The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

Methodology

Over the course of four months, I examined at least 100 museum websites (mostly for public history museums), as well as numerous other types of websites. (A partial is included in this website.) My goals were to develop an understanding of what makes a Web visit easy and memorable, what approaches and techniques museums are currently using (and to what effect), and what innovations other types of websites use that might fruitfully be employed on a public history museum website. I was then able to categorize public history museum websites into four basic types. The simplest is what I label an *Ad*; this is essentially a one-page poster for the museum and consists only of a *home page*. It conveys basic information such as location, hours, and overall focus of the museum. It may or may not contain images, such as an image from the collection. (For an example, visit http://www.alabamamuseums.org/b_bchm.htm.)

The second type I call a *Brochure*. In addition to the home page with the information mentioned above, it has either two or three additional pages or one long, scroll-down page that might include a calendar of events, an exhibition roster, membership information, and/or directions. (For an example, visit http://ritzville-museums.org/depot-museum.shtml.)

A third type I call a *Catalogue*. This has multiple pages but is organized either horizontally (one page leads to the next, as in a book) or, if vertically, in a shallow hierarchy (one page might lead to additional information related only to something on that page). A Catalogue describes the museum’s mission, calendar, membership benefits in detail, the museum shop (possibly with online ordering), and the individual exhibits (possibly with a short blurb about each)—in addition to the basic information. It might provide some brief historical context. (For an example, visit http://www.queensfarm.org.)

The Ad, Brochure, and Catalogue function the same way that these types of marketing and information materials would in a print format. The difference in presentation is negligible: one is read on a screen, the other on paper.

The fourth type, *Education and Research* (which might also be called a *Learning Environment*), takes better advantage of the Web. Using multiple pages, the website conveys not only all that can be found in the Catalogue, but also extensive information about exhibits, such as contextual history, history of individual artifacts, and additional research material. (For an example, visit http://www.wshs.org.) In a lecture given at "Museums on the Web: An International Conference, 1997," Robert Guralnick called this organizational structure "infinite hierarchical depth. [Starting] with very general information about a topic, [we can] move deeper and deeper into the meat of the topic [. . .]."¹ Since this type of website is the only one with the potential to be a genuine "room" of the museum, I selected for study three museums with Education and Research websites.

It must be pointed out that these were also museums with both a physical and a virtual presence, as opposed to an exclusively virtual presence. Virtual museums have been defined as "an organized collection of electronic artifacts and information resources. [. . .] A *learning museum* offers substantial online learning resources which invite many repeat visits and enable substantial investigations and exploration."² It is content-rich, might
take multiple visits to explore, may offer learning activities for many ages and learning styles (including research), and increases desire for a physical "real-time" visit to the museum.

For objectivity, I picked museums that I had never visited either virtually or physically: The United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, The National Museum of the American Indian, and The Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture, all in Washington, DC. I selected these museums not only because of the type of website they employ, but also because, as national museums, they are in the spotlight for how they handle issues of diversity, ethnicity, and interpretation.

It is important to note here that I am neither a museum nor a Web professional. My occupation for the last twenty-two years has been as a freelance writer and editor—in other words, as a purveyor of effective communication. My particular expertise lies in analysing the clarity and efficacy of materials for the reader and rewriting or making recommendations according to my findings. Therefore I was able to approach the museum visit as an informed but unbiased museum-goer.

This website looks at the entire experience with a bifurcated eye: the naïve eye going into it and the educated eye coming out of it. I made a deliberate decision to include my voice in this examination; doing so is, in effect, the same as presenting the museum audience with a signed curatorial statement (while of course making no claims to being a curator). In addition, I wanted the project to reflect an actual viewer's experience. In other words, this project is not just about abstract concepts and applications; it is also about how real people respond to those concepts and applications. Admittedly there are limitations on this, since I had a purpose in mind throughout my investigation.

Nevertheless, I created a plan that to some degree replicated a standard approach. First I visited each museum's website; then I travelled to the museum and compared the experience. In addition, I noted what expectations I had prior to the physical visit (based on my previous virtual visit) and how those expectations were or were not met.

Following the museum visit, I revisited the website to see what it offered as far as helping to clarify my understanding of the exhibits, as well as to see whether I could add anything to the physical experience by revisiting the website. Originally I had also planned to interview museum personnel, but I abandoned that plan when I realized that it might compromise the objectivity of my visits.

After I had visited the museums physically once and virtually twice (once before and once after the real-time visit), I read deeply in the available literature in the field of museums and the Web. While much has been published about Web design in general, less has been written about Web design in relation to museums. The only comprehensive and germane article that I read, "Historical Museums on the World Wide Web: An Exploration and Critical Analysis" by Sue Ann Cody, was published in 1997. Given that it asked many of the same questions that I had raised—but asked them eight years ago—it seemed timely to revisit the issue. Cody did not, however, address my fundamental question, which is how a website can function as a part of the museum experience rather than primarily as bait to lure the visitor to the physical site.

The creation in 1997 of Archives and Museum Informatics, which sponsors an annual, international conference on museums and the Web, has contributed greatly to the body of work in this area. I found a plethora of relevant articles in their archives. Nothing, however, directly answered my question.
After reading the available materials, I revisited the websites for the three museums, this time examining them from a more informed, technical view. Finally, I developed some recommendations and a list of criteria based on the total experience.

These three museums update their websites frequently. Included within the individual sections are "snapshots" of their home pages in November of 2004 and July of 2005. The Web changes so swiftly that new approaches will doubtless be in place by the time this site is published, but the questions raised in this paper will, I trust, be nonetheless worthy of consideration—if only as a measure of how far public history museum websites have travelled conceptually in such a short time.