

**BOTH MESSENGER AND MESSAGE:**  
**MEDIA IN THE NEW MUSEUM**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF MUSEUM STUDIES  
PROFESSOR KYM S. RICE  
ORIGINALLY SUBMITTED FOR MSTD 270A  
FALL 2001

BY

DEBORAH SORENSEN

## **Both Messenger and Message: Media in the New Museum**

In the family of social institutions invented by man, the place of the museum is not rigidly fixed. It is pliant and can develop in many directions, or sometimes move simultaneously in several directions.

Albert Ten Eyck Gardner<sup>1</sup>

As cultural manifestations, museums naturally reflect the issues facing a society at any given point in history. The latest incarnation of museums in America reflects the so-called ‘new’ museology. Although not necessarily new any longer, the ideas leading to a renewed focus on education and inclusion have nonetheless had a dramatic effect on the role museums are expected to play within today’s society. Concurrent with the development of the ‘new’ museology has been the development and expansion of media within society. A rapid-fire progression of new technologies has not only been invented but has become firmly rooted in nearly every aspect of daily life. As media has permeated our culture, so has it permeated our museums. The contact between new museology and new media calls for special attention to be paid to the visible expression of that contact—exhibitions. Focusing on historical and cultural museums, this paper will seek to explore the purpose behind and the effectiveness of exhibition media as seen through the lens of the new museology.

### I. Development of the ‘New’ Museology

The First function of a museum [...] is to give examples of perfect order and perfect elegance, in the true sense of the word, to the rude and disorderly populace.

John Ruskin<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, “Museum in Motion,” Metropolitan Museum of Art *Bulletin*, 24 (Summer 1965) 21.

<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, The Lamps of Beauty: Writings on Art, ed. Joan Evans (London: Phaidon Press, 1989).

To have a ‘new’ museology implies the existence of an ‘old’ one. Being a relatively young country, American museums were late joining the long and varied history of museums. Although many quickly took hold of the idea that museums could be used for education and social reform, “the typical nineteenth-century museum with its emphasis on objects and specimens was sometimes a static and even forbidding place for the public.”<sup>3</sup> Most museums here followed a pattern typical of museums elsewhere in the world, that of a slow practical development of standards and a movement towards professionalization. Collection and display were of primary concern, with less thought usually given to visitors’ needs. The traditional model of a museum as both storehouse and bastion of truth can still be found some places. However, by the mid-Twentieth century a shift began which would eventually turn many traditional museums inside out.

The redefinition of purpose within American museums emerged largely as a reflection of the ‘new social history’ that took hold in this country during the 1960s. Following the lead of those in Great Britain, Scandinavia and France, social historians in America advocated “an increased sensitivity to the history of commonplace activities, particularly those of large aggregates of common people [...] heretofore generally neglected by historians.”<sup>4</sup> The movement towards increased recognition of under-represented groups had strong ties to other movements boiling over during this turbulent time. The sixties witnessed tremendous social change, creating a demand for a new interpretation of history, and “from this demand emerged the concept of the ‘new’ museum [...] based on the assumption that culture can be both the subject and the

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward P Alexander, Museums in Motion (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996) 215.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976,” Material Culture Studies in America. Ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999) 35-36.

instrument of an emancipatory educational process directed toward democratic social change.”<sup>5</sup> An overt emphasis on education and public service is the new museology’s guiding principle. However, it is necessary to remember that these are not necessarily new goals within museums. Even early American museums were essentially humanist in their agenda as public institutions and:

By 1900 [...] were becoming centers of education and public enlightenment. This was natural in a country that prided itself on its democratic ideals and placed deep faith in public education both as political necessity and as a means of attaining technological excellence.<sup>6</sup>

What does change throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s is a fundamental shift in authority with the application of those principles. Museums began to question their role within the educational process—acknowledging the fallacy inherent to the idea of objective reality and the implications of that realization on its traditional role as arbiter of historical truth.

By the early 1980s, public education was coming under heavy scrutiny. The National Commission on Excellence in Education was formed in 1981 in order to create a report on the status of pre-college education in America. The report presented to President Reagan in 1983, “A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform”, alarmed the public and government alike with its dramatic conclusions about the precarious situation of the American educational system.<sup>7</sup> Following close on the heels of this report was another coming from the American Association of Museums. In 1984

---

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Hauenschild, Ph.D, Claims and Reality of New Museology: Case Studies in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, diss., Hamburg (Germany: ICOM, 1988) <<http://museumstudies.si.edu/claims2000.htm>>

<sup>6</sup> Edward P Alexander, Museums in Motion (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996) 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Seaborg, Glenn T., “A Nation At Risk Revisited: Part I,” (1991) <<http://www-ia1.lbl.gov/Seaborg/risk.htm>>

it published “Museums For a New Century,” a report focusing heavily on the educational purpose of museums, recognizing that “all components of a museum, not just education departments, should be committed to fostering learning.”<sup>8</sup> The report made note of the fact that “confusion exists about the nature of learning in a museum context [and assigned] high priority to the establishment of a research program backed by a philosophical framework that would illuminate the nature of such learning.”<sup>9</sup>

In response to the recommendations outlined in “Museums For a New Century,” the AAM created the Task Force on Museum Education in 1989, which subsequently published “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums.” This report served to crystallize the primary goals forming within the new museology in America. The report’s three key ideas were:

1. The commitment to education as central to museum’s public service must be clearly expressed in every museum's mission and pivotal to every museum’s activities.
2. Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society’s pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs.
3. Dynamic, forceful leadership from individuals, institutions, and organizations within and outside in the museum community is the key to fulfilling museums’ potential for public service in the coming century.<sup>10</sup>

The report continues by identifying ten principles that expand upon these core ideas of education, diversity and collaboration. Of these, perhaps the most relevant to the

---

<sup>8</sup> “Museums for a new century: A report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century,” Annotation, Museum Learning Collaborative Website, <<http://mlc.lrdc.pitt.edu/scripts/search>.

<sup>9</sup> “Museums for a new century” <<http://mlc.lrdc.pitt.edu/scripts/search>.

<sup>10</sup> The American Associate of Museums, “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums” (Washington: AAM, 1992) 3.

role of media within museum exhibits would be the following three, numbered 3, 4 and 5 in the report:

- Understand, develop, expand, and use the learning opportunities that museums offer their audiences.
- Enrich our knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of our collections and of the variety of cultures and ideas they represent and evoke.
- Assure that the interpretive process manifests a variety in cultural and intellectual perspectives and reflects and appreciation for the diversity of museum's public.<sup>11</sup>

Ideally then, media used within exhibitions should address some or all of these criteria in order to be seen as supporting the new museology. New forms of media use within museums, however, took some time to develop into the interactive forms that are present today.

## II. Development of New Media

What differentiates our own historical moment is that a symbolic form has arisen designed precisely [...] to battle fragmentation and overload with synthesis and sense-making. The interface is a way of seeing the whole.

Steven Johnson<sup>12</sup>

The evolution of new media has been similar to that of the new museology, developing in response to issues existing outside of its own specific sector. It has also expanded in its application beyond standardization towards greater experimentation and flexibility. One difference, though, would be that while the new museology formed directly, and very publicly, out of its need to relate to a changing audience, media transformed itself for the most part away from public scrutiny.

---

<sup>11</sup> "Excellence and Equity" 7.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Johnson, Interface Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1997) 238.

There were three fundamental advances in public media between the turn of the century and 1950: radio, film with synchronous sound and television. By mid-century television's star was clearly on the rise. The Fifties are often called the "Golden Age" of television—due to the fantastic success of a form of media that "fitted well in the home, as a simpler, cheaper, and more convenient family leisure activity."<sup>13</sup> Video technology soon followed and in 1957 the first nationally televised videotaped TV broadcast occurred, of the Presidential Inauguration ceremonies in Washington DC.

The same year as video's introduction to a national audience, the seeds of the next major revolution in media were planted quietly, when the Defense Department proposed the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). In the 1960s, this agency would commission a distributed computer network called ARPANET, the foundation of the future Internet.<sup>14</sup>

The belief that public media should extend beyond mere entertainment has existed throughout its history. In 1961, a year after *Bonanza* became the first color western<sup>15</sup>, Newton N. Minow, chairman of the FCC, criticized television programming as being, "a vast wasteland [...] It was not enough to cater to the nation's whims—you must also serve the nation's needs."<sup>16</sup> The needs of the nation were indeed vast. Television served to literally bring home the events shaping the future of the nation and the world.

---

<sup>13</sup> "Media in the 1950s: Television Coverage," Thinkquest, <<http://library.thinkquest.org/27629/themes/media/md50s.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> "Technology Timeline: 1957," The History Channel Online, <<http://www.historychannel.com/timeline.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> "Television History: The First 75 Years," TVHistory.TV <<http://www.tvhistory.tv/1950-1959.htm>>

<sup>16</sup> Gorton Carruth, "1961," The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 602.

The 1960s also saw the introduction of computerized data management in museums. The Automated Data Processing Committee (ADP) was formed at the National Museum of Natural History in 1963, and its mainframe text-data system SELGEM ('Self-Generated Master') would continue to be used in museums throughout the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> It was clear that computerization would be of increasing importance to museums and in 1967 the Museum Computer Network (MCN) was founded. A year later MCN and IBM joined together to sponsor the first conference on Computers and their Application in Museums.<sup>18</sup>

In 1969 the ARPANET network officially launched (connecting four university computer systems!), and effectively formed the backbone of the future Internet. This year is also notable for the now mythical Woodstock concert and the introduction of *Sesame Street* on PBS. This landmark children's program used the quick editing style of commercial advertising to deliver educational content. This truly was the beginning of a new age of communication.

By the 1970s, the combined power of print and television media was unquestionable. Investigative reporting and unflinching news coverage were dominant. The Pentagon Papers and the Watergate Scandal are the primary examples of how media was used to shape public opinion and, eventually, to bring down a president.<sup>19</sup> Two far less political, but nonetheless incredibly important media-related events occurred in 1977. *Star Wars* landed in theaters, introducing America to the blockbuster movie and its now

---

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Jones-Garmil, "Museums in the Information Age," Hands On Hypermedia and Interactivity in Museums, (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1995) 1.

<sup>18</sup> Jones-Garmil, "Museums in the Information Age," 2.

<sup>19</sup> "Media in the 1970s: Media battles the Government," Thinkquest.

ubiquitous merchandising power—triggering the fervid collection of “Star Wars”-related objects that continues still. Also in 1977, the Apple II computer—the first with color monitor—was revealed. Although later eclipsed by the PC, the Apple’s attractive and user-friendly interface, as well as its focus on placing computers in the classroom, would define the future of personal computing in this country.

A ticker-tape of technological firsts continues from this point. Computer imaging was introduced into museums, with several videodisk projects taking shape by 1979.<sup>20</sup>

The next key event landed in 1980, when Tim Berniers-Lee:

Develops a primitive hypertext program [...] which stores information using random associations and links. He calls this program Enquire Within Upon Everything, based on the title of an encyclopedia that fascinated him as a child.<sup>21</sup>

In ten years Berniers-Lee will have transformed Enquire into what we now call the World Wide Web.

Following the earnest public policy advancements of the 1970s, the 1980s were a decade of schizophrenic extremes. While questions about public education reform were raging and massive de-regulation was underway, the desire for bigger and better forms of entertainment grew enormously. Theme parks, loud action movies, and colorful newspapers like USA Today—which placed less emphasis on ‘negative’ investigative reporting<sup>22</sup>—took media away from whatever educational ideals it once had and fixed it firmly within the world of hard cash marketing and corporate consolidation. The spread

---

<sup>20</sup> Jones-Garmil, “Museums in the Information Age,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> “Technology Timeline: 1980,” [The History Channel Online](#).

<sup>22</sup> “Media in the 1980s: Television Growth,” [Thinkquest](#).

of cable television also continued, stealing power away from the networks and providing the public with an increase in informational and entertainment choice.

By now, computer technology was booming. For museums:

The decade of the 1980s brought exciting changes [...] Desktop computers and improved storage devices became available early in the decade. Each year brought improvements and reduced costs [...] Software written specifically for museum applications became available.<sup>23</sup>

A quick list of events should help highlight some interesting events surrounding the development of new media that took place<sup>24</sup>:

- 1980 IBM PC introduced.
- 1983 PC named by “Time Magazine” as its “Man of the Year.”<sup>25</sup>
- 1984 Macintosh introduced and PCs are put in use at the Smithsonian.
- 1985 The WELL launches, providing bulletin boards for online discussion.<sup>26</sup>
- 1989 Berniers-Lee proposes a global hypertext project (WWW).

The 1990s witnessed further proliferation of new media and technology. In 1990, the World Wide Web server and browser were released to the public and the Electronic Frontier Foundation was formed to protect freedom of speech on the Internet.<sup>27</sup> Both new choices and new problems, resulting from an increase in accessibility, were multiplying daily.

---

<sup>23</sup> Jones-Garmil, “Museums in the Information Age,” 6.

<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all from Jones-Garmil, “Museums in the Information Age,” 7-8.

<sup>25</sup> Carruth, “1983,” The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates.

<sup>26</sup> “Technology Timeline: 1985,” The History Channel Online.

<sup>27</sup> “Technology Timeline: 1990,” The History Channel Online.

In 1993 the White House went online under the Clinton-Gore Administration, who later announced the National Information Infrastructure Agenda (the “Information Superhighway”)<sup>28</sup>. The NII was established in part to “transform the lives of the American people -- ameliorating the constraints of geography, disability, and economic status -- giving all Americans a fair opportunity to go as far as their talents and ambitions will take them.”<sup>29</sup> By 1995 new websites were going online at a remarkable rate, and with the public arrival of search engines like Yahoo in 1996, the Web certainly was taking Americans further than ever before.<sup>30</sup>

Have the lives of Americans been transformed? The answer is an easy ‘yes.’ The Internet and the World Wide Web have made tangible the abstraction that any piece of information is infinitely ‘linkable’ to any other piece of information. The non-linear hypertext experience has had a profound impact on the way information is delivered and perceived, both *on and off* the Internet—habits of thought have been confronted and changed. With multiple pathways available, the formal steps used for traditional information retrieval are no longer the only way of reaching a destination. Much like the effects of pluralism within the museum, the power of interpretation—or authority—has found itself switched from the institution to the individual. Another by-product of the digital revolution has been miniaturization, the reduction of information into modular, easily moveable ‘bytes.’ Both physically and conceptually the world is getting smaller.

---

<sup>28</sup> Jones-Garmil, “Museums in the Information Age,” 11.

<sup>29</sup> United States Department of Commerce, “Executive Summary,” National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action (1993), <<http://www.ibiblio.org/nii/NII-Executive-Summary.html>>.

<sup>30</sup> “Technology Timeline: 1996,” The History Channel Online.

Where infinite connectivity and infinite specificity combine, a true global community can form.

These changes have taken place at such a break-neck rate that it is sometimes difficult to remember that most Americans have been using the Internet for less than ten years. Within that short time the potential uses of the Web have gone through many shapes and sizes, from online shopping and job hunting to Social Security benefit postings, the process has been one of intense trial and error. Problems rise daily, sometimes ending in legislation. Two examples that touch upon the issue of authenticity would be the signing of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act in 1998, safeguarding copyrighted materials on the Internet<sup>31</sup>, and the ensuing injunction last March against the MP3 music site Napster, for allowing online exchange of copyrighted materials. Interactivity may remove barriers, but what you do after crossing over is still in question.

### III. Case Studies

So where does all of this non-linear, hypertextual interactivity leave museums? These case studies provide several examples of media within the history museum—including one culture-based example from a natural history museum. In accordance with the AAM guidelines for equity and excellence in museum education, the media encountered is evaluated based upon the criteria of its overarching educational merit as expressed through diversity, accessibility and collaboration.

These case studies address media specifically within the chosen exhibits, and cannot possibly reflect the full spectrum of media existing in history museums, much less museums in general. Nor are these analyses concerned with the overall ‘success’ of these exhibits, although media is certainly a good indicator to go by. I first chose two exhibits

within the same museum that were produced thirteen years apart from one another. I then chose two museums that could be seen as large-scale exhibitions in and of themselves. And finally, I looked at two additional environments that express opposite ends of the media spectrum as it can be applied within the new museum. Just as hypermedia allows for multiple paths, museums can use media in an infinite number of ways. However, museums are unique environments—serving both educational and social needs through creative, and often entertaining means—and museum media should not wander but must be direct and lead the audience to an educational experience.

The first two exhibits to be looked at are both permanent exhibits at the National Museum of American History, and both opened to the public in 1987. “A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans & the U.S. Constitution,” “examines the constitutional process by exploring the experiences of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II.”<sup>32</sup> At the time this exhibit was considered a risky endeavor as the Smithsonian’s nod to the bicentennial of the Constitution.<sup>33</sup> This event-based exhibit focuses on two separate strands of experience, the nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans who were placed into internment camps and the 33,000 Japanese American citizens that served in the U.S. Military.

This exhibit is remarkable for its highly original use of video technology. Two kinds of video are implemented within this exhibit for two very different purposes; they are successful for similar reasons. The first media experience comes as you round a

---

<sup>31</sup> “Technology Timeline: 1998,” The History Channel Online.

<sup>32</sup> “A More Perfect Union,” National Museum of American History: Exhibitions, <<http://americanhistory.si.edu/youmus/ex04unio.htm>>.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Battiata, “Smithsonian’s Constitution Controversy,” The Washington Post, 16 March 1987: B1.

corner and are confronted with a life-size reproduction of one of the barracks-style internment camp ‘homes.’ There is a door on the opposite wall from where you stand that provides a distant view of snowy mountains. You hear footsteps and then a middle-aged man and young girl appear in the doorway, which you now realize is a large video screen. The girl proceeds to ask the man, presumably her father, a question about life in the camp. After he answers her question, they pause then turn and walk away slowly. After what feels like a long break (likely only a minute), they reappear with another question, and so on through five rounds of questions and answers.

Selma Thomas, the media designer for this exhibit, spoke to me about the creation of this installation and mentioned the difficulty of shaping “a world on screen that is, if not ‘real,’ at least honest.”<sup>34</sup> To do this, the video had to be grounded within a real environment, thus the video screen was turned on its side to stand in for a doorway. The film shown onscreen also had to be grounded in reality, so the mountains shown are in fact the mountains that could be seen from one of the camps in Washington State. Once the environment was set, surrounded by an entire room of artifacts, the narrative had to feel equally ‘real.’ The man could not just arrive and start musing to himself, there needed to be some motivation for him to express his memories. The decision to have that motivation come from a young girl, his daughter, makes the exchange easily understood and that much more poignant.

In terms of technology, rear-view projection may not have been new but a videodisk loop was. Selma Thomas was approached in 1984 to begin planning the media for the exhibit only five years after the first museum videodisk projects began. These

---

<sup>34</sup> Selma Thomas, “Mediated Realities: A Media Perspective,” *The Virtual and the Real*, eds. Ann Mintz and Selma Thomas (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1998) 6.

disks were the size of an LP record and could only contain 30 minutes of recorded footage. Filming the actors with blue-screen technology (used in *E.T.* only 2 years earlier) and turning the camera sideways, to accommodate for a screen meant to be placed horizontally, were both innovations. All for a series of quiet interactions between a father and daughter. Yet, fifteen years later, “it has never become out-of-date or old-fashioned, because it was designed and produced to serve an integral exhibition theme. The actual hardware is irrelevant, so long as it serves its original purpose—to support a program that the exhibition team defined.”<sup>35</sup>

The second media portion of this exhibit expands upon both storylines through the use of video interviews. In areas set off from the main flow of traffic are two interactive “Video Encounters.” They each contain a TV monitor overhead and a touch-screen below that allows you to ‘ask’ questions. The first encounter, called “Conversations,” is with camp survivors, where visitors first select one of the interviewees. An introduction for that individual is provided and then visitors are allowed to “ask” them questions about their experiences. At any time visitors can stop, skip a question or change interviewees. Selma mentioned the need to make these interviews look different from typical TV interviews, that the monitors should be at a remove from other objects—to allow for a sense of privacy and respect. The interviewees are seated at a comfortable distance from the camera in front of a neutral background. Both their appearance and presentation are direct in a documentary sense. These are not packaged television interviews, but pure texts to be ‘read’ at the visitor’s own pace.

---

<sup>35</sup> Selma Thomas, “Mediated Realities: A Media Perspective,” 10.

The second encounter is “Tools of War,” with three veterans of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team. They relate combat experiences associated with six objects that are illustrated and named on the viewer’s touch screen. You select an object you are interested in and then get first-hand information, anecdotal or technical, from one or all of these soldiers. The effect is mesmerizing. The personality of each man shines through the most mundane explanations of the M-1 Rifle’s firing capabilities, the “object, it turns out, was just a placeholder for a story.”<sup>36</sup> These oral histories are beautiful examples of how the new museology has transferred interpretive authority to the individual, creating a sense of sharing that can only come from real collaboration.

The next NMAH exhibit, “The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden,” is frustrating in that it was produced during a time of incredible media choice and wastes what little media was finally chosen. Opening in November 2000, “American Presidency” is essentially a memorabilia show using a wide variety of themes to squeeze in as much ‘stuff’ as possible. “Its overall cost, including advertising and educational outreach materials, was \$14 million,”<sup>37</sup> which goes to show that money is certainly not what creates meaning.

The first large room, or rotunda, contains two small TV monitors running short documentaries produced by the History Channel. These could just as easily be TV sets left on at home. Both the History Channel bug in the lower right hand corner (a commercial voice of authority out of place in the museum), and the clichéd music constantly running in the background create the sense of media wallpaper, with no real

---

<sup>36</sup> Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000) 12.

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “Hats Off to The Presidency,” *The Washington Post* 15 Nov. 2000: C01.

insight or information to be gained. Yet another problem is that by featuring montages of film footage, you are inherently limited to showing the presidents that had newsreel or personal film coverage.

This room also contains two token ‘interactives.’ First comes a visitor opinion poll, which asks only two questions: ‘what presidential role is the most important for a 21<sup>st</sup> century president to master?’, and ‘who do you think was the most effective president?’ There are only two stations, side by side, that place you with your back to the large open room—not the most welcoming location to place technology that can be intimidating to visitors. The interface is slow and unclear, leading to an end result that is superficial at best—reminiscent of the simplistic pie-charts found in a USA Today newspaper. The other interactive occupies the entire opposite corner and is comprised of a podium and large video screen background that allows you to “Be the President.” Seeing yourself on camera as a stand-in for President Reagan, while you read off of a teleprompter, may be entertaining, but it is not education. Both of these interactives take up a relatively large amount of space and sadly waste their potential for educational interactivity.

Three more documentaries, also produced by the History Channel, cover family life in the White House, show highlights from interviews with former presidents, and showcase clips from movies that feature actors playing presidents. They may be interesting, but what is the message? In the case of Bill Pullman in *Independence Day*, it would appear that “Americans don’t just want a head of government who can balance the budget [...] but one who is also able to kick some serious alien butt.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Michael O’Sullivan, “A Pack of Presidential Paraphernalia,” The Washington Post 24 Nov. 2000, final ed.: N62.

The two remaining uses of media serve little to no function whatsoever. The first consists of monitors and sound sticks, both uncomfortably low to the ground, playing three presidential speeches. The second—sublime in its irony—presents a monitor fixed to the wall that scrolls a non-interactive webpage.

It should be stated that, for all that it lacks in depth, this was “one of the largest exhibitions ever mounted by the Smithsonian, [and] was put together in just eight months instead of the typical two to three years.”<sup>39</sup> However, that does not alter the fact that visitors to “The American Presidency” are being handed back a plate full of pennies, shiny but with little value in the end.

The next two exhibitions studied are actually entire museums. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum carries the dual function expressed in its own name. As a museum, it can be taken as an immersive experience. The building’s architecture and overall exhibit design combine to give atmospheric support to the historic narrative presented. Upon entering the museum, the emotionally charged environment is in full control of the experience about to be provided—there is no doubt whatsoever about agenda or authority, it is written into the very walls.

The media provided is equally straightforward. As you move down from floor to floor, monitors are placed regularly from section to section, creating a terrible sense of inevitability to the events as they unfold before your eyes. These monitors are mostly silent documents, raising uneasy questions about who was in control of the camera and what their intentions may have been. Nazi manipulation of media for propaganda purposes is widely acknowledged. That much of the footage and photo documentation

---

<sup>39</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “Hats Off to The Presidency.”

provided came out of their compulsion for recording their actions adds yet another dimension to the troubling images. Little interpretation is provided to these films, only occasional titles of names or locations, lending further to the sense of formal testimony being provided. Where potentially upsetting content is included a practical application prevents small children from seeing the material. The visitor must look over a wall and down to a screen below. This approach yields a disturbingly voyeuristic overtone.

The silence of the exhibit ends when you come to the first audio presentation, *Voices from Auschwitz*. Set apart, in a long spare room with low stone benches, this presentation of survivors' stories is wonderful in its simplicity. The various stories are edited together to create one 'complete' story of survival, with audio transcripts provided and placed invitingly on each bench. There are no awkward headsets or sound sticks, instead, voices fill the room like ghosts creating an immediate and intimate experience.

Taken as a whole, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum uses media in keeping with the new museology. Information is specific and authority is given to individuals directly involved in the events depicted. From private video carrels to the final theater documentary, the message sent is unwavering in its clarity of purpose and ability to be both informative and emotionally moving.

The same can also be said for the Newseum—although comparisons would likely stop there. A museum dedicated to media could easily be nothing more than an onslaught of images and information. What saves this museum from such a fate is the fact that it is the direct creation of the Freedom Forum, a “non-partisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people.”<sup>40</sup> Just as with the Holocaust Memorial, the Newseum has an agenda that it is unashamed in declaring.

However, despite this celebratory set-up, the Newseum succeeds in the end not because of its agenda, but because that agenda is offered up to the visitor for them to explore and question freely.

The introductory film outlines the issues surrounding information and freedom of the press, and clearly establishes the educational purpose of the museum. After the film, the visitor enters the news history gallery. A timeline of events and individuals moves from right to left along one wall and includes newsfile-like drawers filled with artifacts. Monitors appear in the timeline when newsreel footage appears historically, and play short supplementary films. Interestingly, the timeline includes monitors that rotate still images of additional individuals in order to expand the timeline further. There are also two mini-theaters, one of which also rotates its films. Both of these are excellent examples of how media can be used to increase access to information—a central theme throughout the Newseum.

The crux of the Newseum, and all other museums seeking to incorporate media in their exhibits, is the fact that:

There is a difference between authority and information. Authority is about position, which is about power. Information—about which one can be an authority—is egalitarian [...] shifting power to the individual for whom it is increasingly available.<sup>41</sup>

This transfer of power is handled responsibly at the Newseum, providing not only a variety of information but to also a framework for evaluating that information.

Everything provided has an overarching educational purpose, and although that purpose

---

<sup>40</sup> The Newseum, *Visitor's Guide* (Arlington: Freedom Forum, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Ellsworth H. Brown, "John Edgar Wideman, Homewood, and Culture" *Museums for the New Millennium: A Symposium for the Museum Community* (Washington: Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution, and AAM, 1997) 55.

may emphasize the more positive aspects of media, the resulting experience still feels balanced.

The educational purpose becomes explicit when you move downstairs into the interactive newsroom. This portion of the museum could easily have accomplished nothing more than information over-load—a media carnival. Instead, each interactive has a concentration of focus that keeps the visitor reined in at all times. There are banks of monitors, geared towards children but engaging to adults nonetheless, that allow the visitor to ‘be’ a reporter, editor or photographer through interactive video adventures. Each one is entertaining and educational—not to mention extremely well produced. There are also monitors set away from the main floor in the Ethics Center, where visitors can sit and test their responses to a variety of real life ethical situations and then see what happened, good or bad. As opposed to the opinion poll in “American Presidency,” this polling station provides real content for an educational purpose.

Also similar to what can be found in the “American Presidency” exhibit, are interactives allowing visitors to be videotaped as either a reporter, news anchor, or weatherman. Visitors are first recorded speaking in front of enormous cameras and bright lights. Later they can see the result on videotape. This is certainly a fun interactive that serves to create some sense of the pressures reporters may feel when on camera, and thus has an educational function.

Both the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Newseum are good examples of the new museology in action. Both cede authority to primary source materials in order to give voice to a diversity of experiences. And although one museum is linear out of

chronological necessity, and the other is largely non-linear and thematic, both successfully direct the visitor's experience toward a specific educational end.

The final two museum environments to be discussed are different in form and function.. Opening in 2000, the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture at the New York Historical Society is one of the more recent examples to be explored in this paper. "African Voices" opened at the National Museum of Natural History in 1999. Although they both use a hypertextual model of information delivery, the end results are radically different. Whereas the Luce Center uses the strengths of hypertextual media to add greater detail about specific objects in its collection, "African Voices" attempts to provide greater context through media, often leading to more confusion than synthesis.

The Luce Center can be seen as open storage for the NYHS, though it is not explicitly called this. In fact, the Center is more appropriately seen as an object catalog come to life. The Luce Center is organized categorically much like a catalog, the objects arranged with practically zero interpretation beyond the object number provided. At first glance the Center may appear more like a traditional art exhibit—where direct aesthetic experience is assumed. This arrangement could easily lead to, "the familiar hypertext experience of finding oneself absolutely fascinated but simultaneously totally lost 'This is great but where am I?'"<sup>42</sup> Under the surface, though, the Center bristles with a wonderful assortment of information to help you find out just exactly where you are.

Besides supplementary information posts and exhibit stations, the Center offers two primary forms of media interpretation. There are audio tours available, one

---

<sup>42</sup> Helen C. McCorry, "I Don't Know What I Want But I Want it Now," MDA Information, 2.1 (1998) <<http://mda.org.uk/info21.htm>>.

specifically designed for family use, that provide additional detail for selected objects. What is interesting about these tours is that information is given by a variety of New Yorkers, some more recognizable than others, that are somehow related to the object being described. The resulting impression is less authoritarian than many audio tours can be, with a variety that is much more personal for both the narrator and the visitor.

The other form of media provided takes the form of computers scattered throughout the Center that are connected to the collection's master database. Pieces of paper and pencils are provided at the orientation desk, allowing visitors to jot down the I.D. numbers for objects that interest them in order to access the database for that object's history. This literally is a hypertext experience, only with the added pleasure of physically searching not on-line but in a three-dimensional space with pencil in hand!

The only drawback to be found in the Luce Center could come from the fact that it is not an exhibit but a study center. Visitors coming to the Center may be given a great deal of information, but real interpretation of its context is to be found within exhibits located elsewhere in the NYHS. Even so, the Center creates a bright and beautiful attic to explore, with the added bonus of several fun and educational tools as guides.

At the opposite end of the media spectrum from the Luce Center's spare self-direction is the NMNH's "African Voices" exhibit. The original Africa Hall at the NMNH has a long and politically charged history. The reasons for the new hall's creation and why it took so many years to become a reality, are complex and cannot be addressed in appropriate detail within this paper. What is possible, though, is an examination of the many forms of media included in the final exhibit.

Arising out of a planning process that was highly collaborative, including the ‘stakeholder’ communities directly involved with the subject matter, “African Voices” is perhaps a model example of the new museology. Densely packed with media and interactive opportunities, these resources can also be seen as deriving from very specific goals of accessibility and pluralism. Exposing visitors to the dynamism and diversity within Africa, especially contemporary Africa, is the central aim of this exhibit—an aim easily supported by the variety of media employed.

Upon entering the exhibit from one end of the hall, visitors are greeted by a wall of TV monitors running an introductory video. From the start visitors know that this is not going to be a traditional ethnographic hall experience. The video is bright and backed by rhythmic music, flashing images of an Africa that is primarily urban and contemporary. From here visitors are free to explore several thematic ‘pockets’ of the exhibit that contain varying levels, or hierarchies, of information. Within each pocket are media ranging from audio atmospherics, touch-screen interactives to short films. The overall effect is at first disorienting. A dizzying array of materials competes for your attention, a problem arising directly out of space limitations within the museum.

Two things stand out within this exhibit, as direct results of both the new museology and new media. First, there is the issue of agency, or of who delivers the message to the visitor. The second is the heavy influence of hypertext-style navigation and delivery of information.

As seen in “A More Perfect Union,” the transfer of authority from the institution to the individual is not new, and is a method of interpretation that has been increasing in popularity. Where “African Voices” is different is the extent to which the stakeholder

voices are allowed to dominate the overall message. This exhibit is filled with information coming directly from a specific individual's experience—leading to a feeling of unquestionable reality. For all of its interactivity and media saturation, “African Voices” is a strangely passive experience. Displacing the voice of authority to individuals separate from an institution can be a wonderful tool for learning about other's experiences, but those experiences are most helpful to the visitor when placed within some larger context—a responsibility still belonging to the institution. In the end, an exhibit “will succeed or fail in reinforcing [an] experience and making it more vivid, more memorable, more lasting, not in terms of some ‘objective’ standard imposed from outside, but according to criteria which the exhibition itself and those responsible for its making must propose.”<sup>43</sup>

Of the interactive stations, one of the more interesting deals with the production of *bògòlanfini*, or ‘mudcloth.’ Seeing the intricacies of this artform's manufacture and its important role within Mali communities make for a very educational experience. The short videos share the meanings expressed through symbols and offer an opportunity to design a mudcloth pattern.

There are a few frustrations in this exhibit as well. The Freedom Theater at one end of the hall shows a longer format film called “Struggle for Freedom.” The theater is small and positioned with a glass wall along one side, allowing for the distraction of seeing streams of visitors entering the exhibit out of the corner of your eye. The film's sound is sadly affected by this difficult location, with noise from passing groups

---

<sup>43</sup> Peter Vergo, “The Reticent Object,” *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989) 58.

drowning out the soundtrack. These distractions detract attention from an impressive film deserving of more respect.

As would be expected in an exhibit relying so heavily on media, on several visits certain portions were not working. Either the introductory film screens were black, the metal working interactive was frozen or the sound sticks at the “Music in Motion” portion failed to respond to pushing the selection buttons offered. Even when technically working, some media devices were still problematic. Life-size video screens showed individuals sharing their stories of living in a Somali Aqal. The audio speakers were tiny and placed nearly ten feet off of the ground at the top of the screen. This made the speakers’ voices practically inaudible, unless you stood immediately in front of the screen. The LED transcription—also at the top of a very high screen—forced you to look up and away from the Aqal.

This is a very complicated exhibit that attempts to do many things for many people. That fact leads to most of its problems and although the exhibit cannot really be faulted for trying to offer as much information as its small space would allow, the resulting experience is nevertheless fragmented. Sometimes less actually is more—and, in the case of “African Voices,” its noble intentions would have been better served by less hypertext and a more focused point of view.

#### IV. Conclusion

There can be no doubt that a new paradigm has evolved for the manner in which museums interpret information in response to audience needs and concerns. This shift has coincided with an increasing availability of new technologies and media. The combination of the new museology and new media has inspired many creative results in

the area of museum exhibition. On the whole, media can be seen as providing excellent support for the educational goals of the new museology. However, a serious assessment must be made concerning the specific goals of media placed within an exhibition. After looking at six museum exhibits, several conclusions can be made concerning media's ability to contribute to the new museology's educational aims of diversity, accessibility and collaboration.

Media clearly supports pluralism and efforts to allow for the expression of multiple voices and opinions. Of the examples reviewed, NMAH's exhibit "A More Perfect Union" is an early example of how this goal may be achieved. Individuals are included in such a way that their experiences become primary sources of information. Stories are told to illustrate a wide variety of experiences—made all the more effective through interactive video interviews. A different form of diversity is achieved at the Newseum, where freedom of the press and expression of individual opinion are championed. The role of media in furthering these goals is the foundation upon which the Newseum stands—a role that is explained using the very media involved, to great effect.

Increased access to information is also a natural by-product of media. However, more information is not an end unto itself, and any media employed should have at its core an educational purpose. "The American Presidency" is an example of how a broad but shallow exhibit wasted its media opportunities. Instead of deepening the educational promise inherent in the presentation of so many powerfully associative objects, the exhibit tacks on media devoid of either creative or practical use. On the other hand, the Luce Center—recognizing the immense variety in its collection—integrates media in the

most appropriate and useful way possible. The Center's use of audio guides and web access to detailed information are straightforward and cleverly executed examples of media furthering the goal of accessibility.

Perhaps the most significant change arising from the new museology is the unquestioned inclusion of outside individuals or groups within the exhibit process. Collaboration of Holocaust survivors in the development of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is what invests that museum with such dignity and power. Testimonials and endless amounts of personal artifacts add weight to an already overwhelming event. In NMNH's exhibit "African Voices" a different kind of collaboration takes place. Videos and interactives act as invitations more than documents—with individuals included not because they are the sole authority, as survivors are, but rather to provide approachable experiences for visitors to relate to. Whether used to intensify historical fact or to expand a theme through multiple voices, media has much to offer when handled with respect and purpose.

In the end, the form media takes is far less important than the nature and quality of information it delivers. Media used within museums requires special consideration for the educational aim of the project, and should ultimately conform to the exhibition's needs—not vice versa. More often than not media extends added support to the new museology, where, within a polyvalent culture, the promotion of meaningful connections between people is understood to be vital. As media becomes increasingly woven into our society, it should not be taken for granted but rather be seen as a uniquely useful tool in shaping educational and socially relevant experiences for the museum visitor.

## WORKS CITED:

- Alexander, Edward P. Museums in Motion. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996): 215.
- The American Associate of Museums. "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums." (Washington: AAM, 1992): 3.
- Battiata, Mary. "Smithsonian's Constitution Controversy." The Washington Post, 16 (March 1987): B1.
- Brown, Ellsworth H. "John Edgar Wideman, Homewood, and Culture." Museums for the New Millennium: A Symposium for the Museum Community (Washington: Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution, and AAM, 1997): 55.
- Carruth, Gorton. "1961," The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997): 602.
- The Commission on Museums for a New Century. "Museums for a New Century," Annotation. Museum Learning Collaborative Website, <<http://mlc.lrdc.pitt.edu/scripts/search>>.
- Gardner, Albert Ten Eyck. "Museum in Motion." Metropolitan Museum of Art's Bulletin 24 (Summer 1965): 21.
- Hauenschild, Ph.D, Andrea. Claims and Reality of New Museology: Case Studies in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, diss. (Germany: ICOM, 1988): <<http://museumstudies.si.edu/claims 2000.htm>>.
- Hein, Hilde S. The Museum in Transition. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000): 12.
- The History Channel. "Technology Timeline: 1957," <<http://www.historychannel.com/timeline.html>>.
- Johnson, Steven. Interface Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1997): 238.
- Jones-Garmil, Katherine. "Museums in the Information Age," Hands On Hypermedia and Interactivity in Museums, (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1995): 1.
- McCorry, Helen C. "I Don't Know What I Want But I Want it Now." Information, 2.1 (MDA, 1998): <<http://mda.org.uk/info21.htm>>.
- National Museum of American History. "A More Perfect Union," Online Exhibitions: <<http://americanhistory.si.edu/youmus/ex04unio.htm>>.
- The Newseum. Visitor's Guide. (Arlington: Freedom Forum, 1997): Credits.

(Works Cited Cont'd)

- O'Sullivan, Michael. "A Pack of Presidential Paraphernalia." The Washington Post 24 Nov. 2000, final ed.: N62.
- Ruskin, John. The Lamps of Beauty: Writings on Art, ed. Joan Evans. (London: Phaidon Press, 1989).
- Schlereth, Thomas J. "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," Material Culture Studies in America. Ed. Thomas J. Schlereth. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999): 35-36.
- Seaborg, Glenn T. "A Nation At Risk Revisted: Part I." (1991): < <http://www-ia1.lbl.gov/Seaborg/risk.htm>>.
- Thinkquest.Org. "Media in the 1950s: Television Coverage," <<http://library.thinkquest.org/27629/themes/media/md50s.html>>.
- Thomas, Selma. "Mediated Realities: A Media Perspective." The Virtual and the Real. Ann Mintz and Selma Thomas, eds. (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1998): 6.
- Trescott, Jacqueline. "Hats Off to The Presidency." The Washington Post, 15 Nov. 2000: C01.
- TVHistory.TV. "Television History: The First 75 Years," <<http://www.tvhistory.tv/1950-1959.htm>>.
- The United States Department of Commerce. "Executive Summary," National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action. (1993): <<http://www.ibiblio.org/nii/NII-Executive-Summary.html>>.
- Vergo, Peter. "The Reticent Object." The New Museology, ed. Peter Vergo. (London: Reaktion Books, 1989): 58.