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LIS 258 :: Museum Informatics
Dr. Angel
March 27, 2017

Is that Dust I see?

Museums have been suffering a significant decrease in visits. Many reasons, including a downturn in the economy, locations, or simple lack of time, may be attributed as a cause of this downturn. Despite these easy attributions, the answer cannot be looked at in such cause-effect terms (The New Media Consortium & Balboa Park Online Collaborative, 2015, pp. 16-17). Despite these numbers, additional information is needed to completely understand if this downturn is an actual, real problem and, further, if there is a problem, how to address any changes needing to be made in policy, leadership, collection management, or workflow development.

A recent poll showed 71% of Americans used electronic media to view or listen to art (Surprising Findings, 2015). This number is interesting and brings up numerous questions including “What, exactly, comprises a museum visit?” and “How does a museum incorporate these new technologies to maximize a museum’s visibility, use, and prosperity?”

In response to this trend and an increasing movement of open access, “over 50 cultural institutions have opened their collections for unrestricted use” (Cannell, 2015). Koven J. Smith, director of digital adaptation at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas notes, “Most of us see it as part of a museum’s obligation in this century to make this content available in this way” (Cannell, 2015). In opening their collections, as much as they are able, museums are answering the question of “What comprises a museum visit?” with an emphatic answer showing they see online attendance as important, if not more important, than physical attendance.

Benton County Historic Society is Under Construction

The Bricks are Not Quite Crumbling: The Practical

The Benton County Historic Society (BCHS) is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the museum is pulled in the traditional direction of being bound by existing conventions of attendance and education, but on the other, they are being pulled into a new method of thinking and presenting information where both a kind of personalization and links to the world beyond Benton County, or even Oregon, is necessary to remain relevant and progressive.

The Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center has taken steps towards these goals by creating parallels between their exhibits, other instances in history, and current affairs (Making the Collections Relevant to Visitors, n.d.). These parallels the museum creates, provide a basis for visitors to personalize the information and, consequently, understand their world in a new way. An understanding is created that not only do world events affect the individual, but the individual can affect world events. When this type of personalization occurs, the museum’s directive to improve society through the past, should become more attainable (Nosek & Hansen, 2008, p. 235).

While not explicitly stated by most museums, this goal of influencing the greater population through their exhibits, seems to be at the heart of museum creation, presentation, and preservation. Previously this idea seemed lofty and was likely unattainable except for the largest and wealthiest of institutions. However, the influence of the internet and complementary technologies (both hardware and software) have created new capabilities and possibilities for museums.

The movement from traditional brick and mortar to a more global presence takes time, planning, and, unfortunately, money. This change is not felt solely online, but also in the physical presence the museum provides. This is not to say there needs to be wholesale drastic changes to everything in the museum. Some of these changes, such as labeling objects or creating museum displays do not necessarily need observable changes only changes in the way they are perceived. BCHS has not changed the labels, but the way they view the labels has changed. The labels are now seen as directional signs within the display, a method of creating links between a display's artifacts as opposed to the traditional view of an individual item (M. Tolonen, personal communication, March 23, 2017).

Towards the Future: The Interactive Museum work is more than just creating and labeling displays, the basic need of museums are visits and virtual visits need to play in to the future of any museum. BCHS has embraced this new reality and understands virtual representation can both bring patrons as well as provide a complimentary experience to a physical visit. Ideally, this vision occurs in both the physical collection as well as virtually, but for the time being, BCHS has an in-house kiosk to begin the incorporation of collection exploration into the museum.

This interactive kiosk is simple in nature, comprised simply of two android tablets, a table and a chair, and aimed directly at handicapped individuals as an assistive technology. The tablets link to a catalog of the items in the current exhibition(s). When selected, the items display a description (based off of the MARC metadata standard), a location within the display, and occasionally additional descriptions or links to other items within the exhibition. Despite the limited usability, the kiosk could be seen as a proof of concept for further extensions into interactivity.

Despite the kiosk's success, no specific coordinated efforts have been made due to monetary hardship, the museum has numerous ideas moving forward that could coalesce into a complete plan. The standard internet presence, the static web page (<http://bentoncountymuseum.org/>), has inched towards interactivity recently with additional pages highlighting individual items and collections, such as a page highlighting the Meola films (Figure 1), and a page dedicated to physical self-guided tours of Benton County and Oregon (Figure 2) (M. Tolonen, personal communication, March 23, 2017).

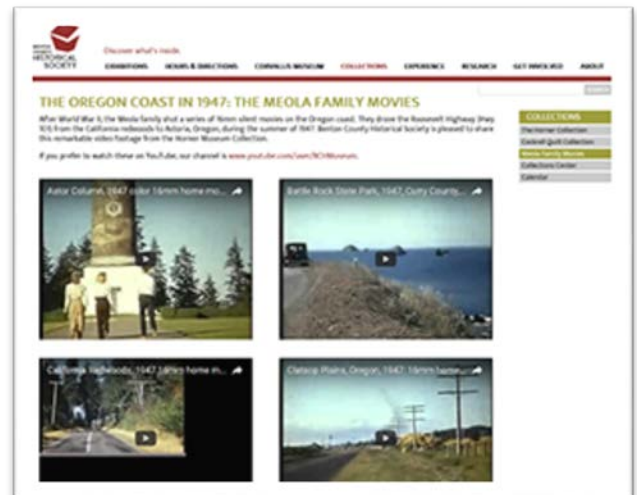


Figure 1: The Meola Family Movies page containing images linking to the movies uploaded to YouTube. *The Oregon Coast in 1947: The Meola Family Movies.* (n.d.). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from <http://www.bentoncountymuseum.org/index.php/collections/meola-family-movies/>



Figure 2: The Horner Museum Tour Guide Series page containing links to historical self-guided tours in Oregon. *Horner Museum Tour Guide Series.* (n.d.). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from <http://www.bentoncountymuseum.org/index.php/research/sites-of-interest/horner-museum-tour-guide-series/>

Additional efforts on social media hubs such as Facebook, Twitter, Pintrest and WhatWasThere are providing new leads and inroads into a planned interactive future web presence. Mark Tolonen, BCHS's Curator of Exhibitions, points to their future efforts of "a blog series and, more importantly, . . . an online catalog featuring thousands of our artifacts which are not currently on public display" as enhancing their web presence and allowing people "to see and learn about [the collection] from the comfort of their homes" (personal communication, March 23, 2017).

This decision to extend into people's homes is seen, largely, as marketing aimed at enticing people to the museum. However, Mr. Tolonen is careful to point out a significant portion of the museum's service is to education, be it a formal inquiry from the neighboring Oregon State University, or the more informal patronage from the neighboring community looking to reminisce or just discover new stories and experiences Benton County has supplied through history (personal communication, March 23, 2017).

Aunt Sally and Professor Bertram: The Patron Experience

When asked about the experience a patron should have when visiting the museum, Mr. Tolonen suggested a metaphor of fine dining. Expressed as an experience from the "pleasant, and . . . welcome" entrance to the final nightcap of an "interesting book" from the museum's store, the patron needs to feel at ease through the visit. The visit should be able to accommodate the various types of visitors – those wanting to "validate their sense of self by sharing their personal history," those who are curious or enjoy learning, or those who simply want to "be alone and clear one's head" (personal communication, March 23, 2017).

Each of these people will create their own, unique reaction and personalization to the artifacts on display. While Mr. Tolonen admits these reactions are "largely out of [his] control," but through the simple efforts of the aforementioned labeling, good lighting, and easy viewing, it is hoped the personal meanings can be arrived at more easily. While Mr. Tolonen is very humble about his ability to influence individuals in their perceptions of items, he does make a concerted effort to bring the items on display into a context of locality, either that of Oregon or Benton County, specifically.

In a similar effort to the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center, BCHS makes an effort to bring the items and exhibitions into focus by connecting it to a broader theme or phenomenon in society. While the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center's image of a boy on an Aryan-only bench can elicit conversations of immigration and racial divide, the BCHS display of Inuit artifacts can elicit conversations of incorporation, cultural tolerance, and adaptability in general, and specifically, a discussion of how the small population present in Benton County has incorporated and celebrated within the local population.

The Grass is Greener

Right now, BCHS is on threshold of a change from the stayed, historical idea of a museum providing a display of artifacts, dates, and histories, to a modern version that can be defined as an experience, where the displays are correlated with both history and modern events and visitors are treated to not just a fine meal, but a meal filled with personality, intrigue, and adapted to the diners' specific needs. Their supposed destination of interactivity as an extension outside their physical walls will not only provide more patrons, but will provide new and different abilities for study, education, and exploration for all ages. The path they face is long, but manageable.

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