

Institutional Change Through New Media

Guest Columnist Jasper Visser

Editor's Note: Since we received this column for publication, we have found out that the Museum of National History of the Netherlands has been slated for closure by the State Secretary for Culture. Because we have followed the museum's groundbreaking work in the digital medium for some time and believe it has relevance to this column, and to the history field as a whole, we have chosen to run this piece anyway. Hope you enjoy and garner some nuggets of wisdom in your own work.

At the recent Museums and the Web conference in Philadelphia I attended a session on institutional change. Soon enough, as always, the discussion turned to the million-dollar questions: How do we get the institutional support from management to implement new media strategies? How do we get our colleagues to care? How can we change the way our CEOs think about cooperation between institutions?

I think we need to reverse these questions. It's not about how our institutions should change to embrace new media. It's about how new media can change our institutions to embrace the future. In this column, after some background, I'll discuss some simple actions you can take today, in your institution, to start the change.

I work for the Museum of National History of the Netherlands. We are a new museum and still very much in our early phases. For instance, we do not yet occupy a permanent physical building, although we currently own an office and public place in the center of Amsterdam. Also, we do not have a physical collection and do not plan to ever have one. Yet, last year we reached over half a million people in real life with our activities, and hundreds of thousands more through a variety of new and traditional media.

In the two years I've worked at the museum there has been strong institutional support for the use of new media and technology. Our vision emphasizes its importance. Why? Because we believe that

in the twenty-first century, to get people interested in history you need more than a building with paintings on the wall. And one of the ways to get people to care about history, and even engage with it, is through new media.¹

I admit, it's easy for me to talk about how new media can change institutions: first, because of the solid institutional support for new media and, second,

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because as a new institution, we are not bound by doing things in a certain traditional way. It's easier to turn around without a building and collection! Starting from scratch often provides a fresh outlook.

In discussions about new media, history, and heritage, there are a couple of recurring imperatives. For instance, *Go Where Your Audience Is*. Although these imperatives have an institution-wide impact, I believe they can perfectly well start from within the new media departments and serve as a catalyst for institutional change. I'd like to focus on four of these imperatives. In addition to the earlier example, these are: *Create Engaging Narratives*, *Serve as a Platform*, and *Focus on Participation*.

Go Where Your Audience Is

People go to shopping malls and restaurants more often than they come through our doors. Our prediction, as new media practitioners, is that ever more people are using location-

based services such as Foursquare and Facebook to tell the world they went to a shopping mall or restaurant. We seize this opportunity and use these platforms to tell them a bit about history whenever they visit a historical place. We've used the option in Foursquare to leave tips at locations, to tell people who checked in at a train station about the history of their surroundings and links to additional information. Results vary per location but overall the reception is good. On top of that, it was free to implement apart from a couple of hours of work. This summer we'll follow up on these experiments with a dedicated history on location project, which will make history locally available to many more people.²

Create Engaging Narratives

In Holland, most museum collections are online and many museum people have begun to understand that the story you tell is more important than the objects you have on display. Engaging narrative gets people's attention and connects them to your collection and your institution. As I wrote earlier, the Museum of National History doesn't own a collection. Online, we use the collections of partner institutions and sources such as Wikipedia to tell stories about history. Our website hosts about 800 stories and continues to grow. We built the semantic INNL network to make more meaningful connections between existing online collections and communities. We found that good stories with links to different collections result in visitors who spend more time on our website. And because we now have the tools in place, it has become easier for all our staff to tell engaging stories about history.³

Serve as a Platform

Like many people I believe that a cultural institution should be a place where people come together and interact with each other. It should serve as a platform. The first steps towards this can be taken online, virtually without cost. For instance, a while ago, before we had our

website and semantic network in place to function as a platform, we used our blog and some free tools to see if we could be a platform for history in the Netherlands. We mapped local oral history initiatives on a Google Map and we created a calendar for historical events of other institutions. We got a lot of positive feedback on these initiatives. People added their own information, and our simple weblog became a platform. We used these lessons to design our new website and its content strategy, and every month it works a little bit better.

Focus on Participation

Fortunately, the discussion about using new media is increasingly one of providing visitors with a participatory experience. One day, most of our best physical museums or archives will have perfectly balanced participatory exhibitions and personalized experiences. This does not mean that our institutions will become arcade halls. Rather, it means we will involve people in the stories we tell about them. The social media and Web 2.0 revolution has put participation at the core of many online experiences.

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We can benefit from these developments to create best practices for participation in our institutions. Two years ago the Museum started with simple (and now common) participatory Twitter “games” that led to in-depth conversations and positive exposure on blogs and even in traditional magazines. By showing the positive effects of participatory projects, we managed to have discussions about participation at the beginning of every project. Coming mostly from the online realm and the general vision laid out by our directors, participation now is considered as essential as education or communication in any project.

There are many small, tangible things you can start doing right now using new media that might result in a change in your institution’s policies or behavior. Because truly, new media can change an institution. And it should. Change has a tendency to come from unexpected places. This time, let it be the new media departments taking the lead.

“History Bytes” is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

Jasper Visser is project manager for new technology and media projects at the Museum of National History of the Netherlands. Together with the team he’s responsible for the new media strategy, (online) participation, community building, and online communication. He writes about innovation in museums on his blog, <http://themuseumofthefuture.com>.

¹ See <http://innl.nl/vision>.

² See <http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2011/01/13/using-foursquare-to-make-historical-contents-locally-available-and-reach-new-audiences/>.

³ See <http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2011/03/06/does-a-semantic-network-improve-the-quality-of-museum-website-visits-some-stats-from-the-innl-network/>.

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