



DOSSIER "ICT and Heritage"

Use of Websites to Increase Access and Develop Audiences in Museums: Experiences in British National Museums*

Margarida Loran

External consultant for the cultural content and services company adoptArt, SL
mloran@menta.net

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Abstract

Many authors argue that digital technologies, and particularly the World Wide Web, have great potential to serve the challenges faced by museums in relation to access and audience development, which involves reaching and nurturing both existing and new audiences. But what initiatives are there, and how effective are they? What strategies and actions are museums undertaking to take advantage of this potential? What is it being done to establish closer ties with core audiences or to attract new audiences? And what is the audience response to the museums' efforts? The British experience in this field is of particular interest because it shows a political context favourable to the development of this emerging area of museum work, and it provides some remarkable and exemplary cases from which to learn good practices.

Keywords

museum, United Kingdom, lifelong learning

Resum

S'ha parlat molt en els darrers anys sobre el potencial dels webs per a incrementar l'accés als museus i obrir-los a nous públics. Però, en concret, què s'està fent en aquesta línia i amb quina efectivitat? Quines estratègies i accions emprenen els museus per a aprofitar el potencial del web? Què s'està fent per a establir lligams més estrets amb els públics habituals o per a atraure nous públics? Quina és la resposta del públic a aquests esforços? L'autora mira de respondre aquests interrogants en el context del Regne Unit, a partir de les entrevistes fetes a set museus nacionals i de l'anàlisi d'algunes experiències exemplars, tot plegat en un context polític favorable al desenvolupament d'aquesta nova àrea de treball.

Paraules clau

museu, Regne Unit, aprenentatge continu

*Contents reported in this paper are part of a wider research study carried out in London in 2002: Loran, M. (2002). *Online Museums And Audiences: Contribution Of Museum Websites To Access And Audience Development*. Master's dissertation presented at the MA in Heritage Management at the University of Greenwich Business School.



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In the last decade, the world of museums has placed renewed emphasis on education and access, with the goal to make museums more relevant, inclusive and valuable to society; places for debate and lifelong learning resources for communities. In this context, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and especially the internet, have a vital role to play. They provide museums with new opportunities to achieve their goals by increasing access to museum collections and knowledge in an unprecedented way; by broadening and diversifying audiences; and by enabling visitors to participate in and enhance the museum experience.

Many authors argue that digital technologies, and particularly the World Wide Web, have great potential to serve the challenges faced by museums in relation to access and audience development, which involves reaching and nurturing both existing and new audiences. But what initiatives are there, and how effective are they? What strategies and actions are museums undertaking to take advantage of this potential? What is being done to establish closer ties with core audiences or to attract new audiences? And what is the audience's response to the efforts of museums?

This article presents a summary of the main rationales from the literature review, and key findings and a selection of examples from primary research: an exploration of current practices among a group of British museums with a strong online presence. The research reported is part of a wider study (Loran, 2002).

Unprecedented access to collections and knowledge

MacDonald and Alford (1997) discuss the opportunities that digital technologies present for the dissemination of knowledge on a scale never before possible, and see this capacity as a key factor in transforming museums. Their vision for a virtual museum goes beyond the digitisation of resources in individual museums, to the collaboration of multiple institutions (museums, libraries, archives, historic sites, scholarly societies, etc.) combining their digital resources: the "meta-museum".

The idea of making collections more accessible and disseminating knowledge to the widest possible audience is clearly a positive one. However, several authors warn of the dangers of museums just providing "more information to more people" and not really taking advantage of the interactive capacities of ICT. Donovan (1997) warns museums not to think that simply providing access to museum collection databases (and object-centric information) would be enough. He encourages them to provide context, storytelling, and stimulate curiosity, exploration and serendipity, if they want to create compelling online experiences and be of interest to a broad range of users. Likewise, Dierking and Falk (1998) emphasise how the capacity of new technology to offer visitors learn-

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ing options, interactivity and various degrees of depth of information will help museums ensure better understanding in visitors with varying backgrounds, interests, and knowledge levels, therefore increasing conceptual accessibility. Anderson (1999) proposes a "learning model" for creating digital content, rather than an "information provision" model.

Reaching broader and more diverse audiences

Many authors stress the power of ICT to attract new audiences. Certainly, the internet allows museums to reach global audiences, even in their own homes. It can reach people who are not able to visit the museum, or who are not inclined to do so. And the interactivity of the media is known to appeal children and young audiences. As stated by MacDonald and Alford (1997), "...museums cannot remain aloof from technological trends if they wish to attract 21st century audiences. Tomorrow's museum visitors will be people for whom computers and multimedia have already played a prominent part in their lives through schooling, recreation, and work experience."

However, beyond expanding the geographical and age group reach of museums, will the internet also affect the socioeconomic, educational or cultural background of museum audiences? Museum audiences for digital resources are growing fast, but the demographic information about web users indicate a similar profile to that of the traditional museum-visiting audience in terms of income and education (MacDonald and Alford, 1997; Keene, 1998).

In some countries this is starting to change. Ross (2001) indicates that more than 70% of UK population now has access to web technologies, from their homes, schools or offices. And soon, he reports, thanks to current developments in technology (such as mobile phones that enable surfing the internet and interactive digital television), and national initiatives that will connect all schools and libraries, a broader spectrum of society will gain access.

Creating new relationships with audiences

By helping to change and strengthen relationships with audiences, ICT also have an important role to play in creating the audience-centred museum that current trends in museology propose. Specific audience-centred interpretative strategies where ICT may contribute, as suggested by Morrisson and Worts (1998), include: bringing the visitors' story into the interpretive process; connecting the content of the activities to the visitors' life; connecting objects to people, places and purposes; connecting people to people, and people to resources; facilitating and encouraging playfulness;



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personalising the message through stories and narrative; involving visitors in making decisions, choices and judgements; providing multiple perspectives and viewpoints; creating responsive environments; and providing relevant information.

Jackson's (1998) vision for using ICT puts people first, encouraging applications that are user-driven, to create social relationships, and promote participation with the incorporation of users' expertise and views. He supports the idea of "collaborative knowledge creation" or "open documentation", which stresses the value of developing knowledge about collections collaboratively with the public (by making specific areas of collection databases open to public contribution). Anderson (2000) emphasises the need to help people learn how to use digital cultural resources creatively, and to ensure that this opportunity is open to groups that the market alone cannot reach.

The potential of web media to change museums' communication with users in a fundamental way is summarised succinctly by Walsh (1997). He argues that the tone of institutional authority characteristic of museums does not work well on the web, since its interactive characteristics have great potential to change the museum voice into "an infinitely richer and truer dialogue with the world".

The British experience:

Museums in the UK offer an interesting field to explore this emerging area of museum work. They operate in a policy context with a clear national agenda to foster lifelong learning, access and social inclusion. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) requires all government-funded museums, and the national museums in particular, to adopt access and audience development policies and to make the best use of ICT.

Several DCMS policy documents (such as the *Learning Power of Museums*, 2000; and *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, 2000) encourage the use of ICT as an important way of increasing accessibility to museums – with the belief that it can help not only to overcome geographical, economic, intellectual and attitudinal barriers to access, but also to reach, involve, and develop long-term and quality relationships with audiences.

To develop this potential, the UK government is committed to the provision, and funding, of digital learning networks, the creation of digital cultural content, and universal ICT access (internet in 2005 and digital TV in 2010 as targets), establishing the necessary conditions for the development of the digital dimensions of museums.

Networks and projects such as the *National Grid for Learning* (providing quality digital learning resources for schools and other learning institutions); the *People's Network* (connecting all public libraries to the internet by 2002 and providing access

to educational content in libraries, museums, archives and learning networks); the *24 Hour Museum* (the internet gateway for UK museums, and the first national museum on the web); or *Culture Online* (aiming to give both school children and lifelong learners online access to high quality and truly interactive cultural resources). As Anderson (1999) points out, there is great potential for museums to distribute digital learning resources over these networks.

The sector's demand for investment in ICT has been clearly articulated in reports such as *The Netful of Jewels* (1999), *Building the Digital Museum* (2000) and *Renaissance in the Regions* (2001). As of 2002, the most important funding initiatives that, directly or indirectly, benefited museums were:

- *New Opportunities Fund (NOF) Digitisation Programme*: £50m to create learning content on a large scale.
- *DCMS/Resource ICT Challenge Fund*: £500,000 (2 years) to encourage smaller museums to make innovative use of ICT.
- *People's Network*: £170m to connect all UK public libraries to the internet, including content, infrastructure and training.
- DCMS funding of £13m to develop projects for *Culture Online* (2002-2004)

National museums developing their online presence

With the goal to explore current practices among museums with a strong online presence, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with key staff at seven national museums: the Natural History Museum (NHM), the National Maritime Museum (NMM), the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the Imperial War Museum (IWM), the National Gallery (NG), the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), and the Tate Gallery (TG) (Loran, 2002).

The museums interviewed have had an online presence since the mid-90s (the Natural History Museum was the first in 1994, followed by the National Maritime Museum in 1996, and the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery in 1998). Since then, all have redesigned and re-launched their websites at least once. Websites have evolved quickly, from providing little more than visitor information and collection highlights to becoming large and complex sites that present a museum's scope of activity, provide online collection databases, online exhibitions, and learning resources; and, increasingly, building communities of interest with targeted programming.

The number of website visits reported is very high (and growing), in many cases higher than physical visitor figures. Here are some figures from the financial year 2000/01:



Museum	Physical visitors 00-01	Web visits 00-01
IWM	1.6 m*	3.2 m*
NHM	1.6 m	3.1 m
NMM	800.000*	1.5 m*
NG	4.8 m	1.1 m

* Figures include visitors to museum's branches and web visits to branches' sites or sub-sites.

Museum	Web visits 00-01	Web visits 01-02	Growth
NG	1.1 m	2.1 m	91%
IWM	3.2 m*	5.3 m*	66%
NHM	3.1 m	4.7 m	51%
NMM	1.5 m*	2 m*	33%

* Figures include web visits to museum's branches' sites or sub-sites.

What are museums doing to achieve such growth in web development and such a positive response from visitors? Research interviews revealed some key factors. The museums studied show a very strong commitment to web development among the direction and senior managers; they have web strategy groups in place to make sure that policy and strategy for the website is managed in a cross-divisional way and involve all museum departments; and report a very good integration of websites into museum mission, goals and policies. The following comments illustrate the vision and interest in an important online presence:

"One of the museum's central roles is to make information about the natural world accessible to a growing audience. Its pioneering website provides scientific data, educational programmes and resource materials to millions of internet users across the globe."

Natural History Museum Annual Report 1999

"I see our overriding challenges as reinforcing the academic base and ensuring the widest access for visitors of all ages, both for research and for leisure, and I envisage greater use of digital technology as our key strategy."

Roy Clare, September 2000, recently appointed Director, National Maritime Museum, press release

Another key factor is the existence of dedicated departments supporting the websites – with teams of five or six staff with very specific skills in some museums such as the Tate Gallery, the V&A and the National Gallery. Less widespread was the existence of specific website strategy documents or programming frameworks with clearly defined objectives and activities to guide web development – still at an early stage of development at the time of the interviews.

It is clear among the group of British national museums studied, that websites are becoming central to museum activity. A sign and example of websites' increasing importance and centrality can be found at the Tate Gallery, an institution made up of a group of galleries. In addition to serving and representing the institution's areas of activity, the website is seen as a new group location (the fifth, after the Tate Britain, the Tate Modern, the Tate Liverpool and the Tate St. Ives), with its own personality and featuring a distinct programme appropriate to the medium.

The museums' aspirations for websites are ambitious. Funding is therefore a major issue if they are to fulfil them. Website development and web teams at the museums interviewed are generally funded by core museum budget. These funds are expected to be complemented with sponsorship and government funding initiatives for specific projects. An interesting and different approach can be found at the Tate Gallery, where a sponsorship package with BT funds the Digital Programmes Department (the staff creating content), contributes cash towards specific web projects, provides help in-kind (hosting the site and the webcasting streaming media service) and secures marketing for the site (adverts and media coverage).

An important and common challenge is to secure major investment, so as to be able to embark on large-scale projects such as providing electronic access to museum collections, and developing interpretive and learning resources, which can be very labour intensive to produce. Government funding initiatives such as the New Opportunities Fund and Culture Online play an important role here, making it possible to digitise materials and develop educational content for websites, at a level that probably would not happen otherwise.

Some museums have already secured important government funding, such as the NMM, which was awarded a 1.6m NOF grant for its Port Cities Project (enabling it to make about 2m items of the museum's holdings accessible electronically and to create an internet-based learning resource combining the collections of several maritime museums and archives from around the UK).

Approaches to web content and audience development: a few examples

The museums studied reported focusing web content development mainly on increasing access and understanding of the collections, and broadening participation among traditional museum audiences. A great deal of effort is being put into making collections available online and developing interactive resources for learning and exploration – serving the needs of the general visitor and the specialist alike. More recently, online programming is becoming more targeted, serving a diversity of audiences with projects aimed at specific groups – not only core audiences, but also those usually underrepresented at museums.



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Museums with art collections have been the first to digitise collections and make them available online, but all the museums interviewed recognised the importance of making collections accessible through online databases, and all of them are working or planning to work towards this goal in the near future – well aware of the crucial need of first working on properly documenting and cataloguing the collections. The nature and size of collections are certainly key determining factors. The National Gallery collection is entirely online but it is a small collection of about 2,400 works, whereas the Natural History Museum's collection, for instance, has 70m specimens.

The National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate Gallery websites have invested in extensive and exemplary online collection databases. New data, features and search tools are continually being added to improve the service provided. These websites offer a range of tools to aid searching and exploration of collections, accommodating different needs, interests and levels of knowledge. They all report high levels of usage of collection information, demonstrating a good public response to this approach.

Education is becoming another key factor for web content development at the museums interviewed, with plans to increase the provision in coming years. Online learning resources aim to provide rich contextual information, with different layers of interpretation and entry points, and to encourage people's active involvement in learning. The Victoria and Albert Museum web projects, for instance, focus on interpretative and learning materials for non-specialist audiences. A major development in this direction has been the transfer of all of the British Galleries' interactive elements to the website.

For school audiences, new materials related to the National Curriculum (targeted to specific ages and educational levels), and new resources for teachers are being created. Good examples are two highly targeted educational interactive elements offered by the Imperial War Museum for children aged 8-10 years old: *Children of the Second World War* and *What was life like in the Second World War*, which provide images, oral recordings of people talking about their experiences and downloadable resources for teachers.

An interesting case in the trend to provide learning experiences for lifelong learning, beyond formal education, is the Tate Gallery website, which has recently expanded to offer an e-learning area. An example of material on this portal offering digital learning resources is a learning package about Damien Hirst's "Pharmacy", the first of a series of online projects in which contemporary artists explore and provide information on their works in the Tate Gallery collection. It includes a 360° panorama of the installation; a biography of the artist, with photos and suggestions for further reading; activities and fact sheets for schools and families to help explore the work in more detail; and a discussion area, with different views about "Pharmacy" from the artist and other commentators, in text and audio.

There are also some very interesting initiatives seeking to build on special interest and research communities around the world. At the Natural History Museum, for instance, the website fulfils an important role in providing content for professionals and enthusiasts, an audience that is not well cared for in the galleries (which are more targeted to tourists and families). It includes a portal to a comprehensive index of natural history information resources on the web; and the "Museum Data Locator", a facility that allows for searches of many of the museum's databases.

The National Maritime Museum also addresses the specialist audience through e-publishing (*The Journal of Maritime Research*, an academic publication available online on subscription) and a subject gateway (PORT, an associated website) offering access to comprehensive online resources on maritime studies selected in terms of their quality by subject specialists at the museum.

At the other end of the audience spectrum, some efforts are also taking place to reach and maintain relationships with non-traditional audiences, such as ethnic minorities or people from deprived areas. Existing web resources are usually an online component of social inclusion projects taking place in the "real world". They often present the project and showcase participants' stories, views, artwork or other contributions gathered or developed during outreach education programmes.

The V&A website provides interesting examples of web resources that support continued education work with ethnic groups, such as the *Shamiana* and the *Sikhs and Arts of the Panjab* projects. However, these experiences had not been seen, at the time of the interview, much response, highlighting the difficulties involved in attracting these groups to the website and the need to take into account issues of intellectual accessibility.

In relation to disabled audiences, all interviewees reported initiatives and efforts to improve the websites' accessibility for people with physical and mental disabilities, an issue clearly gaining importance and recognition. At the IWM, a complete redesign of the website was underway at the time of the interview so that it would adhere strictly to W3C guidelines (from the World Wide Web Consortium). At the same time, the National Gallery was undertaking a comprehensive audit by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) so that it could be included in the RNIB "See it Right" Accessible Website Initiative. The Tate Gallery is developing a groundbreaking project involving a digital educational resource for a visually impaired audience, to help them to explore some of the ideas, innovations and working methods of Matisse and Picasso.

Conclusions

In summary, the British experience is of particular interest as it shows a political context favourable to the development of this emerging area of museum work, and it provides some remarkable and



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exemplary cases from which to learn good practices. The research findings show a clear vision and commitment at the museums interviewed to an important online presence, and to use websites to increase access and reach broader and more diverse audiences. The research reveals an intense content development activity that makes good use of the capacities of the medium, and programming increasingly targeted to address the needs and interests of different audience groups. The interviewees outlined a good number of initiatives that, together, provide an interesting range of approaches, aimed mainly at engaging core users more deeply in the museum experience, but aiming also to attract and serve new audiences.

The public response has been highly positive. All the museum websites studied reported high numbers of online visits and meaningful use of online content, but little research and evaluation has been carried out to date. Despite websites playing an increasingly important role in terms of access and audience development goals, the extent and effectiveness of their contribution is still not known. What patterns of use are emerging? Are websites changing the way audiences use the museum and its collections? Does the online experience improve the museum experience? Do websites really help to diversify the museum audience base? And to increase loyalty among core audiences? How do web audiences relate to or differ from the physical visitor profile? Online audience research and summative evaluation of usage have an important role to play if museums want to understand this impact.

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Related links

- Natural History Museum: www.nhm.ac.uk
- National Maritime Museum: www.nmm.ac.uk
- Victoria and Albert Museum: www.vam.ac.uk
- Tate Gallery: www.tate.org.uk
- Imperial War Museum: www.iwm.org.uk
- National Portrait Gallery: www.npg.org.uk
- National Gallery: www.nationalgallery.org.uk



Margarida Loran

External consultant for the cultural content and services company adoptArt, SL

mloran@menta.net

Margarida Loran i Gili has a master's degree in Heritage Management from the University of Greenwich Business School, having graduated in Museum Studies from Harvard University and with a degree in Geography and History, specialising in the History of Art, from Barcelona University. She currently works as an external consultant for the cultural content and services company adoptArt, SL^[www1] where, recently, she has coordinated and led a range of projects for cultural institutions, including the digital presentation of the Catalan museum system for the Museum Service of the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalan Autonomous Government).

[www1]: www.adoptart.com