

Living with pollution :
overcoming hosophobia in documentation

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S W E D E N

In the year 2000 the Gemeentemuseum The Hague (The Netherlands) was seized by the atmosphere of magic and optimism brought by the new millennium. In particular the museum was caught up by the promising possibilities of information technology (IT). Faced by a mass of ideas for using IT for the day to day running of the museum and in exhibitions and other presentations, the Gemeentemuseum had to decide on a standpoint.

In a series of meetings organized by the “office for strategic innovation in the information society” *InformatieWerkPlaats*, those working at the Gemeentemuseum were challenged to imagine a virtual future for the institution. The idea was to look ten years ahead and imagine what role the museum would play in a future using IT. Although some of the ideas thought up in this project have since proved to have been too optimistic or too idealistic, a start was made: the museum began to think about a virtual museum next to the real building in which artefacts can really be seen by the public.

It emerged that the museum needed to develop a flexible information system in which existing information could easily be supplemented by new data of the highest possible quality. New IT projects should use the already existing data and at the same time make sure that new or altered information flows back into the central system. This approach diminishes the risks involved in undertaking experimental IT projects. Even if a particular project fails in some way, the new and updated information will have been salvaged along the way by becoming part of the central system. Secondly, if the data is of the highest quality, it can always generate versions of a lesser quality.

The museum had already regularly invested in the creation of a central information system before the year 2000. Starting already in 1970 the museum had centralized all the information and documentation relating to each new exhibition. The Documentation Department was set up to collect and present this information. The focus was steadily broadened. What had started as an exhibition archive gradually grew into a general compilation of facts relating to the events, collections, buildings and people of the Gemeentemuseum.

From 1996 to 1998 the museum was closed for the renovation of the building. During this period the *Basisregistratie* (Basic registration) project was undertaken in which all descriptions of objects (120.000) from the museum's collections were digitalized. At the same time, two thirds of the museum's holdings were digitally recorded in photographs.

These developments created their own problems. While on the one hand proving the success of the Documentation Department, the incoming flood of data and documents soon led to a backlog in absorbing them into the system. In the *Basisregistratie* project data was manually copied from the existing inventory cards, inevitably involving various problems. First, the information itself was neither up-to-date nor always trustworthy. Second, errors are always made when copying. Also the photos made of the objects were of poor quality because of a lack of time and money.

During the ensuing years the Gemeentemuseum worked on these problems. First, a website was created for the use of the museum staff to enable them to correct and supplement the descriptions of objects already absorbed into the system during the *Basisregistratie* project. The system is so designed that any changes made to an entry automatically replace the older version in the visible presentation on the computer screen but without eradicating the older version in the system's memory. Second, the digital photos (still valid as a means of identification of the objects) made during the Basis registration project are slowly but surely being upgraded. Every time a new photograph of an object is required - for instance for an exhibition or a publication - a high resolution digital image is made and used in the visual presentation to replace the snapshot made during the Basis registration. Third, new IT projects have been set up to extract and present live data from the central information system, thus giving an up-to-date version which is still in line with the system.

In the course of time The Gemeentemuseum developed various databases for different types of information (objects, documents, addresses etc.). To link these the so-called *Kroniek* (Chronicle) was developed. In this all-embracing system, events related to the museum that result in documents or recordable information are described in simple language. For instance, if an object is given on loan, the fact of the loan is recorded in the *Kroniek* as an item and all the documents, objects, addresses etc. related to the loan are linked in to it. Another *Kroniek* item may be a description of a lecture given by a member of staff in which the same object features. By searching the *Kroniek* for the particular object, both items will be found. Not only events like the loan are described in the *Kroniek*, however. Literally any collection, party, object, place or service can be described and used as a reference point to interlink items from different databases.

Of course many problems remain. One of these involves the role of the Documentation Department as an intermediary between the information in the various data bases and the users, both internal and external to the museum. Many questions only can be answered by specialised

members of staff who have a thorough understanding of the system and all its peculiarities. The contribution of new information and documents can often only be properly absorbed into the system by these same members of staff. The enormous work load inevitably produces a back log in retrieving existing information and in absorbing new data.

To deal with this problem the Gemeentemuseum felt it had to face an unwelcome truth: the information in our system will never be entirely correct and nor will it ever be complete! More specifically: the speed with which new data is produced can never be matched by the speed with which it is absorbed into the system. Even if more efficient ways of canalising new data are thought up, the existing records will never all be adequately revised. These dilemmas present two choices: either we work with a limited selection of controlled information of high quality or we allow all the inferior data to enter our system and try to invent strategies to improve and complete that part of it which we judge to be of importance.

In fact there was not much of a choice and as already intimated above, we decided on the second option. In this respect, the lack of a centralised and accessible system was a key factor. Without such a system members of staff began to make their own archival systems, for instance, systematic catalogues of particular parts of the very varied collections or of documents relating to exhibitions. This led to separate and isolated archives which were stored in ways incompatible with each other. This in turn often resulted in different aspects (or even the same aspects) of a single object or exhibition being stored in different ways and in different places. The inefficiency and redundancy involved in such pluralism are obvious. The need to streamline and centralise the data relating to the museum's collections and activities was one of the main sources of pressure on the Documentation Department: it became clear that all the available information had to be collected and presented, without quality control, within a centralised and accessible system. The other option - to accept in the system only high quality and controlled data - is increasingly doubted by our users. The idea of an ideal data base in which everything is correct and will remain correct is obviously flawed. Most of the users of our 'dirty' system are familiar with the Google approach; they prefer to search large amounts of questionable data and salvage those items which conform to particular criteria of acceptability.

There is another argument in favour of intentionally relinquishing control over the input into the system. It is a fact that most of the data that is contributed to the system will never be used again. Every museum and every library knows that a very large part of the collection never leaves the shelves or the storage areas. The problem is that no one can predict which item will be

requested in the future. To find the one item that will be requested tomorrow, everything must be included in today's system.

Although easy to understand, this approach seems rather inadequate at first. But if we can design our system in a way that enables us to search for and find a desired needle of information in a haystack of incomplete and poorly annotated data, we could put our efforts into updating and upgrading this apparently relevant item and leave the rest of the haystack alone until a new needle takes the future's interest. In this way the system will be continually improved in those areas which are relevant without throwing away those areas which may in the future become relevant. At the same time we are not hampered by the thought that the system must one day become complete and perfect.

The development of tools which will produce good results from the imperfect contents of the system will be one of the objectives of the research that will be undertaken in the coming years by the University of Amsterdam and the Gemeentemuseum. This joint project is part of the programme entitled *Continuous Access to Cultural Heritage (Catch)* initiated by the *Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (NWO)*. The programme aims to provide new solutions for the problems of accessing and using digital systems. CATCH is a question-driven research programme that is particularly aimed at supporting managers of the collections belonging to cultural heritage institutions. The CATCH research programme intends to produce new knowledge and new software (tools).

Of course the Gemeentemuseum is still quite far removed from its ideal information system. But the one thing we learned in 2000 is that, in order to approach an ideal future, one has to overlook the problems of today. What was impossible only few years ago is common procedure now. Likewise, we believe that the unsolvable problems of today will be trivial in a few years. In this sense the magical and optimistic atmosphere of the new millennium is well preserved within our museum. bridge the