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Museums in a Digital World: A Report on Web-Wise 2003

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“Sustaining Digital Resources,” the theme for the Web-Wise 2003 Conference held on Feb. 27th and 28th in Washington, DC, may seem less critical to museums than to libraries and archives. Nevertheless, this filled-to-capacity gathering organized by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) with the Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries, had relevance for museums, whether collections-based or not.

Blurring of Boundaries

It didn't take long for a major issue—“blurring of boundaries”—to get raised. In his keynote address, Robert Coonrod, President & CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, described the transformation of public TV and radio now taking place. Stations are shifting from defining themselves as broadcasters to platform-independent distributors of community-based public service digital media. That's not just fancy talk. The most visited .org site worldwide is www.pbs.org, with some 2.3 billion page views in 2002.

Although it constantly changes, the web can establish permanency. Every public TV show, even those no longer on air, now has its own subsidiary site making related content accessible at any time; some PBS sites never had a broadcast component. David Liroff, VP & Chief Technology Officer at WGBH, brought home the potential for institutional blurring created by this expanding digital presence. He recalled *The New Yorker* cartoon that shows one canine commenting to another while typing at a computer: “On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog,” effectively making the point that distinctions between museums, libraries, and other content providers are minimized on the web.

Collaborative Projects

Rather than intensify competition among institutions, overlapping roles can also lead to collaboration. That desired outcome, reinforced in remarks by Robert Martin, Director of IMLS, is the underlying goal for another agency effort, the 21st Century Learner Initiative¹. It seeks to foster dialogue on the ways in which museums, libraries, and public service media can become “communities of educators” by working together to meet the lifelong needs of “communities of learners” in a knowledge-based society.

The conference highlighted many IMLS-funded examples of fruitful collaboration. For example, the Nebraska Historical Society is partnering with Nebraska Educational Television, the state department of education, and school districts to create “American Bounty: The Story of Food,” a web site for teaching history using archival resources. An element likely to increase acceptance is an embedded assessment that automatically generates reports for both teachers and schools.

Some of the many other examples presented included:

- National Science Digital Library (NSDL), a massive online aggregation of science education resources for pre-K through lifelong learning being created with NSF funding (www.nsdlib.org).
- vPlants, a virtual herbarium developed by the Morton Arboretum, Field Museum of Natural History, and Chicago Botanic Garden (www.vplants.org).
- ScienceSource, a program of the Discovery Center of Springfield, MO and its county library system to increase literacy through programs on science, math, health and environment (www.discoverycenter.org/sciencesource.asp).
- Computational tools for modeling, visualizing and analyzing historic and archaeological sites by a Columbia University cross-disciplinary team (www.learn.columbia.edu/amheida/html/home.html).
- International Children’s Digital Library, a joint project of the University of Maryland Institute for Advanced Computer Studies and the Internet Archive (www.icdlbooks.org/frameadults.html).

PUR Projects

Although not identified as such, a thread of interest to science-oriented institutions consisted of several web-based projects that support Public Understanding of Research (PUR)². Beginning this April, the Lowell Observatory Public Astronomical Research Center will allow web users to make their own observations using a remote-controlled 16" telescope, as well as access a digital archive of research-grade astronomical data (see kraken.lowell.edu/loparcstat.html for status). The North Carolina Zoological Society's "Field Trip Earth" takes a very different tack. At their site (www.fieldtripearth.org), students can participate in conservation projects, such as elephant tracking in Africa, by interacting with wildlife professionals in the field.

In addition, there were technical challenges described in connection with other projects that would lend themselves to PUR. One was technology for indexing diverse historic audio collections for the National Gallery of the Spoken Word (svoice.colorado.edu); another involved transferring, processing, and archiving the terabytes (trillions of bytes) of astronomical data now being collected around the world (for example, skyserver.sdss.org/en). Both are applications of the emerging scientific field of data exploration. These projects, presented at the conference by university researchers, inadvertently illustrated the difficulty of conveying complex information to a lay audience.

Sustainability (and Collaboration Again)

The major conference theme of sustainability took several forms. One was digital preservation, such as the approaches being developed by Electronic Records Archives program at the National Archives (www.archives.gov/electronic_records_archives), and the challenges of preserving digital media-based art works presented by the Berkeley Art Museum/ Pacific Film Archive.

Another aspect was economic sustainability, or as suggested by Winston Tabb, Dean of University Libraries at Johns Hopkins, “nourishment.” How to fund important digital programs and services beyond continually applying for grants? Those seeking a “magic bullet” were likely disappointed. Not surprisingly, the necessity to focus on user or audience needs and to develop sound revenue-based business plans that include long term costs were recommended. Collaboration was often proposed as a means for sustenance, perhaps because so many projects involved partnerships. On the other hand, strategically developed collaboration can be effective, as numerous examples demonstrated.

No matter how defined or structured, collaboration offers the opportunity to match complementary resources. For example, as Joyce Ray of IMLS noted, museums with expertise in audience-focused interpretation and libraries with expertise in managing digital assets can gain from sharing respective strengths. Other forms of collaboration, such as those involving large and small organizations or public and private entities, allow different kinds of “exchanges” to take place that have potential to leverage limited resources, expand audiences, or reduce costs. One speaker indicated that collaboration was not just a good idea; it was necessary today for institutional survival. No one said that creating or nurturing collaboration was easy, however.

Conclusion

Web-Wise 2003, the fourth annual IMLS conference on libraries and museums in the digital world, demonstrated growing maturity of the digital field. For many institutions, the move is towards greater sophistication and interaction, such as the PUR applications mentioned. For collecting institutions, emphasis is shifting from simply digitizing materials to how the digital resources can affect change in those accessing them (“it’s the software, stupid”). This trend is encouraging because the focus is increasingly on the audience, rather than type of institutional resource, such as collections.

Technology will, of course, continue to evolve, increasing opportunities for innovative programming and outreach. Based on a recent IMLS survey³, more than 54% of

museums currently use technology to support programming; the most common form is “Information on exhibits is presented to the public via the Web” (37%). Museums lag behind libraries in technology use; smaller museums show the greatest gap. As costs continue to drop, barriers to obtaining hardware will decline. But people and funds will still be required to create meaningful and engaging applications, not to mention maintaining and updating systems. This need brings us back to the importance of developing means for long-term sustenance and the potential for sharing resources through collaboration.

By signing up for “Primary Source” at www.ims.gov, you can receive monthly communication from the agency about this and future IMLS conferences, along with information about the National Leadership Grants that funded the projects presented. Appropriately, conference papers will be published online in the peer-reviewed internet journal firstmonday.org.

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¹Sheppard, Beverly. 2001. “Museums, Libraries and the 21st Century Learner.” Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services; see also www.ims.gov/whatsnew/21cl/21clintro.htm.

² For a recent report, see Carol and David Ucko. 2002. “Public Understanding of Research Meeting Held in St. Paul.” *The Informal Learning Review* 57:22.

³ Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2002. “Status of Technology and Digitization in the Nation’s Libraries and Museums.” Washington, DC. Also available online at www.ims.gov/reports/techreports/summary02.htm.