

Use of Media in History Museums

Introduction

There are, it seems, unlimited numbers of ways in which media can be used to augment and support educational programs in the museum setting. With a little imagination and a little knowledge about what types of media are available in one's own museum, or what could be purchased, rented, or borrowed for use in that museum, the possibilities are virtually endless.

History museums have a special need for media. They can use non-print media to present history in ways that are far more exciting than any typical classroom curriculum, encouraging further study. They can also use media to replicate events less expensively and perhaps even more accurately and fairly than could live actors or interpreters. They can make history seem more real, for the more senses used to process information, the better integrated that information can become in the visitor's existing conceptual framework. Media can thus enhance an exhibit. This examination of uses of media will focus first on the types of media which have been discussed and/or used in class, and then move on to examine its uses in several specialized history museums and exhibits.

Part One: Types of Media

Filmstrips and Slide Shows

Slide shows and filmstrips can be used in two major ways in conjunction with the history exhibit. They can introduce a self-contained exhibit, or they can enhance through detailed information about objects the visitor will see or has seen in the exhibit.

Introductory Filmstrips and Slide Shows

Introductory filmstrips and slide shows might greet a visitor in an anteroom as they enter an exhibit. They would include surface information basically intended to whet the visitor's appetite and present an overview of what is to come.

Explanatory Filmstrips and Slide Shows

The explanatory slide show or filmstrip's purpose is to expand upon information gleaned from the exhibit in a more detailed manner than would be used in an introductory filmstrip or slide show, or in label copy. It might be presented to a specialized group, such as a

scholarly group, who are interested in finding out in-depth information about the topic presented in the exhibition. It would probably be used on-demand rather than showing continuously or even at specific times, like an introductory filmstrip would, because of its limited audience.

Videocassettes

Videocassettes may be presented in a manner similar to those mentioned regarding slide shows and filmstrips. They have also become very popular as items for sale in a museum's gift shop or bookstore. Video is a stimulating, exciting experience for the viewer, and it allows, for anywhere between \$9.95 and \$100 or more, the interested visitor to take home a piece of the exhibit to view at their leisure. Like owning an exhibit catalog, displaying a video cassette from something as esoteric as a museum exhibit can be a real status symbol in middleclass homes especially, where these highbrow presentations can help offset the image illustrated by one's copy of "European Vacation with Chevy Chase."

Lamination and Mounting

Although lamination gets limited use in the museum setting, which emphasizes longevity of objects, documents, and their own publications, dry-mounting is an acceptable means of producing labels for one's exhibits. Most museums contract this process out to a professional museum exhibit design firm, which would take the text given them by the museum, typeset it in a font appropriate to the philosophy and material of the exhibit, then mount the typeset information onto foam core board or a similar material. This enhances the durability of the label and produces an aesthetically pleasing way of instructing the visitor as to what they are viewing.

Audio Tapes

Audio tapes are increasingly used in museums as part of exhibits, as tolerance of background noise grows with our ability to tune out Muzak® at shopping malls. Additionally, audio tapes are used as part of a new way of guiding visitors through an exhibit without a personal tour. For a few dollars, the visitor can rent a set of earphones or, more recently, an audio "wand," which will guide them step by step through the exhibit, explaining in fair detail what each object is. It does not really allow much flexibility, however, as the visitor is committed to the pace of the voice and cannot glean any more information than is offered if he or she so desires.

Computers

Computers are used more behind the scenes in the administrative world of the museum universe, but interactive computers are used in some large museums as a way of providing information about exhibit locations and details.

Part Two: An Examination of Selected Exhibits

The purpose of this section is to offer a more in-depth look at the ways in which some history museums and exhibits are using media. I am particularly interested in history museums, so I took a trip to the Museum of American story at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington,

DC, and will describe two of the exhibits showing there in terms of their uses of media. More specifically, however, I am also interested in history museums specializing in race issues, so I will describe several exhibits and museums that focus on Holocaust history.

Information Age: People, Information, and Technology

This exhibit is currently showing at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History. Upon entering the exhibit, the visitor picks up a brochure about the exhibit with a bar code on it, much like the UPC symbols found on most items in a grocery store. The exhibit takes the visitor through a chronological exploration of information processing technology from 1832 (the telegraph) through today's cutting edge computer technology. The brochure includes a map of the exhibit, which begins with "People and Machines," "Telephone," "Business Machines," and "Radio," then moves on to a scheduled six-minute showing in the Bijou Theater, followed by "Codebreaking," "ENIAC," "Mainframe Computers," "Network Television," "Auto Factory," and "Information Networks," and concludes with a 15-minute stop in the Concluding Theater. The Interactive Gallery, though not part of the chronological path, was by far the most crowded--and noisy--part of the exhibit.

The brochure text is informative about the details of the exhibit as well: "Behind the scenes of Information Age is a computer network with over 60 computers, 40 video disk players, 2 theater control systems and 10 miles of cable." This is a caption on a photo of a well-dressed woman standing in the room containing many of these technological wonders.

In each section of the exhibit there are stations where the visitor is to scan the bar code found on their exhibit brochure. The first station is at the beginning of the exhibit, and it records the exact time at which the visitor holding that brochure with that bar code entered the exhibit. Then there are myriad purposes for the other scanning stations, though most of them were so crowded that I did not get the opportunity to use mine. The first interior station at which I scanned mine was designed to give me more information about technology. I received a printout including the fact that I was visitor 908,004, and the times and date that I came into and departed from the exhibit, as well as more general information about technology and codes. At one of the interactive stations, there was an FBI fingerprint scanner, and included on my printout was the fingerprint of the last individual to put his or hers into the system. Lastly, the printout included a suggested reading list, for the visitor who wants more information. The last station where I scanned my brochure was the comments station, where I was invited to circle, on an electronic map with an electronic pen, those exhibit sections which I had liked the most, those on which I would like more information, and a space where I could electronically record my comments on the exhibit.

Although I do not think that the level of high-intensity technology evident at this particular exhibit is indicative of what museums are or should be doing presently, it was a buzz of excitement, and the enthusiastic crowd--more so than at any other exhibit in the building demonstrated to me how much our culture adores the cutting edge, the new and different, and the interactive. Here was an exhibit, one of hundreds within a one-mile radius, which was packed with people, clamoring to see, do and learn. Technology is exciting, and people want to be a part of it. Whereas in most exhibits, people spend a matter of seconds in front of any given object on the average, in this exhibit, the stations with interactive technology had people waiting in lines to get to be next. This is a telling trend, and we in the museum field

should not ignore it as a prescription for falling attendance or lack of societal interest in what we do.

Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915-1940

This exhibit, also found in the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, used limited media in its presentation. There was an audio soundtrack piped through an individual sound system in one full-sized shadowbox-type display of a front room in a farm house; sounds came over less-than-well-hidden Bose® speakers of water splashing in a washtub, machinery grinding, and distant voices. This gave this particular area of the exhibit a sort of haunted-house effect, and definitely added to the feeling that one was viewing a fake setup, rather than authentic objects. None of the other displays in the exhibit had such accompaniments. There was a slide show at the end of the exhibit running on a continuous loop.

Kreis Paderborn

This is a museum in Buren-Wewelsburg, Germany, housed in a former castle originally built c1607, which Heinrich Himmler then purchased to turn into an SS training headquarters/concentration camp. The museum is contained within the former guardhouse of the concentration camp. This type of museum, it would seem, has a special need for using media, as its object collections are by definition limited (the people who inhabited the site and who it sets out largely to commemorate came with little, and anything they did bring was confiscated by their "hosts" upon arrival). Even photos and original documents are limited, as the Nazis generally were fairly efficient at destroying the evidence of their own atrocities, but many of these have been retrieved and are maintained by museums and memorials as part of their exhibits and libraries. The museum also shows a video film show on the subject of National Socialism. There is a fixed schedule for this film on weekends, but during the week it can be shown as requested.

Musée de la Résistance et de la Deportation

This museum, in Besançon, France, is another commemorative museum of the Holocaust. It is housed in La Citadelle, built in 1682. During the German occupation of 1941-44, approximately 100 resisters were shot there. The museum is laid out amongst 20 rooms found on the first two floors of the building. On the third level are drawings, paintings, and sculpture visible upon request to anyone who might be interested in seeing them. The museum also has its own documentation and archives center. Also offered is an accompanying tape with people's personal accounts of their experiences during the occupation period as well as voices from the past, for 10 francs.

Other Holocaust Museums

James E. Young, a Holocaust scholar, wrote an article in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*¹ about Holocaust memorials in 1989. His article is one of many of its kind which are rather critical of uses of technology in such museums, specifically because it glamorizes technology in describing the uses of technology for destruction of human life. This may not be so

¹ Young, James E. "The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning." *Holocaust & Genocide Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 63-76, 1989.

understandable in “everyday” types of technology such as slides and photos, which do not tend to draw the attention away from their subject matter as much as do some more contemporary innovations. The Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles is often coming under critical fire for its high-tech light shows, booming voice overs, and other dramatic effects, for just this reason.

Conclusion

It seems that there are unlimited uses for technology in museums. History museums, especially those with limited objects due to historical circumstances, could rely heavily on photographs, documents, and contemporary media presentations of the past. If done tastefully and with sensitivity to the subject matter as well as to the audience, media can be a powerful tool for conveying a message. In many settings, these presentations are completely appropriate ways of drawing in the current visitor. In others, they can have the unfortunate effect of making a technological hell out of a potentially profound learning and sensitizing experience.