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LIS 258: Museum-Partner Observation Assignment 2
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There are many examples of integration between the physical and digital worlds in museums. The Benton County Historical Society (BCHS) is sitting at the beginning of this road, with only small, conservative steps towards the integration many larger museums enjoy. The reason for this lag is two-fold: First, expertise, there are very few staff at BCHS and the expertise of integration is not present. The individuals are taking steps to learn along the way, but this is a slow process; and second, money. BCHS is a small, two-room museum, in rural Oregon. There simply is not a lot of money coming in to the museum to supply rapid updating and technological advances (M. Gallagher, personal communication, February 22, 2017).

Bacon and Beacons

With such a thin margin for error, the BCHS staff have to measure their responses, being very selective in their steps forward. New technologies, such as iBeacons or interactive tours, are simply out of reach. But beyond the factors of monetary and expertise, new technologies need to make sense in the space and context of the museum. Museums, such as the Brooklyn Museum, are able to extend their budget to accommodate the location-based technology. Additionally, the size of the collection as well as the physical size of the museum allow for the technology to be a service to both the museum staff and visitors. The visitors are able to receive relevant information in a timely manner and could be pushed in a specific direction to similar or related exhibits or items ("What is iBeacon? A Guide to Beacons," n.d.). Beacons can create and mediate flow within a museum. Conversely, the staff are able to provide in depth information without being present, a cost-saving measure, and the beacons allow for additional information concerning visitor movements and information needs so the museum can make visits more targeted for the visitors.

These types of technologies are very beneficial for a great many museums, and the technology could be a step in the future, but in the case of BCHS, a one-room museum with a minimum of exhibits, the up-front cost and time spent babying the project, as the Brooklyn Museum was forced to do, would likely outweigh the long-term benefits at this point in time (Bernstein, 2015; M. Tolonen, personal communication, April 5, 2017). Currently, BCHS is focusing on the basic step of digitizing their ever-growing collection.

A Journey without TSA

The digitization is a fundamental step required before any additional steps, such as the beacons, are undertaken. This process is tedious and slow work, and with additional artifacts arriving at the museum,

the process will likely proceed for a significant amount of time (M. Tolonen, personal communication, April 5, 2017). Currently the digitization project is not to a point where large additional steps may be taken. However, this does not mean all technological progress has to stop. Small projects can proceed to not only test capabilities and extend the reach of the museum, but also to provide evidence and scholarly assistance in the daily running of BCHS.
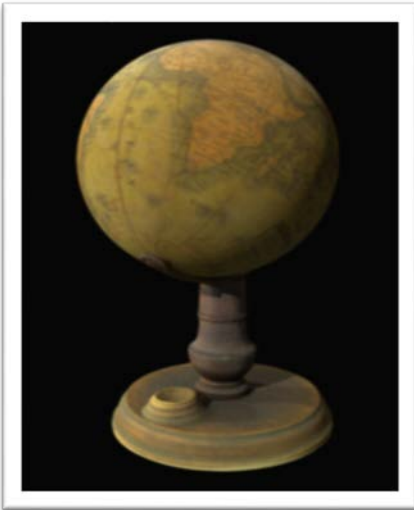

Figure 1: Globe, Germany. c. 1860. Accession number H01906. Detail from: https://sketchfab.com/models/ e57a3e62aaba49738b1ee9a48db5134d

The Meola films, for example, are a series of reel-to-reel films which have been digitized and uploaded to the BCHS web site with the assistance of the social media video sharing platform YouTube. The videos, available on a computer or handheld, are able to be viewed anywhere in the world, but could also be used in future exhibitions as examples of historical film, historical landscapes, or a multitude of other possibilities. Additionally, the digitization provides a way to preserve the film for posterity, a basic tenet of not only BCHS, but of the archival profession in general.

Mark Tolonen, BCHS's Curator of Exhibitions, says "Technology can enhance a patron's experience in different ways" (personal communication, April 5, 2017). The Meola films web page provides patrons the capability of viewing a piece of history in a different way than would normally be possible. For instance, the films could be viewed on location, a possibility not easily undertaken with reel-to-reel films because of their physical limitations and requirements.

Remote capabilities are a key proponent of the future BCHS envisions. Three dimensional (3D) imaging allows patrons to see "a small detailed object that is difficult to see when it is on exhibition" (M. Tolonen,

personal communication, April 5, 2017). Not only are small objects able to be explored more closely by individuals in 3D, but the capability of being able to post the model online provides the additional benefit of being able to examine objects remotely and compare distant objects in real time.

Figure 2: Drum. c. 1790. Accession number H12068. Detail from: https://sketchfab.com/ models/3485d0f3afa64b5a9390e369ea862d13

The capability of remotely viewing an object is very useful beyond the scope of the patronage. 3D rendering capabilities are also very useful for both scholarly inquiry and museum administration uses. Recently, BCHS acquired a drum (see Figure 2). With the donator claiming the drum was from the 18th

century, BCHS needed to confirm this claim. BCHS contacted the curators at Colonial Williamsburg and supplied them with a 3D model of the drum for examination. The provided model allowed the distant curators to confirm the donor's story (M. Tolonen, personal communication, April 5, 2017).

The Future and a Personal Observation

All future plans for digital integration must start with the simple task of digitizing materials. The digitization allows for smaller projects, such as identification or a web page, to be completed, but it also paves the way for a more integrated experience such as the Brooklyn Museum's iBeacons. Digitization allows large museums to present their collection so patrons may plan how they wish to visit a museum (as I did when visiting the Louvre for the first time) and which artifacts they would like to visit. The ability to research to discover more information about an object in real time can only be completed with digitization of some kind.

For BCHS, digitization is a beginning. Their ultimate goal of a total virtual reality immersion of their collection is within reach. It will allow people to see and discover history and artifacts in their own context and allow them to make their own decisions as to meaning and relevance. BCHS's hopes the digitization project will increase the number of people who have access to the collection and engender visits, both digital and physical, to the museum, but more importantly bring the community closer together by providing a source of pride and a place of learning and sharing (M. Tolonen, personal communication, April 5, 2017).

References:

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