Gesiye and LakuNeg, to create artworks in response. These will be displayed at National Museum Cardiff from August 2022.

The work has been added to the museum [website](#) and a [press release](#) issued.

Comms did result in challenges due to adverse responses, for example, comments beneath a [blog](#) about the initial discussion. This was especially prevalent on Twitter, which meant staff were required to moderate the more extremist messages and formulate set responses.

Dealing with these issues did have some positive outcomes. It was decided to undertake staff training on unacceptable behaviour, and safeguarding and wellbeing support was provided for the young people. The museum's social media policy was updated, and an organisational decision was made to stand by the re-interpretation of the portrait. The museum equally experienced a lot of support for the position it took, and the young people and communities involved appreciated the strong stance taken.



Trinidadian artist Gesiye's new installation at National Museum Cardiff, *The Wound is a Portal*. Luigi Creese.

The work around Picton is part of a much larger initiative of decolonising collections at Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales which has produced a [Charter](#) to support this work. This is a useful tool in dealing with questions about why the museum might undertake such work going forward.

**I spent some few years the UK, many years past now. As an American, I was fascinated by all the local and national history surrounding me seemingly at every turn, and how much effort had gone into preserving and sharing that history with the public. So, to see this sort of article, where the only effort is to now tear down that history to push a radical multiculti, globalist agenda, sickens me.**

Blog comment left March 2022

**Thank you for writing to Amgueddfa Cymru concerning the article ‘Decolonising Amgueddfa Cymru’s Collection – the journey begins’. The intention of decolonisation is not to erase history, or the history of the object, but to work collaboratively with communities to develop multiple perspectives to support a better understanding and deeper meaning. Decolonising the collection will mean that we have more information about objects, not less. We will be able to present a more balanced, authentic and decolonised account of history.**

Comms team response to blog comment, March 2022



## Understanding your capacity

Institutions have varying levels of comms support and internal infrastructure to support this work. Don't feel pressure to act like a bigger, more resourced institution if you're not. Similarly, if you work within a larger organisation, reach out to other departments to build capacity to support the project. Your size can be your strength whether big or small.

Reach beyond your department to find who is meaningfully interested in this work. Where possible, bring them into the decision making and delivery process to share the labour across the institution. Trust that those doing the work will do it well but find allies across the institution.

## Bridging your institutional brand and core values

Connecting your project's communications with the institutional core values and principles is essential. By connecting a decolonisation project or practice to your long-term strategic goals, you form a stronger foundation for your messaging and insulate yourself from criticism. Understanding how your project relates directly to the long-term strategy also helps your team build an agile messaging system for your project.

“

**It's about trying to make it more inclusive. Telling different stories that could have been told in the past but weren't.**

Fiona Salvesen Murrell, Paxon House

## Case Study:

### “Treatment of Dead Enemies” - Pitt Rivers Museum

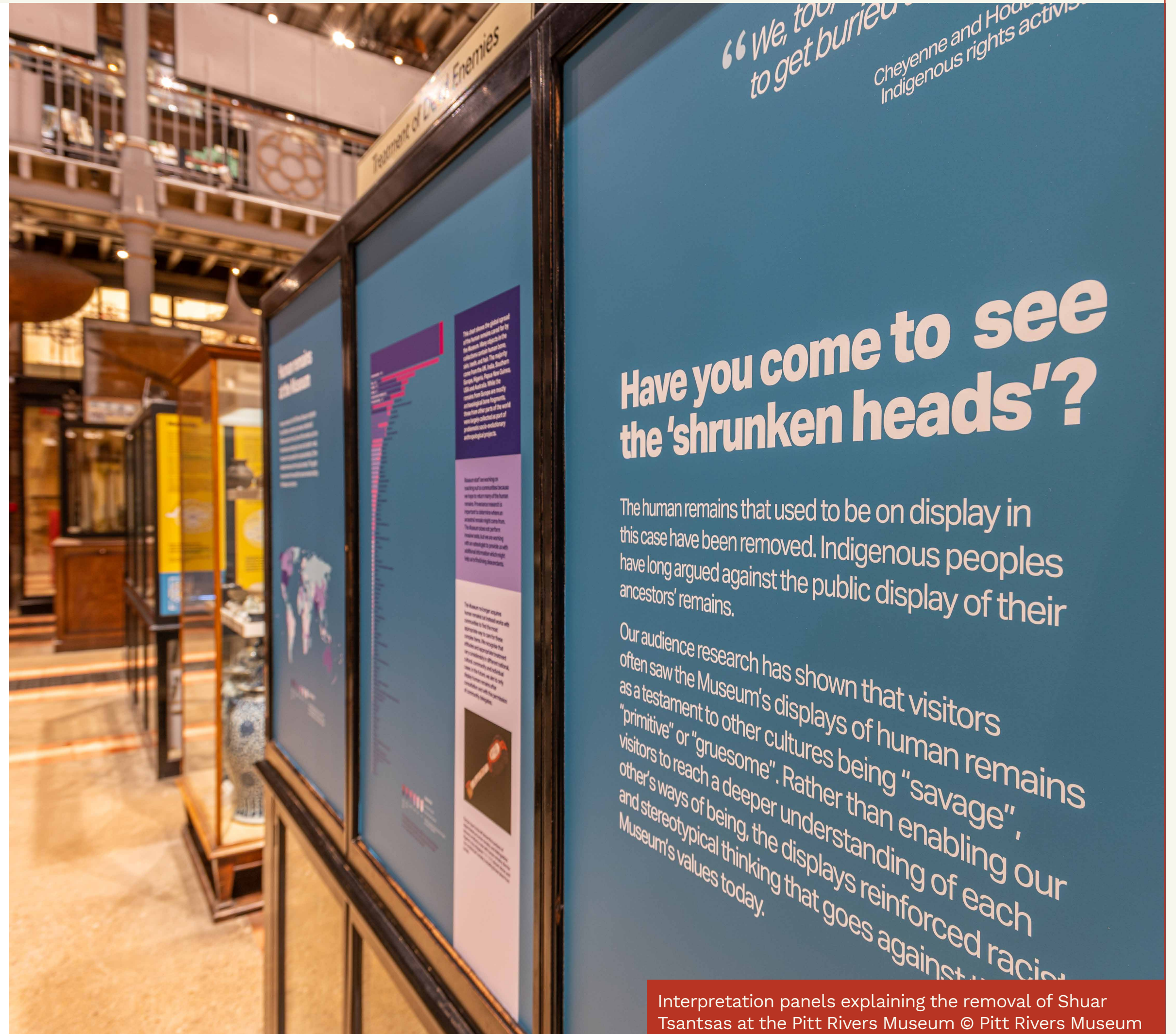
Between 2017 and 2020 the Pitt Rivers undertook an ethical review of its collections and displays, incorporating new museological practices and audience research. Coinciding with the pandemic and museum closure, 120 human remains – including the Shuar Tsantsas, the museum’s collection of ‘shrunk heads’, previously displayed in a case called “Treatment of Dead Enemies” were removed from the galleries in time for the reopening in September 2020.

As part of its media relations the museum worked with two trusted journalists to place features in the national broadsheets. In return for full access to images and spokespeople, the features offered accurate, sympathetic and detailed reporting and drove good quality coverage in the wider media. The story was covered in 300 outlets including major broadcasters, BBC, Sky, Fox News and CNN; and was syndicated by the Press Association to outlets worldwide. The most significant criticism came from the local press which lamented the loss of the ‘shrunk heads’ to local heritage; but wider coverage was overwhelmingly positive or neutral.

Staff wanted to be transparent and proactive in engagement with the public through its own channels. Following the announcement, over 12,000 words were exchanged by followers on Twitter and Facebook, both for and against decolonisation. While initial responses in social media and correspondence were negative, comments to the museum’s ongoing posts became increasingly positive, a trend which persisted to the end of 2020 after the Pitt Rivers reopened.

The museum used its channels to facilitate discussion, sometimes just posting links to further information about decolonisation and the work underpinning the ethical review. This mitigated criticism and positioned the museum as open and receptive to a range of opinions.

The ethical review was a complex and emotive project and communications were integral to its reception. The team used high-profile legacy media to articulate key messages; and its own channels to offer information and engage with debate. This helped maintain the museum’s public profile and has established the Pitt Rivers as a sector-leading organisation in decolonisation.



Interpretation panels explaining the removal of Shuar Tsantsas at the Pitt Rivers Museum © Pitt Rivers Museum

## Writing key messaging

Developing simple, memorable key messages will help you deliver against your objectives and overcome any fluctuations in capacity. They will also help you manage media coverage and control your institution's role in the story.

In keeping with the MA principles of decolonising museums, it's especially important to acknowledge your power and privilege at this planning stage. Don't exaggerate the potential impact of the project or its importance to the institution — make the truth easy to understand. Consider who is centred in your storytelling and who you're leaving out. Many organisations advocate for doing this work directly with members of affected communities. If you're working with partners, let them influence and contribute to the messaging and comms strategy.

“

**We have to be so respectful and that's a key part of decolonisation and repatriation work. Maintaining respect and a dialogue.**

Eimear Cassidy, National Museums NI

At this point it is also useful to explore what specific language you want to use to talk about the projects. Don't assume that the language you've been using internally will be appropriate externally and vice versa. For more support in crafting your messages, try the [Building a Shared Impact Narrative](#) exercise at the end of this document.



Connecting with Yemeni Elders Heritage project at House of Memories, © National Museums Liverpool, Robin Clewley

# Understanding audiences

# 03



Connecting with Yemeni Elders Heritage project at House of Memories, © National Museums Liverpool, Gareth Jones

Deciding how to engage with your audiences will dictate much of the rollout of your strategy. While some institutions find a ‘broadcast’ method of communications effective (never engaging or commenting beyond the initial messages) others have found that engaging is a productive way to build support around a project or practice.



As you decide on your plan, explore who you might reach within these categories.

## Engaged/Passive Allies

This audience is likely to engage in social justice work and broadly support the project.

### Do:

Encourage their participation and give them more opportunities to support the project.

### Don't:

Endlessly amplify them (for example, by retweeting or resharing) and risk inflaming your engaged critics further.

## Curious Neutral/Passive Critics

These audiences will have some concerns about the project but not lash out or attack right away. There is a clear opportunity with this audience to engage them, demonstrate that you're listening, and recognise their needs and fears.

### Do:

Clear up any good-faith misconceptions and build relationships.

### Don't:

Antagonise or provoke into stronger action.

## Engaged Critics

This audience is likely to engage in stronger but civil confrontation. There may not be a way to convince or pacify them but we can still show that we value their engagement with the project. Be open to scrutiny.

### Do:

Acknowledge their feedback and comments in good-faith or if you have a clear response, consider responding indirectly through a new message.

### Don't:

Give them easy targets or provoke into action.

## Malicious Critics

This audience, otherwise known as 'trolls,' are not interested in good-faith discussions about the project. They likely have a surface understanding of the objectives and will be responding to incendiary media coverage or key words. They are also likely to use racist or prejudiced language.

### Do:

Recognise and avoid trigger words or phrases that stir up conflict. Hide racist and explicit messages if possible.

### Don't:

Engage or amplify.

## Internal communications

Sharing and explaining the project throughout the organisation is a great way to get widespread buy-in and is a great test bed for your key messages. Depending on the scale of your project, there might be some confusion among management and other staff about your goals and motivations. Use this opportunity to find any gaps in your strategy.

## Adapting your key messages

Internal audiences have a much higher level of institutional memory than the public. Use this to your advantage by adapting your key messages to call on shared values and practices. Keep in mind that staff, management, and volunteers will all have different interpretations of the importance of the project. If there is capacity, try to meet them where they are to understand any concerns or misunderstandings.

## Building shared ownership

Consider creating a one-page briefing with the essential information about the project and what impact it has on the stories you tell. Highlight the key people, stories, or objects that internal teams should know about. Give staff the space and opportunity to digest and understand the objectives and links to your institution's core tenets and values.

“

**You should give members of staff and social media isn't their central role, confidence and guidelines for how to talk about this work in a positive and engaging way.**

Esther Morgan, Norfolk Museum Service

## Giving space for feedback and input

Maintain an open channel of communication for feedback and further discussion. Internal responses could give you an indication of future public discourse so use these discussions as learning opportunities.

Hold open conversations with internal critics to try to understand the roots of their concerns. Claims of 'oversensitivity' and 'woke agendas' can often be resolved with a discussion about the facts of the project. Always return to the project's key messages and themes. Make sure you're getting a wide range of feedback. There may be some who are very vocal but it's important to engage with quieter critics as well.

You may also face challenges from colleagues who want the organisation to be bolder or more outspoken. Remember that decolonisation work is a practice and that there will always be more opportunities to participate in this work. Listen to their concerns and find opportunities for them to be more meaningfully involved in the project (if possible). Remember, this work is active and long-term.

# External communications

# 04



Maasai representatives working with the Pitt Rivers Museum on the care of sacred Maasai objects. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, John Cairns



**By the time you go public with your project you should already know your objectives and key messages. Having that strategy set in advance makes it easier to adapt your messages to external audiences and align them with the existing comms plans.**

When going public with your decolonisation practice you should think carefully about the channels you want to focus on and the voices you want to centre. If you have limited capacity to engage, it might be useful to focus on channels such as a blog or website rather than social media which requires more resources.

It's important that this work feels part of the wider institutional communications. If we silo the work, and its communications, we undermine the public and the sector's confidence that this is a meaningful practice for the institution (not just a short-term project). We need to demonstrate that this is not a token gesture, especially when working with local or diaspora communities. This also insulates the institution from criticism that it's 'following a trend' or responding to 'woke minorities'.

### **A note on the word 'decolonisation':**

We recognise that many institutions struggle with the word decolonisation. The work of decolonising museums involves creatively reimagining the way museums work, who they work with and what they value. That's what's important. If there's pressure to use alternate words for your project, that's fine. Use the language that enables you to do the work.

### **Engaging with media**

Setting your media engagement strategy should start with your capacity. If you don't have an internal press officer or media team, consider getting outside support to assist with press releases, media requests, and spokesperson guidance. This support should be built into a project budget at the beginning if possible.

If you do have an internal team, meet with them early to assess the potential impact of your project. Many decolonisation efforts come with a harsh media spotlight so it's essential to prepare. Be prepared for journalists to come with their own angle.

Engaging with media, especially broadcast, is a skill. Finding the right voices within your organisation comes down to trust, comfort, and confidence. Ideally you will have someone who has been meaningfully engaged with the project as a key public voice, but if not, ensure you're upskilling whoever will handle marketing and media requests on the policy and collections implications of the project. It's also important to ensure that senior leadership and/or trustees have a voice in your communications. The institution's leadership should be ready to engage if the project sparks public debate or conversation.



Interpretation panels at the Pitt Rivers Museum © Pitt Rivers Museum

## Responding to negativity and controversy

Listen to the criticism and allow that to shape your comms indirectly/implicitly. Where possible, point to existing work to demonstrate a long-term commitment to your organisation's decolonisation work.

Research (linked below) shows that commentators often use the same malicious tactics to disrupt productive engagement with these topics. They include:

- **Exaggeration:** Creating a 'media moment' out of an otherwise benign story by distracting from the facts
- **Fabrication:** Fueling conflict by fabricating a story that contributes to their chosen narrative
- **Distraction:** Shifting the conversation from the issue at hand to a trivial, binary action or event

You can't anticipate every challenge but objections to the work undertaken as part of the decolonisation process are pretty standard. Make sure that you're ready to defuse, ignore, or shift your messaging to engage in the moment.

For more help with this check out our 5-Point conflict checklist at the end of this guidance.

Additional resources:

[NEON\\_Divide&Rule.pdf](#)

[Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy - National Coalition Against Censorship](#)



# Productive engagement worksheets

# 05



Mangubadijarri Yanner (Gangalidda) and Esme Ward (Director, Manchester Museum) at the official handover of 18 culturally significant objects to the Gangalidda and Nyamal Nations, Australia House, 2019, David Tett

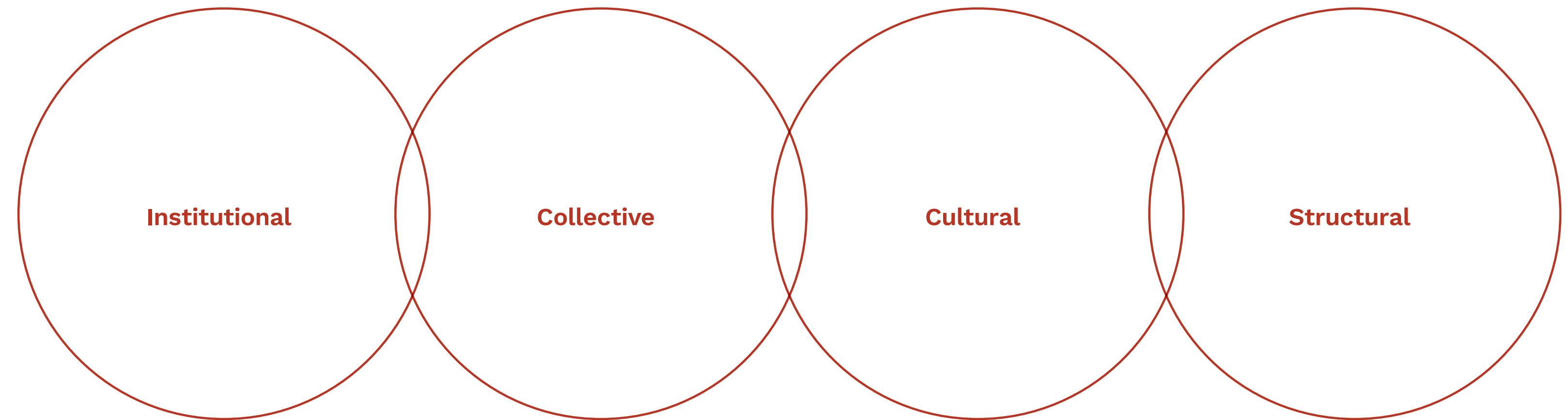
## 5-Point conflict checklist:

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>01. <b>Do you fully understand the conflict or criticism?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>If yes</b>, continue assessing the situation to make a plan of action.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If not</b>, share the comment or question with a team member to try to understand further before taking any action. Make sure you know the facts and the wider context of who the person is, what their motive might be, and how this conflict fits within the wider project comms plan.</p> | <p>03. <b>Is the point of contention widely discussed?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>If yes</b>, consider why this point has gained traction. Is there a clear instigator or motive behind the criticism? Allow that to inform your response.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If not</b>, consider not responding.</p>                          | <p>05. <b>Does the person instigating the conflict hold power or influence over others?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>If yes</b>, assess the situation and consider engaging/bridging the conversation in order to pacify it. Be aware if this person/group has a history of provoking organisations into conflict. Wade in carefully.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If not</b>, consider not responding.</p> |
| <p>02. <b>Does engaging with this conflict come with additional reputation or security risk for the institution?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>If yes</b>, ensure that you have internal stakeholder and line management buy-in before taking any action.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If not</b>, continue assessing the situation.</p>  | <p>04. <b>Can the question be answered within our comms plan or key messages?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>If yes</b>, ensure that engaging is the right response and share a key message.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If not</b>, ensure that engaging is the right response and utilise bridging techniques to get to a key message.</p> |  |

## Building a shared impact narrative

Communicating your decolonisation practice is about more than outlining a project. It's about showing your work, being accountable for its policy implications, and welcoming new and challenging conversations about your institution and collections.

When you're building your key messages, try exploring your project's impact using the framework opposite:



### **Institutional** — a focus on the direct impact of this work

What do we value as an institution? What does this project mean for us as an institution? How is this work a confirmation of our values and ethos? Does this project openly conflict with past or present work? Have we acknowledged that?

### **Collective** — working together with our peers

What does the museum sector value? What conversations are we having within the sector that could bolster our project's messaging? Have you consulted with any relevant communities of origin and agreed communications? How can we leverage the museum community to support this project?

### **Cultural** — finding common ground with wider audiences

What is valued in culture right now? How does it relate to our project? Have we been transparent and explicit about who benefits from this work? Have you consulted with any relevant communities of origin and agreed communications? How does this project reflect the future the institution wants?

### **Structural** — shining a spotlight on the tangible impact

Where are the opportunities for meaningful change? How are our values reflected in our processes? What impact could this project have on our communities? What policies could change to reflect this work?

## Putting this guidance into practice

Every project will have different comms demands. This isn't a fixed process but the ideas and principles outlined in this guidance should make it easier to develop and communicate your key messages to a range of audiences.

We hope that this document will help improve your confidence in advocating for decolonisation, both within your institution and across the sector.

To decolonise is to open up our spaces and collections to a broader historical perspective that engages a wider audience. Museums and heritage sites contain tangible evidence of our colonial past and therefore are perfectly placed to explore the legacies of those histories. Through this work new narratives of how we think of ourselves as a society can emerge – stories that stress that everyone has a right to a voice, to express their agency, and to understand their historical location. Nothing is being taken away, but rather decolonisation work adds depth, richness and a greater understanding to our collective cultural heritage.

## Further reading

**David Olusoga**

**Black and British: A forgotten History**

(London: Picador 2021)

**Corinne Fowler**

**Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural Britain's Colonial Connections**

(Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020)

**Alice Procter**

**The Whole Picture: the colonial story of the art in our museums and why we need to talk about it**

(London: Cassell, 2021)

Find further resources on the [MA website](#)

**Cover image:** Maasai representatives working with the Pitt Rivers Museum on the care of sacred Maasai objects.  
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