

**Webinar: *Keeping Museum Tactile Experiences Safe and Viable*, a session of the series *Accessibility + New Normal Talks*.**

**July 7, 2020, 12:30-13:30 EST**

Organised by the Institute of Human Centered Design, Boston, in association with the Smithsonian Museum. Washington.

Chaired by Janice Majeovski, Director, Inclusive Cultural and Education.

Report by Marcus Weisen

### **The webinar at a glance**

- the question is viewed in the context of legal requirements and civil rights
- a strong practical perspective is developed
- 2 of 4 speakers are blind, one is a user, the other a museum professional
- a transcript and the video recording will be posted online, as will practical resources, including of products
- IHCD envisages a second webinar in Covid-19 in the future.

### **Introduction by Beth Ziebarth, Director - Accessibility Program, Smithsonian Museum**

At the time the Smithsonian is re-opening, "we don't want to go back and put everything behind glass".

Effective communication with visually impaired audiences and with people with brain-based disabilities is important for encouraging them to visit.

### **Ray Bloomer, National Park Service**

The "new normal" is a state of constant flux and change.

The civil rights of people with disabilities have not been suspended by the Covid-19 pandemic! Access is a legal requirement.

People touch all the time in museums and in heritage sites: they touch doors, elevators buttons, taps, etc. So there is no reason for cancelling tactile experiences of museum objects and interactives. If a tactile museum experience is temporarily suspended by Covid-19, it will be replaced by an equally effective and attractive alternative.

We want visitors to feel comfortable and safe and give. We want to give them an experience as robust as before Covid-19.

### **Nefertiti Matos, New York Public Library**

“I can’t image my life without the formative experiences of going to museums and theatres”.

Nefertiti Matos lost her sight early in her life. As a pupil she wanted to be part of the class visit to the Museum of Modern Art. “I too belong to this place!”, she says.

“We have come too far in access to drop the ball now. The question is how we pressure the human right to enjoy culture”.

## **Nora Nagle, Science Museum, Boston**

Many people benefit from tactile objects.

We have to communicate very pro-actively what the museum does to keep tactile objects clean and safe.

In our museum, we had to remove a certain number of objects/spaces from the touch experience. These were:

- small spaces, such as a space capsule: Covid-19 stays in the air in aerosol droplets for quite long
- very small objects, such as a interactive with lego blocks for children: it is not practical to clean these small objects every 2 hours
- ear-phones on audio-devices for speech-reading labels: they are held close to the nose, to the ears and to the mouth
- objects which blow air, as is the case for ventilators. *Speaker 4., Elena Super, says later in the webinar, that they are super-spreaders of the virus. (However, a top-down air flow may press the aerosol droplets down faster).*

Our response as a museum is not to regress below existing standards of access. For example, we have contacted the producer of an audio label system application for mobile phones: blind visitors can then bring their own mobile phones for reading labels.

Tactile experiences don’t have to disappear.

## **Elena Super, PhD Candidate, University of Manchester (Biomaterials)**

The science of corona is massively complex. The pandemic has drawn public attention to research of anti-viral materials.

There are cleaning products for specific materials, e.g. bleach (which is abrasive of course), alcohol, etc.

One way forward is to develop and use self-cleaning materials impregnated with an anti-microbial/viral materials in the surface coating.

Some surfaces can be cleaned with UV LED light and be sterilised 99% within 30 seconds. Some can be cleaned in 5 seconds. This is good for metals and also for materials with “nooks and crannies” (small wholes and fissures). UV LED is problematic with plastic, because it alters the structure of it.

Elena Super offers to find contacts of suppliers of anti-microbial/viral materials to a webinar participant.

*A question is asked:* should people be asked to sterilise their hands or should the museum clean tactile objects?

*Answer:* the fact is that many people do not wash their hands for a period of 20 seconds! Museums can of course promote the washing and sterilising of hands. The most important thing is, however, to focus on what museums can control! And that is all there is to touch, including the tactile objects!