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Facebook, SnapChat, and Twitter; Oh, my!

Social media is a broad term covering a good number of technologies ranging from the simple sharing of information with friends on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or SnapChat to the act of social tagging or the creation of personal collections on Pinterest. The world has grown accustomed to sharing information of all kinds. We review restaurants and stores on Yelp! and provide at book reviews on Amazon and Barnes and Noble all in the hopes of influencing decisions or providing some insight overlooked by others.

The point is we are all connected. The internet has provided a multitude of capabilities and insight into information not readily or easily available. Museums have not been blind to this trend, often using social media as marketing to bring visits or advertise specific online capabilities (M. Tolonen, personal communication, March 23, 2017; Hannon, 2016). As we have seen there are multitudes of different social media technologies to choose from and those choices may be multiplied with the various different combinations available to developers. With all the choices being valuable in some way, it is difficult to decipher and choose between the plethora of technologies.

In the beginning...

At the internet's inception, the first, and primary technology the internet was known for was that of chat rooms (Hannon, 2016). This has not changed. The chatrooms have been replaced by "friends" or "contacts," but the same, basic functionality is present. This idea provides the basis for a "new" idea – virtual reality (VR) chat rooms. VR chatrooms, such as Facebook's Oculus Rooms (<https://www.oculus.com/blog/join-friends-in-vr-with-oculus-rooms-and-parties/>), provide a new and different way for individuals to interact with each other online.

VR chat rooms are exactly what they sound like, a room full of avatars representing people from, potentially, anywhere in the world. The avatars can interact in three-dimensional space, hold conversations, and even talk with their hands (a bonus if you have an individual who signs) (Strange, 2017). Within the confines of a museum the potentials are interesting. It would be possible to set up a virtual representation of the museum, complete with high quality images of the displayed artifacts. An individual could wander from room to room looking, and possibly even interacting with the virtual object (they could pick up the virtual vase, "hold" it, and look at it from all directions.

The individual browsing from room to room would be a standard of what a VR is capable. However, Oculus Rooms and, further, the Google Glass (<https://developers.google.com/glass/distribute/glass-at-work>) concepts aim to include additional operability based on existing social interaction, to this standard. These additions would provide a potential goal of a museum to provide either an interactive automated tour guide or have real individuals leading virtual tours to distant patrons or even classrooms of "smaller" patrons with capabilities beyond just talking with each other.

This way, please. Follow me.

The individuals attending these VR tours would be able to interact with others in the group as well as the tour guide. Additional capabilities, already demonstrated by Google Glass technology would allow for people to fulfill many of the Web 2.0 technologies including social tagging, keyword searches, directions

to other physical objects, have suggested links based on individual objects' metadata, and even take virtual pictures and personal collections (if allowed) (Dashevsky & Hachman, 2014).

The idea of including different technologies varies with the technology. However, some basic understanding and blanket coverage is possible. The inclusion of being able to search the web and conversing with each other creates a classroom-type environment, one where learning can come from the tour guide, other members of the tour, as well as additional background from the internet. This allows for different types of learning to occur and could increase the personalization and meaning of the tour's objects or art to the individual.

The tour, again, would be the standard usage, pointed at general tourists or classrooms of children. However, there are times when greater granularity and focus is needed. Scholars, for instance, would benefit from the capabilities of creating their own pictures, collections, and accessing the metadata of an artifact. These facilities would allow for a detailed study of the objects that would not be as easy in either real life as the artifacts may be physically distant from each other or the objects are not able to be examined at close detail. An example of this kind of collection, without the personal collection capability, may be seen in a YouTube video of the HTC Vive Museum program (<https://youtu.be/6WAC38aZ-hk>).

Manzanita is not next to Heceta Head...or is it?

So far, VR has been bounded by museum walls to some extent, and, certainly, The Benton County Historical Society (BCHS) could benefit from these types of VR interaction capabilities. However, there is a possibility of pushing the technology further with the assistance of the Meola films. The Meola films are geographically based, the subjects are distant from each other, and the sites are diverse and dissimilar. Despite these differences and the physical distance between the individual sites, the possibilities are the same – interaction with others, with a tour guide, and with the internet, in general.

The ideal tool for the interaction would be the Google Glass, or other similar smart glasses or lenses as they allow you to interact with your current physical environment and still receive feedback and interaction. The typical VR headsets, such as the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift, would not be ideal for this situation as they require additional support not easily available “on-the-go.”

Google Glass offers a kind of VR called Augmented Reality (AR), where the world is visible, and a layer of information is inserted into the reality in a similar way to the computer in the movie *Minority Report* and the heads-up display in the Iron Man armors (see Figure 1). This type of interaction would allow additional information to be available when looking at an object or place contained within the film. The location, found by GPS capabilities, would allow for the stills captured from the film, or the actual film, to be displayed. Additionally, there is functionality to allow for skype calls to the BCHS for specific questions about the object or area as well as web searches to gain more information about the area such as places to stay or eat. If the technology exists, people could also take pictures or capture videos which could then be uploaded to BCHS servers for use by the people who created the files, by BCHS itself as marketing or material for a future exhibit, or for multiple scholarly uses.



Figure 1: An example of augmented reality using the Layar application for Google Glass. Looking at an icon will provide additional information layered on top of reality, such as the additional image of the cover model. Retrieved April 3, 2017 from <https://www.layar.com/news/blog/2014/03/18/you-can-now-use-layar-on-google-glass/>

The concept, as described, is aimed mainly at tourists – those who visit the individual places visited by the Meola family and those who travel the Meola family’s route – but the technology would still be valuable to other groups as well. The technology could be used as a way to virtually travel along the route through recordings of visits augmented with overlays of relevant information. This functionality would likely be conceived through a standard VR goggle set-up or, if the technology is available, remotely to a classroom or other venue on a flat screen. The virtual tour could be automatic or guided by an individual. Again, additional web 2.0 functionality could be added to increase interactivity with others, but the tour could be a stand-alone activity in itself.

I can see clearly now

Virtual and Augmented Realities are not new technologies. However, they have gained a new life and credibility since the advent of wearable technology, such as the Apple watch, and the 2014 purchase of Oculus VR, the maker of the Oculus Rift VR headset, by Mark Zuckerberg (CEO and founder of Facebook). What is new are the ideas being put forth for their uses. While, admittedly, gaming is the primary use of VR headsets, the increasing use of the technology for medical, industrial, social and informational purposes is increasing (Hannon, 2016; Strange, 2017; Glass at work).

This trend, at the moment, is small because the technology is expensive and expertise in the medium is not as prevalent as many other technologies. Some museums, such as the Franklin Institute (<https://www.fi.edu/VR-at-the-museum>) are already instituting exhibits using VR and AR to help individuals learn and explore their world.

The technology and its compatible social technologies, while expensive, could provide smaller museums, such as BCHS, with new and wider audiences, increasing their relevance, stature, and integration in both their immediate communities, but also within the scholarly and museum-based circles. Innovations are being made and museums can begin to make preparations for their inclusion in their planning as the expense will likely decrease over time while their functionality increases.

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