Museums and Technology
address given to SAMA KZN Conference
Newcastle, November 16, 2006

Thank you for the privilege of being invited to address you today on the subject of "Museums and Technology." In that topic there are two words which have very different connotations. We are not all as comfortable with one word as we are with the other. As museum professionals I would hope that the word "museums" is a familiar word which you feel confident about. But I should imagine the word "technology" does not have the same connotations for you and that perhaps there is even something threatening about it.

Technology can be seen to be a blessing or a threat depending on how we are placed to engage with it. That it should be a threat is hardly surprising and quite understandable since we find ourselves in the midst of perhaps the greatest technological revolution since the invention of the combustion engine. The revolution we find ourselves in right now is aptly called the Digital Revolution. The stuff of this revolution is the capturing of information into bits and bytes, strings of binary numbers which create facsimiles of the real artefacts.

Revolutions are uncomfortable because they change things. They don't just bring change in the sphere of technology either, they bring change to things as fundamental as culture and economics. They alter the nature of reality about us leaving us feeling disorientated. Take for instance the fact that the web site designed for sharing personal videos, YouTube.com has recently been purchased by Google for US$1.65 billion or the fact that VeriSign bought Thwate from Mark Shuttleworth for US$575 million. In the economy in which we have been operating day to day, such deals make no sense. It is not like anything of great substance is changing hands. These are not mining rights that are being traded but a web site and programming code. It is a sign to us that the economic fabric we have grown up with is changing and that can be unsettling.

So the first thing to say really is that it is okay to feel uncomfortable right now.

It might help to take a quick look though, at some of the reasons we are wont to see technology as a threat.

The Threat of the Digital Revolution

Back to the classroom: Perhaps one of the first reasons we can see technology as a threat is that fact that we have been the experts in our field for so long and now all of a sudden we are having to learn all over again. All of a sudden new faces appear on the scene who do not know very much about our world, who we have to

learn from in order to stay ahead.

Systems become dated: With the change in technology comes a change in systems. Systems we may have invested years of our lives in building may become redundant or less vital.

Change fatigue: With the speed that change is taking place there is also the reality of change fatigue. We struggle to keep up as the spinning digital revolution gets faster and faster. Blogging, webcasting, widgets, and podcasts are all part of the new world. Often it is only our kids who can keep up!

Quality disorientation: Where we were sticklers for quality in the past, which is why we got where we are, we now no longer know how to recognise quality. The rules for seeing quality in a digital environment are so completely different. How do I know that the file I have on the computer before me is at a quality resolution, quality bit depth, that it is colour correct and at the correct dimensions to be of an archival standard? How do I know whether it is an archival or an access file? How do I know whether it is good for printing, viewing on a monitor or delivering over the internet? And what about the metadata? What fields do I use and how do I associate it with the file?

Security concerns: With the digital revolution there is some security that comes of knowing that facsimiles can be easily reproduced so one can back them up more easily, but there is also the concern of security and who gets access to them and once they are out there how does one control reproduction? Isn't there more opportunity to steal than before and how do we manage that?

Digital colonialism: My biggest concern is what I call digital colonialism. Just as the old economy needed raw materials from the "new world" to feed the industrial revolution in Europe, so this new economy needs digital content to feed the engines of the digital economy. Everywhere I go then, I see the evidence of digital traders seeking to gain control of "content". Often they will digitise collections free of charge in order to gain rights to the economic exploitation of that resource. Just as in the first colonialism we often cannot see the value in the global economy of our collections and so find it difficult to make the right choices. My concern is that we as African should remain in control of our cultural heritage and be able to engage with the markets on our terms. Things are so disorientating though we often do not know who to trust.

So at the end of the day this digital revolution has left us looking for a faithful guide with our best interest at heart.

Let us turn now to the potential blessings of embracing this technological revolution.

The Blessing of the Digital Revolution

In spite of all this I do believe the benefits of the digital revolution far outweigh the threats. If we can engage with it from a secure foundation we can certainly turn it to

our great benefit. Here are a number of the blessings:

Preservation: The digital revolution has brought about great strides in the preservation of valuable artefacts not because the digital facsimiles replace the original, but rather because the ease with which copies are made in the digital realm means that the original is handled far less than before and so can be kept preserved in a controlled environment more easily.

Access: It seems to me that museums operate at a point of tension between the mandate to preserve tangible and intangible artefacts of culture and heritage, and the mandate to keep that collective memory alive by granting access to those artefacts. Perhaps this is the greatest contribution of the digital revolution. Suddenly access can be granted not just to those who can make a physical trip to your museum, but even those on the other side of the planet can take a virtual tour of your museum. And if you thought this was just for those with internet connections, think again. It is quite possible to reposition "content" for cell phones which for our culture is a more appropriate point of access.

Markets: The third great benefit for museums is in regard to the markets. As we have already pointed out the digital revolution has brought about a change not just in technology but also in culture and the nature of economic relationships. Of benefit to museums is that museum collections now are gaining increased value in the commercial marketplace. This of course can be good and bad, depending on how we engage with it and control it. But either way there is now an opportunity where there was not as much of an opportunity before. Although this economic opportunity is unlikely to be great enough to support your entire organisation, there is certainly a viable income stream that could be tapped in to if you know how. This is not just in the sale of publishing rights to digitised collections, but also in the marketing of books, posters, multimedia presentations and other products which not only bring in income themselves but also contribute to the growth of your brand and the number of visitors who step through your doors.

I was asked to speak about Africa Media Online in relation to Museums and Technology and I would like to close with a few words about us as an organisation based here in KwaZulu Natal.

The place of Africa Media Online

At the end of the day what Africa Media Online is trying to do is to be a faithful guide. We are trying to assist Africans to both be good stewards and guardians of Africa's heritage in a digital age, not allowing our resources to be robbed from us, and at the same time to engage meaningfully with the opportunities that are presenting themselves at this critical time. We want to assist you to avoid the extremes of: on the one hand, being paralysed with fear and so not engaging with the benefits of the digital revolution; and on the other hand, not having enough control over engagement with the markets and so being open to exploitation.

So what does Africa Media Online actually do?

Perhaps the first thing to say is in the words of President Mbeki "I am an African". You have heard of African Americans. Well I, like many others in this room, am a European African. An African of European descent. I belong to Africa. I know no other home. One is not an African because of the colour of one's skin, but because of the state of one's heart in relation to Africa. I believe with all my heart that this is indeed the African century and I am working toward the goal that in my generation Africa should take her place among the continents of the world, being attributed her true value. For us to do that, however, we have got to be free to present the richness of our history and culture to the world without it being robbed from us. We have got to be free to tell our own story. "Africans telling Africa's story" is our mission statement at Africa Media Online. Toward that goal then we serve you in four ways:

1. We help you become experts in the digital world. We run digital masterclasses around the country geared at equipping you to know what you are doing, fully able to recognise quality and work to global standards (http://www.digitalmasterclass.org)
2. We help you transform your physical collections to digital collections. We have a high end digitisation service which includes scanning at archival standards, keywording according to the African Archival Thesaurus, and systems of the capture of metadata (http://www.digitiseafrica.org)
3. We assist you in getting connected to a global audience and markets in a controlled way. We provide a system which we created called memat, the leading online digital collection management and sales system in Africa. It is a freeware system and we provide professional hosting. The system allows people around the world to visit your web site and browse your collections and even purchase publishing rights (http://www.memat.org)
4. We help you make the most of engagement with global publishing markets in a responsible manner through africanpictures.net (http://www.africanpictures.net)

For more information please visit us at http://www.africamediaonline.com or call me on 033-345-9445 or 082-829-7959.

Thank you so much for your patient attention.

David Larsen
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