
“Who’s out there?” - Combating Virtual Exclusion

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Summary

This paper addresses issues of access. We want to remind you of some of the United Kingdom Government’s philosophies as they are passed down through the relevant publications. There is a huge investment in making museums collections available on-line and it is often stated without qualification that this improves access. This paper looks at how we are currently assessing on-line access and suggests a wider approach. It also examines some of the difficulties and constraints that we neglect at our peril.

Context

The new definition of a museum adopted by the Museums Association in September 1998 has rather crept into the system and we suspect that it is not yet well known. The definition is “Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society”. The key words in our context are enable, explore, inspiration, learning, enjoyment, accessible.

This redefinition of a museum reflects the internal changes that have taken place in museums over recent years. Access in particular is not just fashionable but dear to the heart of curators and education staff. There are a number of initiatives one could point to.

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport undertook a Comprehensive Spending Review last year which made it very clear that National museums in particular must reflect the Government’s priorities when asking for money. For the first time the government pointed out how museums were expected to contribute to policies on Education, social exclusion and economic development. We are now in a culture where promises and targets have to be met. Our own funding agreement as a National museum has targets in a number of areas - including access.

Within the review museums are seen as contributing to four main Government objectives:

- Promote education and lifelong learning etc.
- Provide physical and intellectual access to collections etc.
- Support economic prosperity etc.
- Help to tackle social exclusion by encouraging participation in museum activity and reaching across social and economic barriers.

On the whole museums do quite a lot to combat social exclusion but this needs to be an integrated approach across the range of museum activities. In many museums on-line access is not integrated into such strategies. It either sits with the IT section or the marketing section. Are we actually using ICT to combat social exclusion?

In the context of this paper we should remember how much money is going into the preparation of on-line access. It’s not just the web sites but the underlying digitisation and cataloguing required to make these work. Sooner or later someone is going to ask how effective this investment is.

In April 1999 the DCMS issued a document called “Museums for the Many”. It is not a large document - the meat is in the first 11 pages - but it is a good summary of the Government’s policy. The document follows a draft consultation paper issued in summer 1997 and applies primarily to UK National and Designated Museums. But it encourages “all” museums to offer wide access. It’s worth quoting the main principle...

“The underlying objective for all museums and galleries should be to strive to offer the widest possible access to their collections and to the knowledge and expertise of their staff”

The document stresses that improving access is also about the need to remove barriers to access and says a few words about research which are addressed later in this paper.

Let’s just remind ourselves how we currently assess on-line access. Most of our techniques answer WHAT? is happening - not WHY? The types of data collected include the number of hits, the number of pages downloaded, the navigation of users through the site, the type of domain user, the time, date, country of origin etc. We can tell you, for example, that our own web site in Liverpool is used more during the week than at weekends. We can’t tell you why?

Fundamental Questions

- Does on-line access increase the number of people using museum collections?
- Does on-line access increase the quality of users’ experience?
- Does on-line access combat social exclusion - particularly by removing barriers?
- How do we answer these questions?

Whilst these questions are fundamental they are also complex. The answer is probably yes and all the hype and purple prose we write in fundraising applications is probably justified. But can we prove any of it? It is worth reminding ourselves of the barriers to access?

- Physical and sensory - People with disabilities, older people, people pushing wheelchairs.
- Intellectual - Inadequate display and interpretation of collections, inappropriate language.
- Cultural - Failing to engage people from different backgrounds, displays that may appear demeaning.
- Attitudinal - Not welcoming the visitor.
- Financial - Admission charges, cost of transport for museums, cost of catering and merchandise.

These categories are listed in the DCMS guidelines and reflect terminology derived from equal opportunities legislation and practice. They are all self-explanatory. We can probably think of the on-line equivalents to these barriers but it would be difficult to identify many innovative projects that are removing the barriers. In this field the UK lags behind the US where the IT industry is encouraged to widen access. It is worth noting new UK government initiatives such as a scheme to lease re-furnished computers to low-income households but these are not museum-specific.

Evaluating on-line access

To demonstrate that on-line access combats social exclusion requires a robust research methodology that tests expectation against delivery. In theory each institution promising such benefits would have this in place and there would be a national framework to identify best practice. However it is difficult to identify examples of qualitative work within individual museums in the UK. It is clear that there is no large-scale collaborative work between institutions either. In

this aspect the museums community lags behind libraries. Clearly this is an opportunity for collaboration that the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Council could address.

There are many tested methodologies for gathering information on the users of museum and heritage services. These include surveys, questionnaires, interview, focus groups, observation, data logging etc. Many of these can be applied to or adapted for on-line activities. A newer technique, called Geo-demographics, combines multiple data sets on a geographical framework that allows researchers to group people by things they have in common. There are many variables which can be collected such as share ownership, home ownership, washing machine ownership, educational background, County Court Judgements, age, number of children and so on...

The biggest credit-reference company in Britain, Experian, has developed a system called Mosaic. This splits the population into 12 groups and 52 sub-types. It has plotted these geographically using census and post-code data. It allows advertisers to select lifestyles, behaviours and attitudes and target their advertising where it will do the most good.

For example, there is a category for "Suburban semis". These comprise 11% of the UK population. This is subdivided into "Green belt expansion" (3.4%), "Mock Tudor" (3.2%) and "Pebble-dash sub-topia" (4.4%) (Multimedia Guide to Mosaic 1998)

"Mock Tudor" areas are described in Mosaic as having "disproportionate number of white collar workers in service industries, often at the pinnacle of their careers. Mortgages are close to being paid off and children are at secondary school or university". Such people tend to live in large semi-detached houses in well-established landscapes.

Another category of people are *Rising Materialists*. "Rising Materialists describe neighbourhoods containing large, recently built owner occupied

houses, typically on smaller developments in areas of rapidly growing new industry. Such areas are common in places like Camberley, Fareham, Swindon and Northampton to which highly paid young professionals have migrated following the growth of jobs in new technology industries. The lifestyle of such areas is highly achievement oriented, focused on the material symbols of success. In these areas career and family take precedence over community involvement, the honouring of traditional customs or self-exploration. These are dynamic, future oriented areas, eagerly embracing new consumer products and services".

This is one of the categories of people that visit art galleries but not museums.

Last year the on-line service provider Compuserve undertook a detailed survey of its 400,000 members in the UK and used MOSAIC profiling to categorise them. Their press release described typical internet users as "more dynamic, stylish, economically confident and aspirational than the national average". "A high proportion of Compuserve members fall into the High Income Families and Stylish Singles categories, which include Clever Capitalists, Rising Materialists and Chattering Classes - sociable, articulate adults who like fashion, travel, entertainment and eating out". (Compuserve Press Release 1998)

That description may have held true up till 1998 but the last year has shown a radical shift in the use of on-line services with the development of "free" access pioneered by FreeServe. This has combined with the continuing reduction of computer hardware prices. It is too soon to assess the full impact on the social make-up of typical internet users. However, the trickle-down theory would still take considerable time to reach another Mosaic category.

Rootless Renters. "Rootless Renters is one of the most geographically dispersed of all 52 MOSAIC types. It contains isolated pockets of poor

quality housing, much of it in the form of large old houses that through decay have become divided into small flats, bedsits or squats and attracting rootless young people with little respect for traditional standards of behaviour. Small pockets of older terraces may be mixed up with empty properties, small new housing association developments and houses that have been bought up by Local Authorities and used to house previously homeless families. These are marginal areas where no one is proud to live. These areas contribute disproportionate numbers of County Court Judgments as young single people move around leaving no address for creditors to track them down. For the advertiser these areas offer limited opportunities; it is difficult to find any advertised product for which this type of area represents an attractive market."

This category is one of the classic socially excluded groups. It may well be that they are a target group that your museum wishes to attract (or is told to attract). It is also increasingly difficult to ignore groups of people like this...

"The Government's vision of the electronic future has no place for the excluded. Our plans to modernise Government foresee every single person having access to e-government and e-commerce"
(Public Service Minister Peter Kilfoyle 30/6/1999 in Government Computing Magazine.)

We should point out that NMGM is at the early stages of using geodemographics to analyse its visitors. Since the museum started charging in 1998 a season ticket system has been in operation. The ticket that visitors produce at the entrance point has their address on it. Our admissions staff log the post-code onto a laptop computer at the admission desk. We recently analysed a 12,000 sample of the Liverpool Museum visitors. Geographic analysis showed that 50% of our visitors come from within 6 miles of the museum. A total of 80% come from within 17 miles. Analysis by Mosaic type

confirmed our understanding that we had a family audience but suggested that we had a higher than expected "High income families and company directors" group.

This pilot confirms that the technique is applicable to conventional visitors. At the moment we do not apply it to on-line users but there is no reason why it could not be adapted (with the usual caveats about data collected voluntarily).

We have as yet no way of cross-referencing our two methods of analysis.

A recommended strategy

It would be presumptuous of us to lay down rules but there are some generalisations we could make. Each institution has to understand its own audience first. It needs clear policy aims with specific quantifiable objectives that reflect the nature, location, resources etc. of the museum. "To improve access" on its own will not do. Usually the objective will be one, or a combination of the following...

- To attract more of the same audience.
- To provide a better quality and deeper experience for the same audience.
- To attract new audiences across a broader social range.

Any audience consists of many different groups and different strategies will be necessary to attract these. Some groups will be so difficult and expensive to target that the museum will not be able to afford it.

Clearly web sites have a role to play in all this - we are not suggesting otherwise - but we should be honest about what they can do and how. On-line access is only one tool among many. It should be used within a policy framework and also be strategic and long-term. It should be planned (with SMART targets) and monitored. Data capture and analysis should be

robust and flexible. Above all we should be honest about its limitations as well as its potential.

Summary - Equal Opportunities still applies

The creators and designers of web sites and on-line services need to consider the same Equal Opportunities issues as their colleagues in the conventional design field. These include the use of language, audio, point size, design, technical expertise - plus the barriers listed earlier. Remember the people with no phone, computer, credit card, bank account, bus to library, literacy skills, computer skills, English as a first language etc. You can use on-line access as one of your tools to combat social exclusion. If you do - you need a research and monitoring strategy that is robust enough to prove it works.

We conclude with two quotes again from the "Museums for the Many" (DCMS 1999) document. You can't say you haven't been warned!

Para. 7.7 Setting service standards. These might include "availability of electronic access to collections".

Para. 6.4 Museums and Galleries should "carry out research about their visitors and users (and about those that don't visit and use the museum at present) ... and monitor the effect of access initiatives by establishing targets and performance indicators based wherever possible on both quantitative and qualitative measures"

