

Museum and Archives Moving from Net to Networking

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Recent developments in the cultural heritage sector show that institutions are gradually abandoning their conservative attitudes with regard to new technologies. Although museums, archives and other institutions have embraced digitization since the late 1990s, they have failed to take full advantage of the other possibilities that new technologies have put at their disposal (Cameron and Robinson, 2007: 174). This attitude is due to a long tradition and philosophy of 'closedness' and 'control' in which museums have operated for long. Museum studies scholar Ross Parry and his colleagues offer one possible explanation: 'Traditionally, museums bring fragments of society's knowledge and experience into a *highly controlled environment*, a *closed system*, within which order can then be found – or contrived'(Parry *et al.*, 2010:96. Emphasis added). This philosophy turned museums into what Parry (2007:102) called 'cultural freezers'. The current trend, however, shows signs that heritage institutions have taken a new direction by taking their collections from the *highly controlled environment*, from the *closed system*, into the *uncontrolled* and *uncontrollable* World Wide Web, first, and then into its Web 2.0 version. The Netherlands is said to be on top in this respect (De Haan *et al.*, 2006: 5; 13 and 44; see also SNK, 2009:7), and the 12 November 2010 *MuseumFuture! Connect* conference in Zeist seems to confirm it. In the paragraphs below, I want to explore one of the most discussed topic during the conference – the social networking media in the cultural heritage sector. I will do that by highlighting the way heritage professionals are striving to build communities around their collections, and by providing a theoretical perspective to that subject.

Organized by Erfgoed Digitaal, a Dutch company specializing on new technologies in the cultural heritage sector, the conference brought together about 200 people, mainly heritage professionals, but also other people interested in cultural heritage and new media either for academic reasons (my case) or for commercial reasons (the case of the many companies that exhibited their latest products and services). The three words in the conference title tell the story by themselves: the *Future* of *Museums* resides in their capacity to *Connect* their collections to the users. Digital media professor Paul

Rutten (Leiden University) told the audience that new plans need to be laid down to integrate new media:

Many people think that if you put objects online, the popularity of your institution will decrease. I don't believe that. It rather increases it and attracts more people. The question is: what plans are we laying down concerning what new media achieve with regard to old media.

According to professor Rutten, one point heritage professionals should take into account as content providers is to stop thinking vertically:

Digitization introduces what Castells calls the 'Network Society' where everything is differently organized and structured. What does this network bring? This network connects people with one another, and from this connection emerge new patterns that did were previously impossible...

I find the shift from the vertical model to the horizontal model very interesting. Media professionals are used to vertical thinking, that is, providing many people with content from a central position. Today's networks link people to one another, and if you are lucky as content provider you play a role in those networks that keep interconnections among users.

The National Archive seems to be already operating in a more or less horizontal model. In their 'Archive Out There' [Het archief naar buiten] workshop, Eefje van der Weijden and Tim de Haan explained that their institution placed 1,300 pictures from its collection on Flickr, a photo-sharing site. In two years (2008-2010), 3 million visitors were recorded, and, more interestingly, the traffic on the main National Archive's website increased. On its Flickr account, the National Archive invites users, under each picture, to be active in the meaning-assigning process: 'You can help us enrich the knowledge about photo collections by adding your tags and comments'.

This approach has at least two immediate implications: on the one hand, by adding tags, users help create automatic links among all related pictures with the same tag, both within the same collection and within the Flickr database. As a result, one particular picture would call up a related one, regardless of where it comes from (see Bruns, 2009: 178; Shirky, 2008: 32-33; O'Reilly, 2005). In other words, calling users to tag pictures is having recourse to what new media author Chris Anderson (2006:108) termed 'distributed intelligence'. The latter turns crowds into taggers. By tagging, users are offering recommendations or guidance, even though they mostly ignore it, because a

piece of 'software [is] watching their actions and drawing conclusions from them'. Users are therefore engaged in what new media scholar Axel Bruns (2009: 173) calls 'produsage', as they both *use* objects and *produce* new 'knowledge structures' by, among others, assigning them descriptive keywords or tags. On the other hand, users are likely to form *photo communities* (Shirky, 2008:36). The Council for Culture remarks that this way of producing meaning through user-participation adds considerable value to collections (Raad voor Cultuur, 2010:11). It is obvious that social networking media highly favour horizontal thinking, as users and heritage professionals share the meaning-assigning task. This also confirms new media theorist Pierre Lévy's remark that, 'There is no longer an *absolute* distinction...between the artist and the public, between visitors and those who mount exhibitions, between the critic and the public' (Lévy, 2010:109; see also, Anderson, 2006:78 Buckingham, 2007: 170; Raad voor Cultuur, 2010: 4).¹

In addition, these institutions are increasing the chance of being 'discovered' by the broader public on the Web. National Archive's De Haan gave a clear example of how one picture on Flickr was among the top hits on Google. Finally, through social networking media, institutions are fostering polysemy, multiple/hyper-narrativism and multi-layering around their objects (Cameron, 2010: 84; Roegiers and Truyen, 2008:70; Manovich, 2010: 69-70). Once again, the National Archive offers a good example of the latter aspect. Van der Weijden showed how her institution's approach to collecting user stories on major events of the past has generated hundreds of reactions. Known as *Het verhalenarchief 2.0*, (archive stories 2.0), the theme-based initiative has already user-generated stories on '400 years: the Dutch in New York'; on '65 years: Liberation'; and in months to come, on '50 years: Italian labour migrants'.

Leiden-based Museum Boerhaave is operating on a close but different terrain: Twitter, the short message networking site. The museum has formed a Twitter community of 2,187 followers (12 November 2010), mostly ordinary visitors, heritage professionals, science fans, and news media professionals. Telling colleagues from other institutions, Museum Boerhaave's Vera Bartels said:

¹ Walter Benjamin ([1936] 2008: 33-34) had made a similar remark, also basing his argument on the spread of a media technology, the printing press, which ended the exclusive access to literature for a small number of writers. It is in the late 19th century that 'an increasing number of readers...turned into writers', that 'the distinction between author and public [started losing]...its axiomatic character'. As a consequence, 'At any moment, the reader is readily to become a writer'.

It was initially a simple experiment, just to see, because we had no experience with it. We immediately started [using Twitter]. We have now 2187 followers.

For a relatively small museum like Museum Boerhaave, this figure is huge

She added that in addition to Twitter, a weblog has been launched, and efforts are underway to start a Facebook community. This seems to be a trend among heritage institutions in The Netherlands. A survey I conducted in April and May 2010 on museum and archives websites shows that about 11 percent of institutions have an account on social media (SM) sites, while about 3 percent of museums and about 2 percent of archives provide links to them without having their own accounts.

MUSEUMS				ARCHIVES			
Have website	Have SM account(s)	Links to SM	No SM account(s)	Have website	Have SM account(s)	Links to SM	No SM account(s)
553 (out of 569)	58	14	481	103 (out of 265)	11	2	90
97.1%	10.4	2.5	86.7	38.8%	10.6	1.9	87.3

Uses of social media by museums and archives²

The 'Have SM account(s)' column contains those institutions which have their own accounts or channels on one of the social media platforms. The 'Links to SM' one contains those which have no account on their own but imbed, or provide links to, material from social media platforms.³

Given this trend and the fact that most topics discussed during the *MuseumFuture! Connect* conference focused on new media and networking [Projection on the Past; The Archive Out There; Social Media for Dummies; Communicating with Codes; The Museum Within Reach; Social Media in the Museum; Digital Architecture; the Digital Shelve; and others] there is little doubt that museums and heritage institutions in general have entered a new phase. They are all geared towards an increased use of Web 2.0 technologies. With the massive embracement of those technologies, those institutions move from a monologue-oriented schema into a dialogue-based schema (Walsh, 2010: 233-234), from a mono-directional net to networking. In the Web 2.0

² These figures are based on surveys I conducted in April-May 2010 on museums' and archives' websites listed by the Stichting de Museumserver <http://www.museumserver.nl> and ArchievenWO2, <http://www.archievenwo2.nl/>, respectively.

³ For instance, Historisch Archief Westland's website [<http://www.historischarchiefwestland.nl/Smartsite.shtml?id=105151>] links to YouTube channels of users called 'kunstgebouw' [<http://www.youtube.com/user/kunstgebouw>], 'maanmist' [<http://www.youtube.com/user/maanmist>], 'jeansmovies' [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjbz801NTiQ&feature=player_embedded], among others (All websites accessed 27 September 2010)

world, the heritage professional becomes a user, whose story, like other users' stories, will be submitted to the collective intelligence of the community of users not as the sole story, but as one of the stories.

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