

“In conversations, Museum professionals need to move beyond discussions of specific technologies and explore a fuller dialogue on what these technologies mean to the experience of cultural content. It is only when directors and curators are informed of the true reach of Web 2.0 (In September 2006, YouTube had 34 million monthly visitors) and how this represents a watershed moment for Museums and cultural institutions to exponentially expand their audience while also making previously obscure content accessible. Once we can get over our love for the technologies (the cool factor) and treat these services as the strategic outreach they are will the adoption rates for these tools truly blossom.”(clm2134, 2007)

“The Internet has fundamentally changed the practical and economic realities of distributing scientific knowledge and cultural heritage. For the first time ever, the Internet now offers the chance to constitute a global and interactive representation of human knowledge, including cultural heritage and the guarantee of worldwide access.

We, the undersigned, feel obliged to address the challenges of the Internet as an emerging functional medium for distributing knowledge. Obviously, these developments will be able to significantly modify the nature of scientific publishing as well as the existing system of quality assurance.”(2003).

INTRODUCING THE BLUE OCEAN MUSEUM: an imagined museum of the nearly immediate future.¹

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2007

SCENE SETTING

Come with me to visit the Blue Ocean Museum, an imagined museum of the nearly immediate future. I am the director / imaginer of this museum which, while based on a new model, is grounded in real possibilities that are within or almost within reach.

I am not proposing change for the sake of change. This model aligns museums with the underlying consequences of the vast, fast-changing, often overwhelming and frequently puzzling internet.

Access to the internet is growing steadily. While the technology divide still exists, many kinds of increasingly affordable equipment make it possible for more people to be connected. The web is changing the way people generate, acquire, and use information.

“The new Web is a very different thing. It's a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution.”(Grossman, 2006)

Web 2.0 comprises social web sites "... that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users." (2007) These sites in creating layers of networks between friends, new acquaintances and strangers, have made it easy to generate, store, and pass on information quickly by-passing authorized channels. As a consequence, those organizations (governments, not-for-profit organizations and corporations) -- long in command of information -- can no longer control it. And without that control institutions will have to alter their very ways of operating.

Museums are among those institutions that are affected by this new wide-spread information sharing and will, I believe, have to shift from the intellectually-controlling institutions they currently are to becoming service providers of shared content in the future. In fact we are already seeing inklings of such practices within the more nimble museums around the world.

You might think this paper is about museums in virtual space; their websites, online exhibitions or digitized collections. It is not. I am proposing to change the fundamentals of the physical museum site, where actual people congregate. As I wrote the paper, I asked myself: "Will museums be willing to respond to the new internet reality in order to remain important civic spaces, or will their inherently conservative natures prevail rendering them marginal or even extraneous in the future?"

The museum I will describe is mythical and meant to be illustrative. The name -- Blue Ocean Museum -- comes from the book "Blue Ocean Strategy" in which the authors Kim and Mauborgne "argue that tomorrow's leading companies will succeed *not* by battling competitors, but by creating "blue oceans" of uncontested market space ripe for growth. (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005) It is hoped that the Blue Ocean Museum, by tapping into the democracy of the web, will succeed in a new blue ocean and, by attracting a broader than usual demographic, become widely used, unlocking "new demand" through its innovation and service.

As a matter of convenience I have chosen the content to match the museum's name, so the museum is dedicated to ecology, especially water, in all its manifestations. The proposed paradigm would work equally well, however, with any subject matter.

The Blue Ocean Museum's mission statement remains squarely within the traditional museum community and is -- "preserving and presenting tangible evidence of the earth's natural environment and its peoples in a welcoming gathering space for all members of the neighborhood and those just passing through." Among the cognoscenti the nickname of this museum is "The Deep" (as in "deep blue sea") and its tag line is "Dive In".

While the mission might sound similar to other museums, what is different is how the museum perceives of its relationship to its audience. The Deep is not an authoritative institution using the instructive voice and presenting carefully controlled bits of information; rather the museum facilitates personalized investigation by providing a

large amount of easily accessible content gleaned from many sources and available on an as-needed basis.

Given the easy access to information internet users have on their cell phones and computers, why go to the museum at all, you might ask? I reply that museums have two interlocking comparative advantages; they are the sites of multi-sensory experiences using tangible objects, and they remain trusted civic space where strangers can safely meet face-to-face in real-time interactions. These advantages become increasingly important given how isolated net users are and how synthetic virtual experience can be. So our traditional competitive edge – real things in real space among real people – remains. Yet I believe museums will remain relevant only if they invest in service strategies that mirror the way people have come to use the web to investigate and learn. In other words museums will have to change their internal cultural position from instructor to facilitator.

GALLERIES

Within the Blue Ocean Museum there are three content galleries – art, history and culture, and science. There is a study storage research section, and the ubiquitous café and shop, all of which can be accessed through the lobby. Each gallery has its own attraction appropriate to its content, but the basic set-up is similar one to another and organized to facilitate access to the information the visitor might want when face to face with objects. The entire building has wireless access compatible with the range of equipment (i.e. cell phone, mp3 player, pda, etc.) the visitor have brought with them. Additionally there are simple laptop-type computers one can borrow. Hang the expense; this is after all a fantasy museum!

Each gallery has:

- Comfortable seating with a surface on which to use the laptop. These seats are placed so that the objects are in view. Visitors are encouraged by the physical setting to investigate objects and then be able immediately to look-up the answers to questions they are self generating.²
- A hands-on physical activity area that provides families with something to do related to the installed theme. This is placed so that while children participate, their parents can simultaneously keep an eye on them and assess the installation, themselves.³
- Access to a huge data base -- perhaps the internet itself – that is organized through a useful search engine. Additionally the visitor can find a bookmarked selection of associated interesting sites within a framework that limits certain socially unacceptable sites.⁴
- An available blog platform so that the visitor can to enter into a written conversation with the curator and all other participants who wish to join in.⁵
- Sets of portable headphones so that one can listen to audio tours produced from various perspectives with the ability to record tours of one's own to leave for others to enjoy.⁶
- The ability to listen to appropriate music and other soundscapes associated with the theme and learn about other audio material along lines of one's interest⁷.

- A printed bibliography of useful resources from multiple sources (print, audio, video, movies, web, etc.) that can be accessed at home for further study.⁸
- Various printed or electronic trails based on input by other visitors tailored to special interests, time constraints or age of accompanying children.
- A video, photography and audio recording “studio” that permits visitors to add content to the sites provided.⁹
- A section of the physical exhibition that has been designed to reflect the input of prior visitors and to respond to current events.¹⁰

It is not the strategies that are new. They all already exist, some only on the net and some as small experiments in museums.¹¹ They have not been aggregated together in a museum site yet, though, as every day passes, more possibilities are becoming realistically available. What is new is the dedication of the Blue Ocean Museum to co-partner with museum visitors so that choice and production of content can be shared.

The Blue Ocean Museum combines the technology with other exhibition strategies to develop a mix of interactions. For example, the special feature of the history and culture exhibit space is a real or imagined environment similar to a period room that has sound, furniture, artifacts, etc., adding as many contextual elements as possible. The opening period room will be Captain Ahab’s cabin, an imagined place as it could have existed with access to the historical context, readings from Moby Dick, and excerpts from related movies.¹²

The science section, for its part, is full of hands-on experimental stations and has a section reserved for “relevance and timelines” where news is posted quickly for all to see and where hosts are available to explain contemporary issues and facilitate discussion and debate.¹³

These descriptions are presented as illustrations of a basically altered institution. The technology is only a means toward creating a museum that is intentionally responsive to and malleable by the visitors themselves. I am motivated by a belief that if museums become more intellectually democratic institutions, many more people will find them relevant to their lives.

What sets “The Deep” apart from other museums is the amount and type of content that is available for the visitor to use. While there is information available that is carefully written, chosen or edited by the curator (as is now traditionally the case,) there is much more available that has been authored by others (which is not).

The kind of information is intentionally chosen for its associative relevance – there is “stream of conscious” browsing material that includes fiction, news clippings, film, first person narration, animation, etc. In the art gallery, for example, there are auction catalogues, reviews, biographies, movies, fashion and literature of the time, gossip, and a photographic file of other work produced by the same artist for comparison sake. Since the internet with relatively broad access is available on site, one assumes some might go further afield. In other words each exhibition has been set up to allow people to

answer their own personal questions as they occur. The fact that these questions might stray from the exhibit, like that part of everyone's daydreaming, is expected and encouraged.

STUDY STORAGE

The objects collected by "The Deep" include art, crafts, natural history examples, cultural material and live specimens in aquariums. All the items not on exhibition are on view in the study storage area.

Displaying collections in a study storage area is a current museum trend.¹⁴ With the invention of an easily updated and installed micro-dot that holds vast amounts of information, one can make associated content easily available to visitors who are looking at the relevant object. The formerly clunky structure of writing down something and going elsewhere to look it up is eliminated. As in the rest of the museum, the available information is not all created by the staff nor is it only factually dispassionate.

There is a system that allows the public to add keywords to the database. This is known as tagging or "folksonomies." "The process of folksonomic tagging is intended to make a body of information increasingly easier to search, discover, and navigate over time."¹⁵ Thus taxonomies like library catalogues and museum collections records formerly controlled by workers within the industry are increasingly being opened to modification by users. Interestingly a number of museums are already experimenting with users tagging collections on the museum's website, though I know of none who are making this available on the exhibition floor.¹⁶

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE:

Given your journey through this new museum, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are consequences for the organization. New administrative structures will be needed.

Building large free open access data bases through the voluntary cooperation of millions is already challenging the twentieth century business model based on withholding and controlling so-called "proprietary" or trade-marked information.

The pyramidal administrative structure with its ascending levels of supervision of increasing authority is being challenged by internet users working alone and in free flowing groups called networks. There are network theorists who are trying to understand how the small often unedited contributions of millions of people can create services and products that are quantitatively better than the previous ones which were carefully researched and controlled by a highly specialized few.

Suffice it to say, perhaps as a cop-out, that the new museum business model is the subject for another paper and The Blue Ocean Museum, which is based on the web 2.0 model of shared authoring, has an unknown administrative structure at this time.

What is known is that the curator's role will become enlarged to become a knowledge manager rather than solely a researcher and knowledge provider. The most interesting element of the curator's job might become the exploration and presentation of both related and tangential material as peaks their personal interest or might appeal to others.

PERSONALIZATION AND CUSTOMIZATION: Learning consequences

Why provide so much content within the walls of the museum? Why not allow the visit to be "pure", untrammelled by information interruptions? Because this generation of web users will demand increasing access to relevant information in real time. People are used to accessing and then isolating information as they need it (bookmarking) and altering it as it pertains to them (personalization and customization). It is easy to do and the move to personalized and customized content is increasing in both commerce and education.

What is the downside? As the trend toward information on demand continues, will people learn more and more about less and less, you might ask? Will their life experience limit their agenda or reduce the context in which to fit the information? Will future adults have a wide set of net contacts associated to a limited set of experiences, a narrow band of intense expertise and an uneven understanding of such topics like history, science, and nature. What will be the consequences of limited learning on the requirements for effective citizenship and the peaceful and productive interaction of unfamiliar peoples with each other? These are reasonable questions.

"There are concerns that this [personalization] is a cause of the increased balkanization and partisan rancor in our politics as people retreat into their own little information echo-chambers where they only care to deal with people who share their views and information that buttresses their belief systems." PDF 14(Rainie, 2006)¹⁷

And some museum educators have written:

"What about public education and cultural heritage? Should they be customized? And if these experiences were given over to customization, what happens to treasured ideas like intended messages, shared experiences, belongingness, and collective cultural identity?"¹⁸

I share this concern and believe that museum leaders must participate in many forums to continue this questioning. But I take the position that the consequences are potentially positive.

THE MOTIVATION TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW:

For example, it is increasingly clear that narrowed study will not be the only outcome personalized learning. Increased browsing often known as "googling," is gaining in popularity and with it the acquisition of new information.

There are websites specifically organized to lead users from the known to unfamiliar territory. www.pandora.com, for example, encourages listeners to hear unfamiliar music that is similar to the music they already know and like. www.amazon.com suggests books that are related to the books the reader has already read. The motivation to learn something new related to one's established interest may well prove to be powerful enough to offset the balkanization that is worrying others.

People choose new sources of information based on trust and that trust must be earned, it is not chosen at random. Asking one's friends (word of mouth) has always been considered to be a source of trustworthy information. Huge websites such as www.myspace.com are built to establish trust starting from the known (friends) and moving outward. www.tripadvisor.com mixes "word of mouth" opinions generated by users with factual information to help travelers decide on potential travel destinations. In this new context, museums will leverage the trust they have developed as an authority in the past to this new environment.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE DARK SIDE:

But the web also has a dark side that must be acknowledged. The motivation of web users is not always benign. To be a blogger, one need not be literate, use grammar correctly, or provide interesting material. Much of the content found on the web is boring, silly, inane, and unreliable. Some of the information found on the web is verifiable while much is conjecture, or just plain wrong. Some is even malicious.

An individual can create aliases with ease and change persona at will. There are web experiences that are related to reality as we know it and an almost equally mesmerizing world that is invented reality.

There is hearsay, false information, identity theft, scams, and hackers. Some bloggers intend to influence others to act in socially unacceptable ways. The edges of the web are dangerous and its uses problematic.

In response, pundits are divided: "Web 2.0 either empowers the individual providing an outlet for the 'voice of the voiceless' or it elevates the amateur to the detriment of professionalism, expertise and clarity." ¹⁹

An potential outcome of more and more people talking to each other about less and less is not far-fetched. And indeed the trivial material exchanged all day by young people instant messaging each other suggests that this time-consuming activity has already infected us and may be interfering with the time available for skill acquisition or family interaction.

The virtual environment is not sufficient to maintain civil stability. It must be intermixed with real-time, face-to-face, peaceful group interaction among diverse strangers. Museums have, as one of their special advantages, neutral attractive civic space. It may be, in our new cyber environment, that personal access to other people will become a more important museum asset than it already is.

Museum leaders, influenced by their interest in contributing to civic wellbeing have embedded such words as “forum, meeting ground, marketplace of ideas, and safe space for unsafe ideas” within their vision and mission statements. Yet I would contend that they have done so without understanding the thorough-going change the full realization of such an idea would cause. And now to become responsible within the internet universe, museums will need to rethink their civic responsibility more carefully and thoughtfully than ever before.

THE ROLE OF A CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FACE OF WEB 2.0

There are contemporary philosophers who, using phrases such as “Social Capital” and “Civil Society”, suggest that museums and other like organizations have responsibilities that include civic order and group cohesion.

“**Civil society** comprises the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning [society](#) as opposed to the force-backed structures of a [state](#) (regardless of that state's political system) and commercial institutions.”²⁰

“Civil society is important for democracy because it is the free space in which democratic attitudes are cultivated and democratic behavior is conditioned. (Barber, 1998, p. 6).

Robert Putnam would argue that there is

“... a distinction between two kinds of social capital: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding occurs when you are socializing with people who are like you: same age, same race, same religion, and so on. But in order to create peaceful societies in a diverse multi-ethnic country, one needs to have a second kind of social capital: bridging. Bridging is what you do when you make friends with people who are not like you, like supporters from another football team. Putman argues that those two kinds of social capital, bonding and bridging, do strengthen each other.”²¹

In this context, civil society organizations serve “to hold the state accountable, ensure that multiple voices are heard in the policy process, and use associative action for economic, social and political change. They also permit a range of values and points of view to be expressed within society “. (Salamon, 1997) Such a pluralist environment preserves choices and enables individuals to act on their own ideas and values in relation to the “common good.”²²

A danger inherent in the internet revolution is the replacement of an agreed civic curriculum with the rise of individuality in which group norms are no longer understood, ascribed to or relevant. Social scientists interested in networking and the consequences of web 2.0 come to a few conclusions. The first is that there needs to be an agreement about etiquette and the rules of use. In the current world of the web there

are various and fluid rules of behavior. Norms are established for one site but don't translate to another. So when extending the web 2.0 possibilities to their extreme ends it is possible for the civic curriculum to be lost while individual expertise rises, creating a society of unrelated specialists who do not understand how to operate within a broader context.

CONCLUSION:

Museums, like many other institutions, have tried to remain basically unaffected in order to preserve their traditional method of delivery of services and their important traditional role. While many museums have websites, museums mostly use them as a new technological pipeline for the same old information posted in other formats. If asked, I believe that most museums would say that their presentation of reliable information is an important ingredient that ensures quality and trustworthiness. Quality control is indeed an issue, one being struggled with all over the net. The accommodation however must not be the exclusion of other sources, but rather some way to differentiate between the organization's material and those suggested by others.

I predict that, even in the short run, museums will:

- Broaden their delivery systems so that information authored by others appears within their physical sites.
- Move more quickly to integrate their collections records and images with others into broadly-held sites, given the general academic trend toward open-source materials.
- Include audience generated keywords (tagging) so that finding aids become more intuitive and linked to more emotional and fictional categories. There is evidence that some of this is already happening.
- Make blogging visible so that comment, and possibly refutation by credentialed, non-credentialed, and anonymous others can be seen and responded to within their walls in the same fashion as the web news media have already done.
- Facilitate the distribution of "unendorsed" trails created by strangers for others to follow.
- Institute visible access to their collections, with each item associated with downloadable content so that individuals can pursue specialized interests without prior permission.

If they don't quickly do these things, I believe museums will become even more the underused and irrelevant mausoleums our detractors have long suggested they already are.

On the other hand, if museums transform themselves and are seen as trustworthy knowledge brokers rather than unitary authorities, I suggest that the museum's place in society will be enhanced.

If one believes that accepting contrarian information in one's midst and participating in the ensuing dialogue is at the heart of democracy²³, then a new, slightly chaotic, democracy can be nurtured within the walls of the Blue Ocean Museum and all that follow. In this new configuration, museums will rightfully become a useful forum for peaceable conversation.

There are philosophers whose backgrounds include technology production and sociology who are thinking optimistically about the future. They posit that this new internet-based cooperative group behavior which one author characterizes as the "Smart Mob," will prevail and their actions will continue to contribute to commercial and civic success.(Rheingold, 2002, Surowiecki, 2004)

In today's world, we are surrounded by examples of seemingly intransigent tribal war and narrowly defined ideological hatred, it is refreshing to think that web 2.0 is providing examples of peaceful cooperation even as other networks are being used for divisive and dangerous communication. I remain hopeful that the museums that participate in this increasingly influential universe can be an important force for civil stability and will become the essential inclusionary institutions I have long hoped for.

Make no mistake. We are living in the midst of a true world-wide revolution whose consequences are murky and fluid and whose impact may equal or exceed those of inventions that changed previous history.

The consequence of web 2.0 is that the control of information is no longer in the hands of any institution. I believe museums have no alternative but to share authority. We cannot continue to invite our visitors to be passive recipients of our received knowledge. They have morphed into the rabble of a new and unpredictable insurgency. And they're busy creating handbills of dissent without the permission of any central authority. They hold the power of instantaneous information in their hands, just as we hold our venerable institutions in trust. By sharing the authoring of information with them, we are at least righting the power equation. And there is no better time to start than now.

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¹ I am indebted to this reformulation of my previous paper to an imagined museum journey to Wendy Luke and Marsha Semmel who generously read my previous paper which was mired in detail and suggested this Blue Ocean journey. I am grateful to them both and dedicate the paper to them, Dean Anderson (my husband and editor) and my world-wide colleagues other pals who read and criticize my work as it unfolds.

² Conversely visitors they can carry their own seating with them to get up close to objects. This as was experimented by MAKMAC Frankfurt in Germany almost a decade ago.

http://www.museum fuer angewandte kunst frankfurt.de/index_2.html#

³ See Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, Scotland,

<http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/index.cfm?venueid=4>

⁴ See (who has on-site data bases within galleries)

⁵ See (on-site blog sites)

⁶ See the guerilla iPod tour and podcasts made for exhibitions such as

http://www.metmuseum.org/events/ev_podcast.asp#episodes

⁷ See www.pandora.com

⁸ See www.amazon.com

⁹ See www.flickr.com , www.storycore.net

¹⁰ See Molndal Museum, Molndal, Sweden

¹¹ Put in Dallas Museum of Art /YouTube and Australia Archives / Flickr

¹² See the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka, Japan.

¹³ See the Ontario Science Center, the Minnesota Science Center and the Boston Science Museum. And DAVIS, J., GURIAN, ELAINE HEUMANN, KOSTER, EMLYN (2003) Timeliness: A Discussion for Museums. *Curator*, 46, 353-361

¹⁴ See the Hermitage, Russia, the New York Historical Society in New York, and the XXX museum in Vancouver Canada.

¹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy>

¹⁶ See Powerhouse in Australia and the Steve Tagging Project. www.steve.museum.

¹⁷ Ranie

¹⁸ Envisioning the Customized Museum:

An Agenda to Guide Reflective Practice and Research

Mary Ellen Munley, Randy Roberts, Barbara Soren and Jeff Hayward, soon to be published in *In Principal In Practice*

¹⁹ wiki

²⁰ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society Accessed 26 December 2006

²¹ Wiki http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Putnam

which includes: unfettered intellectual access by individuals to a vast quantity of information pursued based on personal choice, people's ability to effect large scale events by posting information on person-

to-person websites, and the establishment of new virtual communities which bypass organized institutions and established boundaries

²² eikenberry

²³ Interestingly the first pronouncement of the newly democratically elected government of Turgekkistan was to open internet cafes.