

New Technologies and Museums in South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

In this presentation I consider how museums might navigate a changing, digital world. While aware of the challenges inherent to incorporating new digital technologies into established institutions, I explore the ways in which the Internet, social media, digitisation and significantly, mobile technology in the form of cell phones, might be used to the museum's advantage. I look at how these technologies can be employed to engage a broader spectrum of the population, a population that does not, by comparison to other countries, have a culture of museum-going or significant engagement with museum collections. I do this by discussing museums as agents of social inclusion and offering practical examples from projects we have worked on, most notably the Ulwazi Programme, a digital heritage initiative that has been set up by the Libraries and Heritage Department of the eThekweni Municipal Library in Durban, to facilitate the recording and sharing of local histories and culture.

Introduction

The digitisation of cultural resources is not a new phenomenon. Since the late 1990s, various efforts have been made in Europe, America, Canada and Australia to digitise, and generally make available online, museum collections, private collections and other heritage materials. Two key issues regarding the digitisation of these cultural resources and the Internet as a mode of transmission, are interoperability and access.

Interoperability

Interoperability is one of what I would term the professional benefits that digital technologies can offer to museums. Digital collections, used in conjunction with the Internet can facilitate interaction and collaboration between institutions. The Internet can provide institutions with access to a wide network of collective knowledge in which they can convey information about curatorial and conservational practices, develop standards to share materials, techniques and content for the creation of exhibitions, and the identification and location of materials relevant to research.

Here, I would like to point to the benefits of open-source software, which amongst other things, is freely available and highly customisable to the needs of individual institutions. Open-source software offers museums and other institutions:

- A community of developers who are constantly improving the software
- The ability to move to other service providers if you are not satisfied – they do not hold the niche knowledge linked to paid, proprietary software
- The ability to modify the software's code in order to make changes to suit your institution's needs.
- Free software – no recurring licence fees!

There is a significant and growing amount of free collections management software. For example, Omeka is an open-source collections management framework, specifically designed for museums, archives, and cultural and heritage organisations. It can accommodate documents, audio and video files, has advanced search capabilities and uses the Dublin Core metadata system. Online exhibitions can also be created around digitised content and the framework comes with a user-friendly content-management system. It has been used by, amongst others, the Smithsonian, the New York Public Library and locally by the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity and the Centre for Civil Society, both at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The screenshot shows a digital collection interface. At the top left is the 'ccrri' logo (centre for critical research on race & identity) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal logo. A search bar with a 'Search' button and 'Advanced Search' link is on the top right. Below the logos are navigation tabs: 'Browse Items', 'Browse Collections', 'About', and 'Contact'. The main content area displays a document viewer for a PDF file named 'pra20080217.047.057b.pdf'. The viewer shows a newspaper clipping with the headline 'We are rocking in the same boat, so let's work together'. The clipping includes a sub-headline 'SECOND OPINION' and a photo of Sakhela Buhlungu. The text of the clipping discusses a draft pupil pledge and mentions President Thabo Mbeki's State of the Nation address. Handwritten text 'ST Feb 17, 07' is visible over the clipping.

Access

While the above illustrates how these new technologies might serve well the needs of practitioners in an institutional context, a key question for museum workers in South Africa and beyond, and the focus of this presentation, is how these technologies might be employed to engage a broader spectrum of the population. The distributive nature of the Internet means that it can overcome geographic constraints and provide greater access to a wider audience. This points to the potential for the museum to present its collections in the digital realm and extend its reach beyond institutional walls. There are a host of freely available social media technologies with which this can be done, including:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Pinterest
- Tumblr
- Flickr (see for example, the National Museum of American History, Chicago Museum and Flickr Commons)
- Google Cultural Institute

The more content that the museum shares online, the more likely it is to feature in search engine results like Google, which in turn contributes to its public profile on the Internet. While in the past, a number of museums were apprehensive about digitising content, believing that the digital surrogate would satisfy or replace the public's desire to engage with the original artefact, many of them now actively present part of their collections online as a mechanism to stimulate pre-visit interest in the museum and its collections in general.¹

¹ On anxieties around digitising museum objects, see Besser. H. 1997. The transformation of the museum and the way it's perceived. (In Jones-Garmil, K., (ed.) *The Wired Museum: emerging technology and changing paradigms*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

Mobile Access

Mobile access to cultural resources is increasingly important in South Africa where much of the population live in rural or semi-rural areas, with little or no access to museums, archives and heritage institutions or fixed Internet access. The Internet population in Africa is still only 10.9% but estimates suggest that mobile phone usage in Africa is close to 70% and greater still in South Africa, with 98% cell phone penetration. Since 2000, there have been some 316 million new mobile phone subscribers on the African continent. A recent, promising development in mobile technology has been the introduction of browsers on most new generation mobile phones. This combined with the 3G network that all mobile providers have migrated to, means that everyday people are accessing the Internet from their phones in ever-increasing numbers. According to the Mobility 2011 survey from World Wide Worx, 39% of urban South Africans and 27% of rural dwellers are now browsing the Internet from their mobile phones. The same report reveals that the penetration of smart phones like Blackberrys, iPhones and Android handsets is likely to reach 80% in South Africa by 2014. While this points to how some of the technical difficulties of access might be overcome, the legacy of South Africa's weighty past poses further challenges.

Addressing Legacies of the Past

I would like to foreground what I see as two critical questions for museums and other memory institutions in South Africa. Firstly, how might digital technologies contribute to addressing past imbalances and including previously excluded histories? Secondly, how might these technologies facilitate a more inclusive and democratised mode of recording and sharing our past? Museums in South Africa have historically functioned to consolidate settler histories and ideologies. During apartheid, clear distinction was made between cultural history (white history) housed in museums and ethnography (non-white history), relegated to

ethnographic collections. Post-1994, various efforts have been made to address past inequalities and make museums and their collections more relevant in the post-apartheid context. However, there still exists the legacy of categorisation, the ordering of knowledge and exclusionary racial bias.²

The development of a digital strategy for existing collections therefore raises questions about the relevance of these digitised cultural resources to the vast majority of the population who were excluded from, and by, museums, and perhaps for whom these institutions and their collections hold little significance. The South African population does not, by comparison to other countries, have a culture of museum-going or significant engagement with museum collections. A simultaneously humorous and sad anecdote can be found in Steven Dubin's study on museums and cultural transformations in South Africa, *Transforming Museums*. When asked what museums were for, two local people in rural KwaZulu-Natal responded, "a place for dried giraffes" and "where they keep old stuffed animals". With this in mind, I believe that digitisation initiatives should be carried out with a carefully thought out methodology and a theoretical underpinning to avoid retaining the same exclusionary categorisation while migrating to a newer format. We should not digitise just for the sake of digitising!

Social Inclusion

"Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation." – Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever

The South African case can be situated in emerging global debates surrounding museological and heritage strategies aimed at addressing forms of social

² For a more detailed discussion on these transformations, see Coombes, Annie. 2003. *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Durham & London: Duke University Press and Dubin, Stephen. 2006. *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

disenfranchisement and cultural inequality. Resultant shifts in theory and practice have challenged the authoritative voice of museums and heritage institutions as the only one, and acknowledged the value of multiple voices, community consultation, participation and even control in the representation of culture. They have given rise to community-run museums, community archives, indigenous cultural centres and alternative approaches to heritage.³ Digital technologies have also contributed to this discussion. The variability of these technologies is seen to encourage dialogue, multiple authorship and the exchange of ideas and opinions. In contrast to the closed authorship and fixed ideas of traditional museum and heritage practices, digital files circulate more freely and are open to further editing, authorship and interpretation.

Much of the debate has centred on developing a more representative and comprehensive heritage in response to calls for a more inclusive society. Museums are being asked to assume new roles and develop new ways of working, to clarify and demonstrate their social function and more specifically to reinvent themselves as agents of social inclusion. The basis of social inclusion, according to professor of Museum Studies at Leicester University, Richard Sandell, is three core elements:

- *Representation*—the extent to which an individual’s cultural heritage is represented within the mainstream cultural arena;
- *Participation*—the opportunities an individual has to participate in the process of cultural production; and
- *Access*—the opportunities to enjoy and appreciate cultural services (which can incorporate both points above)⁴

³ For more on these debates, see Butler, B. 2006. Heritage and the Present Past. (In Tilley, C. Keuchler, S. and Rowlands, M. (eds.) The Handbook of Material Culture, London: Sage; Hall, S. 2008. Whose Heritage? Un-settling ‘The Heritage’, Re-imagining the Post-Nation. (In Fairclough, G. et al (eds.) The Heritage Reader, Abingdon and New York: Routledge; Karp and Kratz et al (eds.). 2006. Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴ See Sandell, Richard. 2002. Museums, Society, Inequality. London: Routledge

In recent years museums have paid increasing attention to issues of representation, participation and access, especially in respect of those groups traditionally underrepresented in their visitor profiles. A growing body of research has sought to identify the barriers that exclude different constituencies and, in response, museums have initiated projects, which seek to broaden audiences, and enable access and contributions. By addressing issues of representation, participation and access, museums are attempting to become more inclusive, to tackle their legacies of institutionalised, and in the case of South Africa, racialised, exclusion.

The Ulwazi Programme

The Ulwazi Programme is a South African digital initiative that has been set up by the eThekweni Municipal Library in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.⁵ It enables local communities within the municipality to contribute to a digital cultural resource of local knowledge using computers and their cell phones. The programme is based on the idea that access to a digital knowledge resource of local relevance and in the local language, Zulu, facilitates the growth of digital and information literacy skills, and in turn, the preservation and sharing of local knowledge and histories. The programme uses the existing library infrastructure and Web 2.0 (social) technologies to create a collaborative knowledge resource in the form of a Wiki, much like Wikipedia but localised for the municipality. The Ulwazi Programme offers one example of how memory institutions might create a platform to stimulate dialogue with their constituencies. I believe it also shows how an institution can promote social inclusion. I base this assertion on the following criteria:

⁵ www.ulwazi.org

- The Ulwazi Programme increases access to the municipality's existing digitised cultural resources
- It allows people to *represent* themselves in the mainstream cultural arena
- It does this by providing opportunities for individuals to *participate* in the process of cultural production

This type of programme could serve well the museum as an institution looking to engage broader audiences and have ongoing relevance to them.



Going Forward

I understand that the prospect of digitising museum collections and extending the reach of the museum into the digital realm is a daunting one for many museologists and curators. What I have suggested in terms of the Ulwazi Programme – creating a mutually constituted digital space in which digitised museum content intersects with cultural content generated by the general public

– may also be a scary possibility. In order to allay some fears I would like to highlight the following:

What this does not mean:

- It does not mean giving up all authority as a museologist or curator.
- It does not mean letting the general public dictate what appears on your museum website.

What this does mean:

- It means creating a space for dialogue, being hospitable, in the words of Verne Harris, to other peoples' perspectives and views on the past, allowing for multiple perspectives.
- Giving the general public a space on a museum website to share their views on the museum's collections and contribute digital artefacts that demonstrate the ways in which they deal with the past.

Some other salient points to consider:

- *The past is not complete.* The cultural resources that relate to the past, held in memory institutions like museums and archives and in the minds and cultural practices of everyday people, have a bearing on the present and how we imagine the future. We should therefore treat them accordingly, with care.
- *The past is not neutral.* What we know of the past, again to use the words of archival theorist, Verne Harris, is merely a "sliver of a sliver".⁶ The version of the past we have is the result of others' intervention, a process of selection and rejection, a process of producing the past. We too, are not

⁶ Harris, V. 2002. The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa. *Archival Science*, 2.

merely custodians of the past. We bring to bear on it our own frames of reference, our different histories, and our own narratives as we select and reject what should be part of the record. The more perspectives we have, the more voices we are hospitable to, the less of a singular version of the past we end up with.

Developing a Digital Strategy for Museums

How then do we proceed in developing a digital strategy for museums in South Africa? I believe the following are essential:

- A critical understanding of the history and transformation of museums in South Africa. And importantly, an understanding of the history of the particular institution, the communities it wishes to engage, and details of these past engagements.
- An understanding of the way in which we mediate the past in the present, and how we might make a hospitable environment for those who do not have a museum-going background, to engage with, and contribute to, cultural resources.
- An understanding of types of social technologies that are freely available to us so that instead of working in silos, we might work as a consolidated whole in addressing some of the legacy of our collective past.