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Technology and the Museum Experience

Introduction

As discussed in my previous paper, "Computerization" (19s_3409_Jackson_a2.doc), I provided a brief overview of how technology has changed how archives, museums, and libraries make collections accessible. I also briefly explored if and how technology has changed the visitor experience and the impact it has on the visitor's ability to interpret relationships and connections between objects. In this paper, I will expand on these topics and profile a museum and an archive and track their evolution from a traditional model to one in which technology drives their exhibitions.

I. Evolution of Technology

In 2006, the Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) published a report titled "Status of Technology and Digitization in the Nation's Museums and Libraries." In the introduction to the report the authors noted that digital technology "provides the public with new pathways to access museum and library collections and brings them 'face-to-face' electronically with librarians, curators, scientists, artists, and scholars. By using technology, rich scientific, historical, aesthetic, and cultural resources can be presented with contextual information that enhances educational value" (IMLS, 2006, p.1).

Since the IMLS's report, technology has become a deeply rooted part of our day-to-day lives. Museums and archives "are being challenged to respond to new audience expectations and behaviors brought about by an always-connected society" (Barr and Rogers, 2017). In a New York Times article from 2013, "Technology That Services to Enhance, Not

Distract", the (then) Cleveland Museum of Art Director, David Franklin, stated "Every museum is searching for this holy grail, this blend of technology and art" (Bernstein, 2013).

As mobile technology developed, "the boundary between the physical and the digital user experience" evolved (Doljenkova and Tung, 2015). An article from 2014 titled "How Museums Can Use Beacons to Enhance Visitor Experiences," (Mallik, 2014), discussed how beacon technology, while primarily used within retail, could "revolutionize the experience museums offer (ibid). Beacon technology was first introduced in 2013 by Apple, Inc. It enables an individual's mobile phone to receive signals from the beacon, determine the users' location, and deliver location specific content to that user. Beacon technology enabled museums to provide more context to visitors as they navigated through the museum. In a 2015 blog post, the same author provided an overview of how three museums including the National Slate Museum in Wales, the first in the world to use beacon technology, were using the technology to "enhance visitor's experience" (Mallik, 2015).

Most recently, in 2017, the Knight Foundation, which funds programs in journalism, the arts, and technology, announced $1.87 million award to 12 art museums to support the museum efforts "to explore new ways technology can connect people to art" (Barr and Rogers, 2017).

As stated in my previous paper, institutions commonly provide interactive experiences for visitors using audiovisual displays, 3-D replicas, touch screens, and iPads with curated content or tours. In an online article, "The Impact of Data and Technology on Museums,"

author Sarah Mitchell states “by having interactive applications, Google Glass or screens with the art being observed, visitors can gain deeper information on the piece or exhibit they are looking at” (Mitchell, 2017).

A 2009 publication by iSchool faculty at the University of Toronto noted in that collections traditionally were the domain of the curator. Now that technology enables museums to share their collections online, “opening up access has changed the focus of the museum from its preservation activities to its interaction and engagement with the public.

II. Institution Evolutions – Case Studies

A. Museum of the City of New York

The mission of the Museum of the City of New York states that it “fosters understanding of the distinctive nature of urban life in the world’s most influential metropolis. It engages visitors by celebrating, documenting, and interpreting the city’s past, present, and future” (Museum of the City of New York, 2019).

In 2015, the Museum of the City New York completed a three phase $97 million renovation and modernization project. Plans to expand the museum’s space date back to 1998 but it was over 15 years before the project begin. During the renovation, a video update on the museum’s YouTube channel included comments from the museum’s (then) director, Susan Henshaw Jones, who said “It’s more than just getting new lights and getting new electrical. We’re going to be in every way, shape, and form a 21st century institution (Jones, 2011). Included in phase two, a Digital Lab was constructed which

enabled the museum to digitize over 50,000 images from their photo collection. The renovation also included technology enhanced classrooms. Finally, as part of the overall renovation, in 2016 the museum opened a permanent exhibition *New York at Its Core* which occupies the entire first floor of the museum.


Museum of City of New York, 1990s *(YouTube-SiteChecker)*


Museum of the City of New York, 2017 *(MuseumNext)*

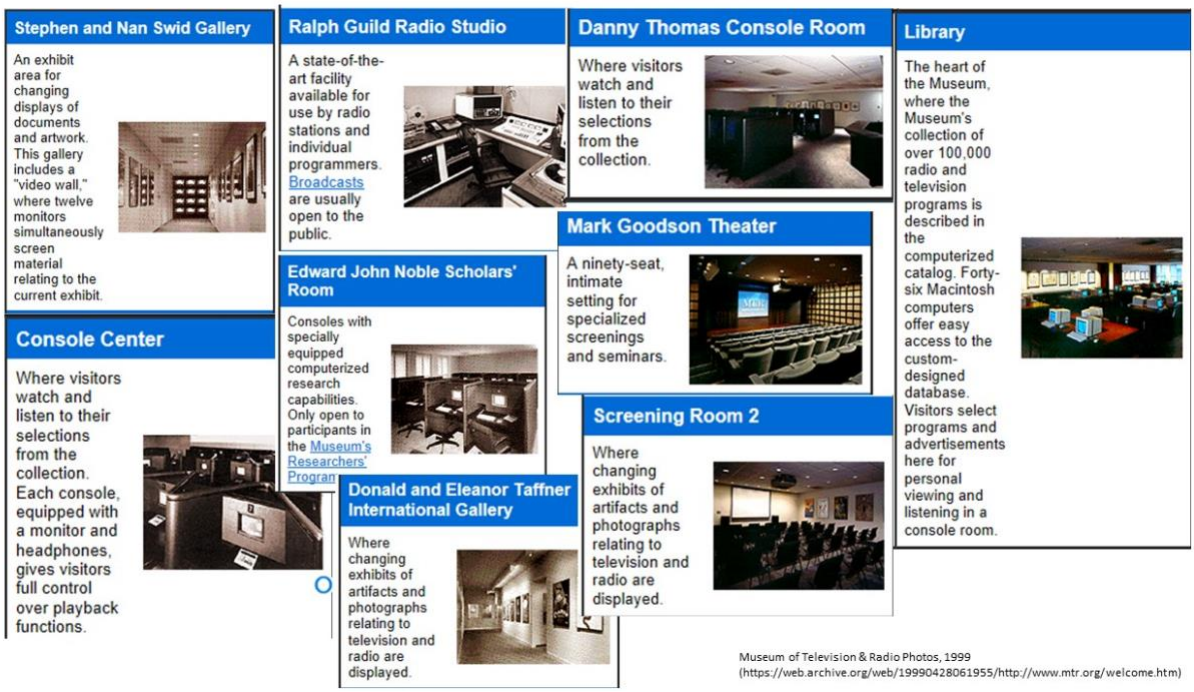
On the Museum of the City of New York's website, in their "Behind-the-Scenes" section, an entry from 2016 titled "From Taxidermy to Technology: The Exhibition Evolution at the Museum of the City of New York" discussed the exhibition trends of the museum. The article states "…rather than utilizing mannequins and taxidermy, characters in *New York at its Core* bring their stories to life via interactive touch-screen technology that provides a wealth of information on the individual or animal and explains their significance to the history of New York City" (Chapin, 2016). The Society for Experimental Graphic Design (SEGD), a non-profit, professional association, described the *New York at Its Core* exhibit as one which told a story " through object-rich analog displays coupled with immersive media, in an all-encompassing environment dramatic in its modernity and reductive in materiality" (Makowski, 2015).

B. The Paley Center for Media

The Paley Center for Media (Paley Center), formerly known as the Museum of Television & Radio (MTR), was founded in 1975 by William S. Paley as the Museum of Broadcasting. In 1976 it opened to the public on East 53rd Street in New York City. The mission of the institution was to "collect, preserve, and interpret television and radio programming and to make these programs available to the public (Museum of Television and Radio, 1999).

Museum of Broadcast Communication, 1982
(https://www.transdiffusion.org/2015/09/12/for-the-want-of-a-museum)

In 1991, the Museum of Broadcasting became the Museum of Television & Radio (MTR) and moved to its current location, 25 W. 52nd Street in New York. The new name reflected industry changes such as the expansion of cable television. The MTR offered a variety of exhibitions, seminars, programming, listening series, live and taped radio broadcasts and curated screenings.



By 2007, the MTR rebranded itself as The Paley Center for Media, in part, to reflect technological changes, e.g. the Internet. In an article announcing the name change, the (then) President and CEO, Pat Mitchell, stated "'Museum was not a word that tests really well with the under-30 and 40-year-olds," especially in the context of radio and television" (Jensen, 2007). The Paley Center ultimately digitized most of their collection and curated screenings moved to an online forum. Today public programming consists primarily of the center's signature television festival, PaleyFest. Education programs continue through on-site course, videoconferencing courses, education workshops, and a university series.

The Museum of the City of New York and The Paley Center, as with many other museums, have transformed to meet the needs of the technology driven society. However, how they

transformed as institutions and places of exhibition is very different. The MCNY mission has remained constant. The Paley Center's mission has evolved and is now focused, in part, on leading "the discussion about the cultural, creative, and social significance of television, radio, and emerging platforms for the professional community and media-interested public (The Paley Center, 2019)." Further down in the full mission statement is mention of the center's archive and the public's access to it. At its core, The Paley Center never operated as a "true" museum but as an archive.

At one time, The Paley Center was one of the few places the public would be able to view episodes of vintage television programs or listen to vintage radio programs. Today, the public's access to archival footage and content is much different. Much of the content an individual would have sought out at The Paley Center has become increasingly available to the public over the years with cassette tapes, VHS, DVD releases of vintage programs and, now, podcasts specializing in vintage radio programs. Broadcasting networks that at one time might have donated footage to the Paley Center, now have their footage available online through their websites or YouTube channels.

III. Technology and the Visitor Experience

With many museums driven by technology, what impact might this have on the visitor's experience and interaction with an exhibit. As noted earlier, some view technology as enriching the museum visitor's experience. However, given how connected many individuals are to their various devices, does this result it shorter attention spans? Does a visitor's ability to "swipe left" in turn affect their ability to derive context from an exhibit?

In April 2017, a “60 minutes” segment called “Brain Hacking” featured a former Google product manager, Tristan Harris. In this segment, he discussed how smartphone applications are developed in way that creates user dependency and the result is more engagement by the individual with their smartphones and its applications. Also featured in this segment were Dr. Larry Rosen (Professor Emeritus of Psychology) of California State University.

Dr. Rosen, along with another colleague, recently published a book titled “The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World” which discusses the impact of technology on individual’s lives. The book discusses, in part, the impact of multitasking and the concept of attentional selectivity. The authors note that “technology offers an intense sensory experience that includes stimulation of all senses by a variety of devices. Given that all we possess – and have close at hand – many devices that signal our attention, we may leave our current patch not because we have finished our resource intake at that location but simple because we have been alerted through stimulation of our sensory system by strong bottom up influences that something more interesting or intriguing is available” (Gazzaley and Rosen, p. 192). Based on this overview, because the design of some of the technology utilized in museums, such as iPads and Google Glasses, enables attention selectivity it may result in the visitor remaining engaged with museum objects and exhibits. However, does the visitor lose the full context of an exhibit because of attention selectivity.

The article “The Role of Technology in Museums” outlines the pros and cons of the use of technology in museums (Nolan, 2016):

Cons

1. The distraction of technology and devices distracts individuals from the reflective experience of the museums
2. Negative side effects of technology such as short attention spans
3. Is the museum experience being compromised with the shift from a traditionally physical experience to a digital experience?

Pros

1. Enables museums to expand their visitor base by attracting younger visitors
2. Museums in the 21st Century are "participatory and audience-driven" and the use of technology should reflect that

The author concludes by indicating that a balance is needed in the use of technology in museums. She notes, "At the end of the day, the question is no longer whether technology belongs in museums, but rather, how can museums ensure that technology supports, rather than overshadows, the overall museum experience? (Nolan, 2016).

Finding balance in the use of technology in museums is a theme in other discussions as well. In an article outlining a group discussion regarding the pros and cons of technology in museums, one participant in the discussions notes, "To maintain a sense of integrity for cultural institutions, I think it's important to remember that the artist is at the center, not a product, or return on investment" (use all five, 2017). Another participant noted, "When does it become more about the spectacle of fundraising, or the technological practices around showing the art, than the art itself? In "Museums of the Future: The Impact of Technology on Museum Practices," published in 1999, the author noted in implementing technology, museum experts should use technology to improve the visitor experience and "not for the

sake of technology itself (Anderson, 1999).

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