

From Headphones to Microphones: Mobile Social Media in the Museum as Distributed Network

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Figure 1: Still from a 1952 news clip from the Dutch Gescheidenis (History) website, demonstrating new audio tour technology at the State Museum in Amsterdam.

It's not about the technology.

In a black and white film (Fig. 1), a crowd of well-dressed Europeans moves as one through Amsterdam's State Museum. The voice-over explains, "By use of a 'hearing aid' the visitors get information and are being guided to the different artworks in the exhibition. The spoken words are recorded in several languages on a so-called tape recorder." As the *invisible guide* instructs, heads lean in to examine a detail in a painting, and then just as suddenly, move away to the right to follow the tour into the next gallery.¹

Although this video from 1952, excavated by Loic Tallon, shows an example of one of the earliest tour technologies, a common perception of museum tours is that they are not terribly different today. Despite having evolved through numerous generations of mobile content delivery technology in the past 60-odd years, museum tours continue to face

objections – however unfair they may be – that:

- Standardized tour content creates a homogenous, one-size-fits-all experience, possibly watered down to better appeal to mass audiences but ultimately boring both the novice and the expert;
- Museum tours dictate the visitor’s movements and time in the galleries. Even though random access devices, which allow visitors to select commentaries in any order, have been prevalent in museums for nearly a generation, visitors still decline audio tours because they “prefer to visit at their own pace” (Luce, 2010). And it is true that wherever linear content is used – for example, a one-to-two minute audio commentary about an object – visitors can feel obliged to continue looking at that object until the end of the commentary, whether they remain interested or not.
- Digital tours produce herd behavior among visitors and crowding around exhibits as visitors look primarily, if not exclusively, at the objects featured on the tour;
- Audio and multimedia tours are in competition with human docents and represent an attempt to replace social interaction with a cold, isolating technology.

Perhaps partly as a result of this reputation, audio tours have never gained status as an indispensable part of the museum visit, despite having been introduced so long ago.

They are a *nice-to-have* rather than a *have-to-have*: after all, audiences do not visit the museum to take the audio tour. Indeed, take-up rates remain stubbornly well below 10% for most permanent collection tours, and many cultural professionals and members of the public are downright hostile to the platform (Longo, 2010). By contrast, in the past decade, one new technology after another has been heralded as the must-have tool for the next generation of museum interpretation: multimedia tours, cellphone tours, podcasts and downloadable audio tours, even Twitter and text-message tours – all have come on the scene amid high expectations, but have so far failed significantly to transform the interpretive landscape. iPhone and web apps are the latest great hope, and offer exciting new ways of reaching audiences on-site and beyond. Yet according to a 2006 study at SFMOMA, a minority of visitors uses technology for on-site interpretation, opting instead for traditional analog tools – if any – when given a choice (Samis, 2007). So are these new platforms doomed simply to replace the traditional audio tour with increasingly complex and expensive, but no less marginal, solutions for museum interpretation?

It’s in the context of this repeating cycle of dashed new technology hopes that I’d like to propose we frame the question differently. Mobile interpretation is not about the technology: which player, which platform, which app, or other bells and whistles. It may be easy to assume that the Dutch museumgoers move as one in the 1952 film clip because the audio tour uses a broadcast technology: everyone is hearing

the same content at the same time, so they are all compelled by the technology do the same thing at the same time. But imagine, for a moment, that the content asked visitors to spend a couple of minutes looking around the gallery, then to choose a favorite artwork and describe it to a companion. Using the same, archaic broadcast tour technology, we would have seen a very different experience played out in the museum. Instead of herd movement, we would have seen individuals experiencing the exhibits at their own pace. Instead of tomblike silence, we could have seen lively social interactions. Instead of obedient, passive visitors, we would have seen proactive teachers and ambassadors, advocating for the works that most touched them – reinforcing their memories, learning, and experiences by sharing them with others. When the content and experience follow the technology, instead of the other way around, we risk turning our visitors into comical cyborgs – a melding of human and machine – that follow borg-like behaviors prescribed by the platforms and interfaces we offer them. If the museum tour experience has not made many gains in popular opinion since 1952, despite all the innovations in mobile technology in the past 60 years, perhaps it's the content, not the technology, which is the problem.

The audience takes the lead

A compelling interpretation program is the result of great content and user-centric experience design first and foremost. And in the *www* age of *whatever, whenever, wherever* information

on demand, our visitors are increasingly determining the museum's interpretive experience themselves, using new informational practices adapted from their Web 2.0 lives. Since we can no longer even assume that our visitors are physically in the museum, the question becomes: how does the museum “meet them where they are – and take them someplace new” as Michael Edson, director of Web and New Media Strategy at the Smithsonian Institution, has asked?

Letting our audiences lead our mobile program design means thinking about content and experience design first and foremost. Following are six questions towards the design of an evaluation-led, user-centric mobile experience. But before embarking on any mobile project, it is worth any interpretation designer's time to check out the research and evaluations of previous mobile projects and their audiences. By 2005, over 100 handheld pilots had been conducted at museums around the world (Proctor, 2005). Most of these repeated some, if not all, prior experiments in ignorance of their colleagues' learning in other museums. Although convincing internal stakeholders that evaluations are worthwhile can be a challenge, significant progress has recently been made in centralizing access to what data has been published on mobile platforms and projects. Several wikis and websites are referenced in this paper and make an excellent starting point for any mobile interpretation project.

At the same time, it is important to take into account the radical transformations that recent technology and social

media in particular, have wrought on contemporary culture. Concepts and applications that may not have worked even just a few years ago may now have currency in today's more mature Web 2.0 zeitgeist. And audiences are not always reliable predictors of what they want, like, or will use; sometimes we just have to try out new ideas in order to understand if they will work with our target audiences. For this reason, an appreciation for the value of audience-led design and basic understanding of the principles of prototyping and usability testing are critical skills for museum professionals in this era of rapid technology change.

1. Who is your target audience – really?

Whether you're targeting on-site visitors or virtual visitors through the mobile web, identifying and understanding your target audience is not just a question of demographics. In designing an interpretation program, we also need to know what platforms they already use to get content and information on a regular basis:

- Are they already in the habit of taking traditional audio tours?
- Are they comfortable using cellphones or smart phones?
- Do they regularly download podcasts and other content for time-shifted playback on their personal media players?
- Do they use mobile social media applications, such as text messaging (SMS), Twitter, Facebook...

If museums' visitors are reluctant to use technology in the galleries, web and cellphone use statistics show that they are certainly using it everywhere else, with internet penetration rates well over 50% for Europe and 74% for North America², and mobile phone subscriptions surpassing 60% globally.³ What do they like about the tools and devices they use every day? What makes accessing content on those platforms compelling, addictive, and automatic – or difficult and not worth the effort?

In the light of your organization's mission and key messages, what do you want this target audience to know, think and/or feel? Having understood a bit more how your target audiences operate – what delights and frustrates them – we begin to have a sense of how to reach them on all the platforms they use, both inside the museum and beyond. And with a bit of forethought and judicious content design, it should be possible to create a mobile program that will move cross-platform as easily as your visitors do.

2. What do they want to know?

Just as important as understanding what mobile platforms and tools visitors already use and enjoy, is getting a sense of what they want to know. What in your exhibition or collection makes them curious? What questions pop immediately into their minds when they enter the gallery or encounter a particular object? Do existing interpretation solutions already satisfy those questions?