

CIDOC 2012 Keynote Address

Powering the Museum of Tomorrow

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Abstract: Meeting the needs of future audiences demands that museums are flexible, responsive and agile in embracing new technologies and new ways of working. Provenance, authority, information and narrative are all key elements of the value we uniquely bring to the online world. If we are to connect with modern users, we must ensure that the information we create and the systems we use can be repurposed dynamically across platforms and contexts.

Good morning, and thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you here today. Thank you for the kind introduction. Both in my role as Chief Executive of the Collections Trust, and as Chair of ICOM UK, I have long been a supporter of the work of CIDOC and its community.

The title of my talk is 'powering the museum of tomorrow', and I think this is a key theme for the CIDOC community.

Everything we do sits at the heart of the museum, we are its engine room, giving it momentum and powering its work. Without the work we do, the collections would be lifeless, devoid of meaning and connection. We bring the collection to life, making it meaningful and useful for millions of adults and children all over the world, both in the real world and increasingly online.

There is a golden thread which connects the earliest days of documentation and cataloguing of collections with the exciting future that lies ahead of us. Information that was recorded in the 1970's or even earlier is today being served up as linked open data, driving new applications, new business models and new forms of engagement.

It is this spirit of continuity and a legacy of ongoing evolution that is best represented by CIDOC. It is manifest both in programmes like the *Conceptual Reference Model* and the *CIDOC Documentation Principles*. Our role is not to constrain the museum, but to adapt – to help it face the challenges of each new generation with confidence.

So I wanted to use this address to look ahead to the immediate future of museums, to think about what those challenges are and about how we might need to adapt to meet them.

The first, perhaps the greatest challenge confronting museums worldwide is that of relevance.

The most fundamental question is how we preserve what is essential and unique about cultural heritage – stewardship, preservation, scholarship, interpretation and display – while presenting it in a way that connects intuitively and seamlessly with the way people live their lives today.

On one level, in a time that is marked by great social and economic change – good and bad – it is more vital than ever that nations maintain a continuity of identity, that they have a sense both of their uniqueness and their connection to the rest of the world. That is what cultural heritage does for society – it gives us a sense of identity, of continuity and of connectedness. It is a great sadness that many Governments, preoccupied as they are with short-term agendas, have lost sight of this fact. As a friend of mine recently said – ‘why is it that we judge the value of something 6,000 years old by the number of people who came to see it last year?’

But life today is different from how it was two decades ago. Not just in terms of technology, but in terms of the way we live and interact with our families, our friends and the society around us. The challenges we face – of environmental instability, conflict, economics – are not challenges we will solve individually. Our future prosperity depends on collective action and collective responsibility.

For our museums, our galleries, libraries and archives to be relevant to this world, we have to be part of the solution. We have to help people understand their collective responsibility for each other, to see that the answers to some of mankind’s most urgent questions lie in a better understanding of our shared past.

So relevance doesn’t rely on changing our core purpose – we don’t have to become computer game designers or cinemas or amusement arcades. It relies on using the most current methods and practices to bring our core purpose into the heart of people’s daily lives. We have to be present, available, confident and professional in the way we help people interact with our knowledge.

If the first challenge facing museums is relevance, the second, connected challenge is *agency*.

Agency is a difficult concept to explain, so I will spend a few moments to define it. A recent study found that above a certain level, money is not the most important motivating factor in people’s daily work. Once people are paid a reasonable salary, the most important motivation is self-determination – the ability to define and control what happens around you in your working life.

Today and tomorrow’s generations have grown up in a world which is designed around them – whether it is social, or mobile, gaming or broadcast, there is a basic expectation that the services you interact with will empower you to do

what you want to do. This is agency – the fundamental expectation that the world will respond to and shape itself around your actions. Agency is the real factor underlying social media – the paradigm of technological platforms which *do nothing* other than allow you to exercise self-expression.

To tomorrow's consumers, any aspect of life which constrains the sense of agency is broken, and will be worked around or ignored.

But the traditional Victorian model of cultural heritage was explicitly designed to prevent agency. You were expected to submit to the presentation of a very highly-curated experience. And for many people, this disempowering experience remains the mental picture they have when they think of 'museums'.

And over many years, our standards and policies and procedures in documentation and knowledge management have evolved similarly to prevent agency – we as the curators, custodians and experts in our collections, record information which is made available for your consumption.

So the biggest challenge, in terms of documentation practice, is moving away from the mono-directional, authoritative model and towards one which accepts not just a multiplicity of views and voices, but also their context.

We have to let other people speak, it is not enough to expect them to listen.

It is a challenge precisely because it is about balance. The basis of what we do rests in authority and scholarship, and this has to be protected and celebrated. But alongside the authoritative voice of museums we have to give a place for the user, the amateur, the external expert.

So the challenge for our community is to evolve once again – to build on the platform of professional standards and procedures, but to learn to become flexible and adaptable and to manage context and subtlety as well as authority.

So those are my first two challenges – relevance and agency. Together, they will define how your children think about museums. Collectively, we have to decide how documentation will adapt to support them.

My third challenge is simpler – it is how we will adapt to support the ever-expanding range of inputs and outputs which the museum is expected to deliver. Consider for a moment your own museum – it is likely that in the past 5 years you have begun to collect not just artefacts, but records, books, knowledge, born-digital material and the range of current and legacy formats which typify modern communications. Your role will have changed from collections

management to records and knowledge management, digital and physical preservation, lawyer, data protection specialist and a million other functions. You will be expected to adapt to accommodate a huge range of formats, each with its own requirements for preservation and care. You are likely to be expected to formulate policies for acquisition and disposal, retention and loans. You may have been asked to conduct efficiency reviews, or to reduce your organisation's expenditure on environmental management.

You will already have to support multiple points of interaction – whether in-gallery, through catalogues, online or in touring exhibitions. These will continue to expand to include apps, social platforms, the cloud, mobile gateways and aggregators like Europeana.

Most museums in Europe have quietly adopted the role of digital publishers and broadcasters without any noticeable change in budget or staffing. You have acquired these skills on the job, through projects, through contact with your peers at events such as this. That many museums are embracing the social web with confidence and sophistication is a testament to your adaptability.

The sheer scale and complexity of what it means to manage a collection have increased exponentially, and our systems must adapt to support this development. Most of our SPECTRUM partners – leading providers of Collections Management Software worldwide – are in the process of evolving modular, extensible systems that share much in common with web content management systems, digital asset management systems, even smart building and resource management systems.

The key to the future success of our profession lies in flow – the ability for knowledge, creativity, insight and evidence to flow across the whole organisation, to inform future development and to enable it to adapt seamlessly to the changing needs of our audiences. Conservation, documentation, front-of-house, finance, education, directorate – the success of all of these depends on the effective flow of knowledge between them.

These, then are my 3 challenges to the CIDOC community in thinking about how we can power the museum of tomorrow –

- How do we ensure that our systems, procedures and standards help our institutions deliver services that are relevant to current and future audiences?
- How do we ensure that we give our institutions the flexibility and adaptability they need in order to give their users a sense of *agency*?

- How do we move away from monolithic practices to deliver systems which explicitly promote the flow of knowledge between the different parts of our institutions?

Relevance, agency, flow.

Over the next few days, we will hear about technological innovations and programmes which are seeking to address some or all of these challenges. I look forward to hearing more about the work that is being done. I leave you with this final thought – ever since the early days of CIDOC, we have worked together to adapt to the changing needs of our institutions. We are challenged once more to deliver the museums that the future deserves, and in the process to put documentation and knowledge & information management at the heart of what museums do. It is a tremendously exciting opportunity and I look forward to working with you to help achieve it.

Thankyou.