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1. Museums for far away publics

Museums are forced to adapt to changing times, in particular in respect to

- develop from "European" heritage savers towards institutions for intercultural communication
- reach broad and popular publics instead of cultural high level minority groups
- fulfil a multiplicity of different functions, from cultural heritage to all aspects of popular leisure activities
- think of their publics as markets for their services and commodities
- understand their visitors as being clients of the serving museum
- meet people's increasing possibilities of mobile accessibility.

Museums have always been "heavy" institutions: being located at a specific venue with all their collections and displays of real world objects which in addition very often are unique. Museums have to be visited physically as a filled space. Of course, they always have been trying to reach out of this place - by travelling curators, objects and exhibitions, by publications, by merchandises. The new communication technologies - Internet, CD-ROM - not only offer new possibilities for being present in the communicative worlds, but they establish a pressure on every institution to make use of them. Whoever wants to count for something in the "information society" has to make use of the new technologies.

But although there is a kind of hysteria forcing everybody to make use of the new technologies, there are some serious questions rather open, like

- What are the publics which make use of these technologies? So far they still are minority fractions in Germany and we know rather little about them.
- What could be effected within these publics by making use of the technologies? We do not know very much about the ways people use these technologies, their motivations of usage, the effects to be effected by usage of the technologies.
- Will the efforts of making use of the technologies by museums - in the framework of their increasingly restricted budget lines - be met by respective gains? The usage of the technologies not only requires computers, software and network traffic expenses but needs personnel whose required skills do not belong to the traditional skills of museum personnel.
- Which aims should museums follow in using these technologies - prevent their traditional publics to change to other media (realistic), attract new target groups which so far have not been to museums (optimistic), consider the new technologies as new media offering a complete new way of presentation of the idea of "museum" (virtual).
- And how will people react to offerings from museums reaching out from their fixed venue into the new cyberworlds? Should museums become a part of these worlds or a counterpart against them?

Some of these questions are studied by a research project on the potentials of usage of museums outreach representation through new media (Internet, CD-ROM) which is jointly undertaken by the work unit information science of the Institute for Mass Communication and Communication Science of Free University Berlin and the Institute for Museum Studies of the State Museums of Berlin - Prussian Heritage and being financed by Stiftung Volkswagen. The research programme covers several smaller empirical studies and should lead to a representative survey in late 1999 on museums visitors and users of these new technologies. This paper outlines some of the results of first stages of research and some assumptions for further research. The presentation at the conference should provide some more details of research that are available then.

2. What do we know about Internet users in Germany?

Since its introduction in 1993 the number of Internet participants has been constantly growing. In Germany it went up from about 300.000 users in January 1993 to about 5 to 6 millions in 1999. In the very beginning of online research the „typical“ Internet user was a young employed male person between 20 and 39 years old with at least some college experience or highschool degree. In the meantime these characteristics are gradually softening and other user groups become more and more important.

- There is more variety concerning the age of the users, i.e. the number of youngsters as well as elder persons is continually increasing.
- Although users continue to be predominantly male, the number of female users - especially young females - is rapidly increasing within the last four years. (The W3B-Survey indicates for autumn 1995 6,2 % female users, for autumn 1997 12,2% and in 1998 15,5%.)
- Users with high education and high income still are in the majority, however the quantity of persons with lower levels of education and income clearly is augmenting.

The following table gives an impression about the present quantities concerning gender and age of Internet users, based on two highly reputed surveys.

	W3B-Survey 1998	ARD/ZDF-Survey 1998
Gender		
male	84,5 %	72 %
female	15,5 %	28 %
Age		
14-19	7,5 %	11 %
20-29	35,3 %	29 %
30-39	31,0 %	34 %
40-49	15,5 %	17 %
50 and elder	10,7 %	9 %

About 40% of the users are novices, i.e. they have started on the Internet resp. on WWW only in the past 6 to 12 months. Due to different research categories within the studies it is rather difficult to gain results about how long Internet sessions normally take but one can say that online facilities are used between 2 and 10 hours per week.

Online users are eager for knowledge and news but also for communication. Internet is regarded to serve both, information and entertainment resp. infotainment and edutainment. The attention given to the net is as well due to professional as for private reasons. Most of the respondents report that they seek problem solving information, want to be informed about actual trends and are curious about what the Internet offers. However, not all of the facilities the Internet offers, are requested in the same way. WWW and E-mail are for the majority of the users the most favorite services. No other technologies come close to them. Newsgroups and even more chats are especially accepted by young resp. very young users. Online shopping is due to open security and privacy questions still seen as dispensable.

There are four significant types of users:

- **pioneers**, i.e. mainly young men working in computer branches, forming the technical avantgarde;
- **members of the postmodern society**, i.e. intellectual, liberal mainly male users who regard themselves as global media users;
- **curious people**, i.e. novices with only little experience, high number of women;
- **pessimists**, i.e. people having a negative attitude to new online media.

3. Internet usage in Internet Cafés

In the past 5 years online users have been rather well examined by nearly innumerable online and offline surveys worldwide. We know quite well about general demographics, technological equipment, Internet behaviour and so on but we still know very few about the relation of museums and Internet and even less about visitors of museum homepages.

Due to the small personal and financial capacities of the project, it was necessary to find a way to meet and identify online users without big efforts and costs. Most of the online users have access to the Internet either at home or at their working place. However, another opportunity to get access to the web are Internet Cafés. Therefore the project initiated a small survey about Internet behaviour in general and especially concerning museums. The qualitative interviews were supported by a questionnaire. 90 web users participated in the survey. Questions were asked on the following areas:

- General Demographics
- Web and Internet Usage
- Leisure Interests and Media Usage
- Opinions on Internet
- Opinions on Museums in Internet and Museums in general.

Most of the demographic results match with those raised by other studies:

- More than two third of the users are in the 20 to 40 age range.
- The gender ratio is between 50 : 50 and 70 (male) : 30 (female), depending on the location.
- The users mainly have high education levels.
- Apart from the WWW most of the participants use E-Mail. Chats are used by about 25%, newsgroups are rarely used.

As to the special access situation we found out that in most of the cafés regular guests are dominating. Many of them also have further access possibilities but like to meet with friends in the cafés. To stay in the cafés therefore is not only to go into the web but very often is also a chance to meet people, to enjoy the atmosphere, to play around etc. Especially for young people the Internet cafés are more or less meeting points for different purposes. These results are in clear contrast to some people's anxiety according to which new media will diminish social contacts. Social isolation in front of the personal computer at home doesn't take place, at least not according to what the web users in the cafés told us.

Another cliché whereafter many online users spend most of their session time surfing from one web site to another either could not be verified. In fact, there are only few participants using the net without any idea of what they want to do or where they want to go. If so, they are very young or novices in the web. The majority of the users seek information about educational institutions, local authorities, jobs, literature, travels and finances and stay (and pay) for 30 minutes up to 2 hours.

Definitely the biggest surprise of the survey was not even that about two third of the participants (!) are museum visitors. Still more surprising was the opinion that for most of them no web site could ever substitute the museum visit in situ. Most participants would appreciate to find museums in the

Internet especially with basic information about opening hours, actual exhibitions, events etc. but museums should not try to be too pedagogic.

At least three different types of users could be identified:

- pragmatic users i.e. high education level, seeking for special information or services;
- net hoppers i.e. under the age of 20, mostly female, participating in chat groups, regarding the Internet to be fashionable;
- experts i.e. mostly male, online freaks using nearly daily all kinds of online services, regarding the Internet as indispensable.

4. Users of Museum Websites

What do we know about users of museum websites? Currently not very much. Some 100-200 museums in Germany are offering websites, from some twenty of them data of their statistics about usage have been collected (mainly for January 1999). Usage statistics usually are computations based on the logfiles. Since most of the servers used different software the statistics software differed not only in what is counted but even in how counted features are named and defined. Therefore usage statistics on this basis could not be compared very intensively. They perhaps help the personnel operating the server and even they can provide some indicators how heavy the website or some of its parts are used but they provide relatively small information about who and how. At least some evaluations point into the following directions:

- Websites of German museums are visited mainly from visitors who know the URL, that means most visits are related to frequent visitors which already include the URL in the bookmarks. Only up to 25% of the visits are following links from search services, regional information systems, technical turn-around sites or museum turn-around sites. Regarding the last ones, there are two major institutions so far: dhm.de and webmuseen.de.
- Museum websites in Germany with high frequencies of visits should be visited by some thousand people a day, but most of the museums should have frequencies much more below 500 visitors a day.
- At least half of the visitors of websites of German museums are located on a German host. This differs substantially from UK where 90% of the visitors came from North America.
- Museums websites are visited during the week more frequently during the workdays (in particular Thursday), least frequently on Saturday.
- Due to the fact, that the majority of users is located in Germany the least frequent visiting times are 0-8 o'clock.

The project recently has mounted an online questionnaire in order to find out something more qualitative data about users of museum websites (or at least users of the Internet who are at least that interested in museums that they might fill in a museum related questionnaire (<http://www.museum.fu-berlin.de/>) . There has been a similar activity in form of a master's thesis by Rachel Reynolds in 1997 in England. Although the results may be a little bit outdated (due to enormous developments in the Internet audiences) and not comparable to our approach some experiences might be still of interest:

- The large majority of respondents wanted to see online exhibitions.
- 3-D and live video was only expected by the large majority of children and adolescents, but images would be expected by most of all. Most respondents wanted to have a search engine for selection within the website.
- About two third of the respondents did not want to have details on the museum staff and their expertise.
- Museum and Internet audiences in the UK are quite similar in their socio-economic classification.

The study indicates that Internet users are quite similar to museum users, that Internet users do not want to get background information before a visit but that they want to obtain information they would not have access to in the real visit, and that websites are unlikely to lead to real visits.

1. Perspectives of Virtual Museums

Some first searches on the topic "virtual museum" in Germany seem to support some of these findings. A search was conducted in August 1999 using a meta-searchmachine and found more than 100 websites which to some extent relate themselves to the idea of a virtual museum. A first evaluation showed that the interpretation of "virtual museum" is quite different and may be grouped into three different approaches:

- the museum-oriented approach, that means websites which related themselves to the traditional idea of museums. The largest fraction within this group were real virtual museums, that means offerings within the Web that only exist there - but with many of the features of real museums including systematic presentation, guided visits, changing exhibitions, special galleries etc. Another subgroup are special exhibitions within the Web that do not relate to real exhibitions. They are somehow similar to private collections, that are not accessible for the public in real world but are presented now in the Web. The representation of real museums by a virtual presence (that means in a way that is self-sufficient) was very rare.
- the actor-centered approach, where individual actors present themselves and call that a museum. This is very popular in connection with projects of schools within the Internet or with some of the people using the Web for self-representation. But even some commercial institutions appear as virtual museums.
- the art-oriented approach, which appears either as a gallery of virtual or network art (that means art that is only existing within the net) or as a gallery-like representation of a recent artist and his or her artworks.

This indicates at least that there seem to be two quite different approaches to museum outreach in the Web: On one hand the representation of the museums and some museum-related information in the Web. This is the large majority of museums websites, where the Web is used more or less as a new information source about the museum. This service could become restricted to those museums visitors which are capable of technology use and are planning museum visits (this could be a rather small target group).

On the other hand there is a strong tendency of Internet usage to build up virtual worlds which only have loose connections to real world museums, collections or phenomena. They tend to form a new medium which is unique for the Web and which is of serious interest to real world museums

- The diversity of approaches to establish something new on the Web using the concept of "museum" indicates at least two new developments: 1. "museum" is looked at as a positive concept which people like to adopt for their expressional approaches, it does not appear in these contexts as something traditional, dusty, old-fashioned. 2. This use indicates that at least these fractions miss something in real world museums which they now try to establish in the web. Real world museums perhaps have to think about possibilities to add something to their real world to attract this fraction which seems to be rather museum-oriented (or give up that fraction).
- These developments could become dangerous to museums in at least two respects: 1. The concept "museum" may become trivialized by being used for self-representation (and not for the representation of cultural heritage). 2. The more non-museum-museums become established on the net (and some of them are really good) the relation between museum and the heaviness of its objects may disappear in the minds at least of the cybernauts - although they perhaps seem to have a lot of features which are similar to traditional museums visitors. That means that perhaps real world museums have to try to relate themselves to all kinds of virtual museums in order to keep this relation present.

To find out what people who are interested in museums and the web think about some of these questions a discussion group in form of a specific mailing list has been started.