

Web communication. A content analysis of German university collections and museums websites

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Abstract

The internet opens up new horizons for (science) communication: through classical websites, weblogs, wikis, podcasts, or videos. Specific research on the potential these communication media offer for university museums and collections is still missing. Therefore, the paper presents and surveys the current use of internet communication in order to provide fundamental material for critical discussion. The study is based on collections registered in the online database "University Museums and Collections in Germany".

Introduction

The great variety of information technologies and the widespread use of the internet offer vast opportunities for interaction. The times have passed when universities or museums had to produce brochures to reach their communities. Today, even the smallest institution is able to generate and distribute information in a simple way by using digital media. And it is not only easy to create adequate instruments, it is also inexpensive.

Compared to other museums, university museums do not merely aim to address the general public, they also have to serve communities inside the university such as students and staff. The use of the internet can help to meet the specific needs of all these groups.

Therefore, the internet is an ideal communication platform for university museums and collections, which often suffer from a lack of financial and human resources, but nonetheless have to interact with all kinds of communities.

Currently, interaction is mainly channeled into traditional websites, videos, podcasts, weblogs, or wikis. The interest of this survey is to learn which basic technologies are used by university museums and collections in general, and which technologies are used to reach individual communities in particular. The study is based on institutions registered in the online database *University Museums and Collections in Germany*¹ which contains 760 entries with 436 websites. In addition, I would like to provide an overview of the basic elements of the wide range of web technologies and to encourage collections staff to privilege the use of the internet over 'analog' communication tools.

Basic web technologies

The simplest way to reach the internet community is through a traditional website, which is a collection of web pages, images, videos or other digital assets.

There are many varieties of websites which can be set up for university museums and collections, e.g.:

- Information sites which contain content that is intended to inform visitors;
- News sites dedicated to publishing news and commentaries;
- Database sites whose main function is to allow the searching and displaying of a specific database's content like an inventory or a catalogue;
- Blogs (or web logs) which provide news or commentaries on particular subjects;
- Wiki sites for collaborative work.

¹ publicus.culture.hu-berlin.de/sammlungen/ (accessed September 12, 2008).

Larger organizations often run extensive websites, sometimes including special services for purchasing replicas or publications.

In Germany, most of the university collections run static information websites which present basic information in order to enable a first contact. Alternatively they present a description with images that gives a first impression of the collection, sometimes even a virtual tour through the museum. Some of these tours are specially produced for children or school classes.

A few collections offer surveys on their holdings in form of catalogues or databases which in most cases are interesting only for expert users.

Sadly enough, videos and podcasts, which are highly popular among young people, are very rarely used.

'Podcast' is a blend of 'broadcast' and 'iPod'. A podcast is a series of digital media files which can be downloaded for playback on portable media players and personal computers. The initial appeal was to allow individuals to distribute their own radio-style shows, but the system quickly became used in a wide variety of other ways, e.g. audio tours through museums or exhibitions or interviews with scholars to explain academic facts. The production of podcasts is easy and inexpensive: Everybody who can work with a computer is able to produce a podcast.²

For the world of university museums, podcasting is a wonderful instrument, not just as a tool to inform people outside the university about current projects or exhibitions. It also makes it possible to include the university community in creating podcasts, simply by recording commentaries or interviews with colleagues or students.

The production of videos or videocasts requires more expense and knowledge. Therefore, it is advisable to look for qualified partners who can support the production. This could be the ICT unit at the university, students from local departments of film and media or even television broadcasters interested in certain subjects and willing to co-operate with the museum or collection.

Only a few collections offer databases with information on their holdings, although databases of digitized objects are useful to support display, research, and teaching, especially e-learning. The great advantage of multimedia databases is that holdings from different spheres can be united in one tool and can be presented in their multifaceted historical, cultural, and scientific contexts.³

The second generation of web sites, the so-called Web 2.0 with its interactive and collaborative elements, offers far more potential for university museums and collections. Blogs and wikis are of especially strong interest because of their value in facilitating collaboration and information sharing among users. Oddly enough, in Germany, blogs and wikis hardly appear on university museums and collections websites.

A blog is a website with regular entries such as commentaries, descriptions or other material on particular subjects. It combines text, images, and links to other resources. The possibility for readers to leave comments is an important part of a blog and enables a large number of users to generate and distribute content.

Blogs can be used to enhance communication internally or externally. They are particularly practical for university museums and collections because they are able to transport messages directly to the

² The basic equipment including software costs 180 EUR upwards.

³ This is the case at Humboldt University, where a database called *Cabinets of Knowledge* was developed, which currently makes available about 13,000 selected objects dating from the last 200 years: www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/ (accessed September 12, 2008).

public and do not only address colleagues and students, but also people from outside the university. In this way, it is possible to create an important news source.

A wiki allows authorized users to create, edit, and link web pages easily. It is often used to create collaborative websites. The most prominent example is Wikipedia.

A wiki is an excellent instrument for teamworking, in particular for supporting all kinds of projects. This can be potentially relevant for group work on exhibitions or research projects, or for participants of university seminars. For example, recently, UMAC started a wiki for the board, not just to improve the workflow, but also to produce a digital information repository for UMAC. The wiki enables every board member to enter his or her results or thoughts or to make a comment on the contribution of a colleague. In this way it is possible to produce a comprehensive, updated survey on UMAC's activities and sources for the entire board.

Communities

The majority of analyzed websites do not address a specific community. A few websites are offered in English and are exclusively intended to inform experts. Others, offering instructive and exciting virtual tours through their collections, are meant to communicate their content especially to school classes and are often referred to as e-learning programs. The internal university public, however, which should be one of the main communities for university museums, seems to be of no relevance. This is difficult to understand since university museums and collections should primarily serve their parent institutions. The use of the internet can help to support the needs of the internal academic community.

Concluding remarks

The result of my analysis is that most university museums and collections in Germany are not seizing the available opportunities provided by the internet. Why so? Usually, universities are open-minded about new web technologies: Why should university museums and collections be any different? Is it a matter of costs, time, or reserve over these new concepts? Or is it just a lack of knowledge and skill? Whatever the reason, it is necessary to address the situation immediately and try to make up lost ground.

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