Personal Digital Collections on Museum Websites: Research in Progress

Paul F. Marty
College of Information
Florida State University

In my current research, I am exploring the role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in encouraging stronger relationships between museums and their online visitors. The ability to access digital representations of museum artifacts has transformed the way museum visitors interact with museums. The widespread availability of digital collections has resulted in unprecedented levels of access, yet increased access to information is only one of many ways that ICT have changed the relationship between museums and their visitors.

Increased access to digital collections has removed many traditional barriers between museums and museum visitors, offering new opportunities for interacting with collections and information resources (Besser, 1997). Douma and Henchman (2000), for example, discuss an online exhibit that allows visitors to digitally "strip away" layers of a painting (Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*), examining earlier versions using simulated infrared or x-ray lenses. Gillard (2002) explores how the National Museum of American History's *HistoryWired* project encourages visitors to manipulate a collection of artifacts, uncovering connections between objects along temporal, cultural, and thematic lines. Sayre (2000) describes how the Minneapolis Institute of Arts allowed online visitors to follow the restoration of a painting in real time, drawing them into the process and building stronger relationships between the museum and its visitors.

As museum professionals explore new methods of making collections available online, the purpose of museum websites has shifted from providing information about the museum and its collections to providing visitors with new opportunities for interactivity. A growing number of museums now encourage their visitors to draw connections between artifacts, and share those connections with other museum visitors (Bearman & Trant, 2005; Dietz et al., 2004; cf. Borgman, 2003). In this way, museum visitors use ICT to add value to digital collections, contributing their knowledge to the museum's collections by adding new connections and interpretations across user communities (cf. Lynch, 2002).

As part of this process, revolutionary trends in personalization have occurred in the online museum environment (Bowen & Filippini-Fantoni, 2004; cf. Beardon & Worden, 1995). A growing number of museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Virtual Museum of Canada, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, allow visitors to create personal digital collections (PDC) of their favorite artifacts, adding or removing artifacts at will, and returning to view their collections whenever they like. Some museums, such as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Walker Art Center, allow online visitors to group digital artifacts into personal galleries, annotate them with textual descriptions, and share them with other online visitors.

While the specific features of these systems vary, the common hope is that museum visitors who are encouraged to collect their favorite digital artifacts at museum websites will develop a more positive relationship with the museum itself. In theory, the ability to create PDC serves as a lure, encouraging visitors to explore the museum's collections in person as well as online. Excited by

seeing their current favorites online and finding new favorites at the museum, visitors will return to the museum's website before and after each visit, looking up more information about their current favorites, and adding new objects to their PDC.

While data about the use of PDC in museums are very hard to acquire, preliminary evidence indicates that PDC are a popular feature on museum websites: at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, for example, nearly 30,000 PDC have been created since 2000 using the MIA's Art Collector feature (http://www.artsconnected.org/art_collector/). Despite their popularity, however, the majority of the visitors who create PDC never return to visit them again: at the Getty Museum, for instance, fewer than 20% of the online visitors who create PDC using the MyGetty feature ever return to look at their collections (http://www.getty.edu/mygetty/).

Why is this the case? One possibility is that the process of using ICT to build PDC on a museum website is much like gathering postcards of favorite artifacts at a physical museum: the fun is in the creation process. For many visitors, the act of identifying and organizing their favorite artifacts may be sufficiently satisfying so that there is no need to revisit them later. It may be that PDC serve primarily to help visitors organize their impressions before or after a museum visit, establishing order in the apparent chaos of museum collections. In this situation, the mere existence of a PDC (or the knowledge that it exists) may be sufficient to meet visitor needs.

In my current research, I am exploring the influence of PDC on relationships between museums, museum websites, and their visitors. While there is no doubt that using ICT to allow visitors to personalize their museum experiences has the potential to be extremely positive, the current lack of understanding about the motivations of visitors who develop PDC makes it hard to speculate about why they rarely visit their collections after they are created. The lack of data regarding the use of PDC makes it impossible to answer questions such as: What visitors are most likely to develop strong attachments to their PDC? Under what circumstances will visitors return to their PDC? Does the use of PDC encourage increased museum visitation? Studying the use of PDC by museum visitors will help answer these questions and increase our understanding of the potential benefits of adding PDC interfaces to museum websites.

These research questions are all part of a larger body of research which explores the role of ICT and digital museum resources in the lives of museum visitors. From this perspective, the most important unanswered questions about PDC concern the ability of digital museum resources to encourage museum visitors to become involved with museum activities and collections. In particular, a study of PDC provides an excellent opportunity to examine the culture of collecting as mediated by ICT. The study of the "digital museum in the life of the user" is an important but relatively unexplored area for museums (Marty, in press). Given the increasing use of ICT in museums, there is a need for a thorough study of the potential value of PDC for encouraging museum visitors to become more involved with museums and museum websites.

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