Museums and the Information Society

Introduction

As the Information Society begins to take shape, it is becoming apparent that museums can play a significant role in it, as they do in society generally. But the use of information and communications technology is a means to an end, not an end in itself. So let us first consider what is seen to be the wider role of museums in this new age, and then examine some examples of how museums in different countries are already organising themselves to take advantage of it. This will perhaps help us to understand some of the requirements for success, and the part that standards can play.

The politics of museum information

First, then, from the political perspective, what are the evolving new roles for museums? There are dozens of reports on the Information Society from (or for) governments almost everywhere; certainly from G7 countries. Museums are identified in them in a number of contexts:

- As assisting to maintain cultural identities during progressive globalisation
- As helping to bind together dispersed communities
- As providers of content for the new technology
- As players in the new forms of education provision that are themselves developing to take advantage of the new technology
- As partners with libraries in information provision

The museum perspective

From museums' own perspective, ICT offers new ways of meeting our two overarching objectives: to build collections as long term assets, and to use them to entertain, to enlighten, and to educate.

The collections used to be thought of in terms solely of physical objects: if information was considered at all it was simply in terms of documenting the provenance of the object. Now, we can build information collections that will let us in museums really share the meaning and the interest of the objects with much wider audiences - indeed, if we wish it, with millions of people.

In many countries, too, government funding for museums is decreasing; information and communications technology may be a new source of income. How to reconcile our public service mission, for which we receive by far the greater part of our funding, with pressure to provide a better service and the need to generate income belongs to another debate.

Turning to museums' mission to communicate, there is an excellent correspondence between physical exhibitions, and multimedia productions. Multimedia is a much more natural extension of museum exhibitions than are radio or TV, which we have not used much, or even print publication. We can use multimedia very effectively both to make our traditional collections better and more valuable, by adding information to them; and also to enlighten and entertain through the medium of objects - but virtual objects.

Issues for museums

So museums have reasons to want to become players in the Information Age; and the wider community seems to have identified several important uses for them. It is also fairly clear what museums could potentially do, at least in the short term, even in such a turbulent new scene.

So how do we get there?

In my perception, from a national museum that aspires to be a leader in this field, there are three major issues - and a host of less important ones. First is the matter of relationships - among museums, between museums and commercial companies, and between museums and governments. Second is the question of investment. Creating multimedia productions and resources is not cheap. Thirdly, will the public, the final arbiters, want what we can provide?

Relationships

James Hemsley has referred to 'feasting with panthers', in his analysis of possible relationship models between museums and the commercial sector. The

issue is, will museums share the feast with the panthers as equal partners, or will we be the dinner?

Relationships are absolutely fundamental to success: contractual, commercial, competitive or supportive. There is a variety of possible players. There are museums themselves; technology companies; multimedia publishing companies; the entertainment and broadcasting industry. A writer for the OECD has referred to the cost incurred when relationships cannot be based on trust, but have to be legalised and formalised. It is specially difficult to build stable relationships when we don't have clear models to help us understand how content will generate income.

Museums have not been very good at forming relationships among themselves, yet few of them are big or powerful enough to enter these new arenas without partners, especially when intellectual property rights and finance come into it.

Various people have advocated that museums should band together in the Information Age. Cooperation between museums is not cheap, as I know to my own museum's considerable cost - I led a UK national project for two years. Museums are all extremely different in almost every way. Where museums are not run by a central body, governments have generally encouraged competition rather than cooperation. It may be that the popularity of the World Wide Web among museums is partly because this has a low-cost entry threshold and does not have to be a joint activity.

But museums operating as groups would be better for museums themselves, because it would give them marketing muscle and enable them to develop digitised resources that were more comprehensive and thus more valuable; better for the commercial sector, because it would make transactions simpler and less expensive; and better for users, because they would much more easily be able to find what they wished, and perhaps have the choice of more desirable and sophisticated products than museums acting singly could achieve.

There are already some examples of museum groups forming, and I will go on to discuss these below.

The issue of investment

The second major issue is one of investment funding. It is not cheap to build and maintain resources of multimedia content; it is not cheap to make sophisticated multimedia productions to the high standards that people expect. Where is the money to come from? From public funding, additional to museums' current funding or as part of it; from private investment; or will the income these resources can generate pay for their creation and renewal? Who will own these resources once created: will they be public property, like the collections themselves, or will they be owned by commercial companies?

Assuming that these resources are created, conventional wisdom says that a pool of permanent multimedia content - digitised text, images, film clips, animations - will be created, the existence of which will eventually make multimedia productions much less expensive. Is this realistic? How will we ensure that this is a long term resource - at a time when the technology is developing so fast?

Will people want museum information?

The final important question is: if museums divert their scarce time and resources into these new areas, will the results in fact be what people want?

Some examples

I would now like to turn to some examples of museums moving into the digital area, and see if this can help us to see how these issues can be addressed in practice. Some individual museums are successfully moving into this field, but it is difficult to learn much from them. There are some museum groupings beginning to form, however, and these could be of interest.

Australia: the Cultural Industry Development Program

This programme began in 1990. The overarching aim is to realise the export potential of the heritage industry in Australia. Comprehensive economic information on the cultural industry was researched, and it showed that the number of people employed, the total annual value of goods and services provided, and the existing contribution of the industry to the economy were large and significant. However, the players in the heritage industry - both content providers and commercial organisations utilising the content - were found to be fragmented, and thus unable to realise the full potential of either sector.

Australia: practical development

Following this initial research, two successive bodies, reporting to and resourced by central government, worked towards setting up an independent Australian Cultural Network. The substantive work of these bodies has been done by partners in private sector consultancies and in major Australian

museums.

The present Heritage Committee was established in 1993. Its main objective was to develop a self-sustaining Australian Cultural Network. To kick start this, a modest amount of central funding ($Australian 277,000 in 1996/7), was provided for an impressive portfolio of projects. The centrepiece of the Heritage Committee's work is a World Wide Web site, AMOL, Australian Museums On Line.

The Australian Cultural Network is the next evolutionary stage. It will establish an important on-line World Wide Web site to provide a forum for practical working partnerships. It will provide practical ways for the Australian cultural resources, both information based and actual, to be developed and marketed.

The USA: the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO)

An even more advanced initiative, though with a tighter focus, is AMICO (Art Museum Image Consortium), again with an on-line presence, the Art Museums Network. AMICO is a not-for-profit organisation that has been set up by the USA Association of Art Museum Directors. It will create an avenue for the non-exclusive licensing of intellectual property rights for its member museums and galleries, and distribute museum digital content to the educational sector. AMICO has grown out of the Museum Educational Site Licensing project of the Getty Foundation. It builds on the close professional relationships already enjoyed by art museum staff and management in the USA and Canada, and indeed world wide.

The AMN (Art Museums Network) is a sophisticated World Wide Web site that lists and showcases museums, primarily art museums, through their individual Web sites and through general information, throughout the USA, Mexico and Canada.

The UK (Scotland): SCRAN

SCRAN has been set up as a Millennium project funded mainly from the proceeds of the UK national lottery. Museums in Scotland have been invited to contribute digitised resources from their collections - images, catalogue information, multimedia. These are processed to conform to the SCRAN technical standards and will be used to make multimedia products for dissemination over networks to Scottish schools, libraries and museums. The longer term objective is for this resource to be marketed and to generate income sufficient to continue the process without public support.

Prerequisites for success

None of these groupings have so far had time to actually develop the outcome of their plans. But they have clearly overcome some of the issues I outlined above. Some requirements for success seem to be:

A trusted organisation - developed either from an existing successful relationship (as in the art museums and in SCRAN, which had successful small-scale predecessors), or through a careful process of consensus building, as in Australia

Start-up funding - to fund the expensive process of developing consensus and relationships, and to run practical prototypes as a sort of proof-of-concept, rather than to fund digitisation (although this may prove to be necessary). In the case of AMICO this was from the Getty Foundation; in Australia, from the central government; in SCRAN, it was from government funds in the form of the national lottery.

Clear objectives, agreed by all the players - Attention to legal and contractual relationships - in both SCRAN and AMICO one of the most important steps was to get agreement to standard contracts; in Australia, a commission is investigating legal aspects of intellectual property rights.

From these examples, it is clear that technical standards alone, while they are necessary, are not sufficient to generate a successful place for museums in the Information Society. While all my examples of successful groupings use, and have helped to establish, standards, this is not enough. Standards need not only be technical ones, of course. Standards can apply equally as well to contractual relationships, and I would argue that this is actually what needs to come first. They are two-edged weapons: they can be straightjackets, stifling variety and competition, or they can make that all-essential level playing field that helps many players enter the game and protects our multimedia resources for the long term.

Will we be popular?

A while ago, I noted that museums were the most popular category of listing in Yahoo! the main World Wide Web directory (back in 1995 we even outdid Latin American studies, the US government, and football). Museum world wide web sites, at least, do seem to be popular; certainly, multimedia exhibits in galleries

are very successful, and add considerably to visitors' experience.

Conclusions

In this paper I have just been able to draw attention to what I see as the most important issues, the matters that will have to be addressed if the museum component of public services is going to be able to play its full part in the Information Society. I look forward to the discussion of the two central questions: how do we promote the formation of the productive relationships that I see as essential; and what about the investment we will need to make?

| Top of page

Bibliography

Many of the documents and reports I have referred to are available on-line, and so WWW urls for them are included below. *[I don't know how many still are - SK, March 2006]*

General reports

ACTS FAIR report: Review of developments in advanced communications markets ACTS FAIR / Databank Consulting, October 1996.
http://www.analysys.co.uk/acts/fair

Electronic publishing - from Scribe to Screen. Andersen Consulting, and Ienm (Techno-Z FH-Salzburg), 1996
http://www2.echo.lu/elpub2

Europe and the global information society: Recommendations to the European Parliament (the Bangemann Report). European Council, May 1994.
http://www.earn.net/EC/report.html

INFO2000: Proposal for a Council Decision. European Commission: DGXIII, May 1995.

International Futures Programme, "The Internet in twenty years: Cyberspace, the next frontier?". Riel Miller. OECD, 1997.
http://www.oecd.org/sge/au/highligh.htm

MAGNETS: ACTS Project Report, Brameur Consulting, March 1997.
http://www.brameur.co.uk/vasari/magnets/

Museum groupings

AMN (Art Museums Network) / AMICO (Art Museum Image Consortium)
http://www.AMN.org/AMNhtml/AMNhome.htm
The AMN is the Web presence of AMICO, a consortium of art museums in the USA, Canada and Mexico. It developed from the Getty Education Site Licensing Project.

AMOL (Australian Museums On Line)
http://www.nma.gov.au:80/AMOL/
AMOL is an organisation sponsored by the Australian government to encourage the museum presence in the heritage information market.

SCRAN (Scottish Cultural Resources Network)
http://www.scran.ac.uk/
SCRAN is funded by the UK National Lottery Millenium Fund in partnership with those providing the content. It is developing a central resource of multimedia collections information, to be made available by various market routes.