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Impact on Museum Profession

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The introduction of interactive multimedia in museum environments has during the last years given rise to great expectations of a new era within museum management, education and interpretation. Visionary members of museum staff have long ago seen the light and given enthusiastic descriptions of the advantages of the new technology. Now, to an increasing degree, commercial companies are also presenting systems designed especially for use in all fields of museum work. The list of the advantages of using information technology in museums is almost endless. Within collection management it is obvious that electronic databases will provide us with wonderful possibilities for quickly accessing object information, which is of great value in daily curatorial work. What is even more promising and what might really bring some renewal in museum thinking are the hitherto unseen possibilities for comparing information across traditional boundaries. Inside a big museum several departments will be able to use the same data and in this way break down the barriers. This creates the possibility to trace a certain subject through all periods and all geographical areas, despite the traditional academic division of the universe. In the same way, easy exchange of information among museums, small as well as large, cam promote the gathering of information now spread all over the world. The results of this new research work will, after some time be reflected in museum exhibitions, whether it be in the permanent galleries or in interim arrangements. In the short term however, the impact of technology on the visitors is most often understood as simply placing interactive systems in the exhibitions and thus giving the visitors access to some kind of information. That information might be part of the curatorial database, in an edited version, or as more often seen, new written stand alone systems dealing with one limited topic chosen from the sphere in interest covered by the museum. In both cases the visitor is given an enhanced, optional opportunity to get information not available in the showcases. It might be access to information about objects in store or information from sources outside the museum. Likewise the technology creates an opportunity for dissemination of information via public networks, mailing of optical discs and whatever might be available in the future.

The precondition for the fulfilment of these visions, is of course the technical development in general. But no need to worry about that, we can now do things e.g. within image storing and handling, that a lay curator (in edp matters) did not dare to dream about 5 years ago. Also the market provides us with database management systems that are affordable and easy to use.

But the major hurdle is to be found within the museums themselves, and not only in terms of the economical limitations, we all have to face. These years envisage an explosion of visitor systems in museum exhibitions all over the world. Fortunately, many museums do have the chance to try out one or several possibilities. Some will presumably remain for many years and others will prove to be failures in a short time. The use of information technology is a new field of work within museums, which many museum professional

welcome. But we must not forget that this field is as demanding as any other area concerning strategy and attitude. We have to be very careful in formulating the goals and pay a great deal of attention to the presentation form and didactics. Fancy graphic interfaces are not enough for a long term success, since it will be hopelessly out of date compare to the rushing computer game industry. On the other hand many of us have experienced in our museums that a touch monitor in itself is still fascinating, and that some visitors spend a lot of time just to see the screen change without reading one word, or look at just one of the beautiful pictures, on which we spend many resources to put into the system. But hopefully time will work for us, as long as we can guarantee the content, even when the use interface becomes a bit old fashioned or dull. We wouldn't dispose of old books as long as the content is valid, just because a new printing technique has been invented, would we?

One of the most essential tasks is to exchange experiences with colleagues from other museums and for this purpose make our own experiences available in the form of critical evaluations. This aspect has unfortunately been neglected to some extent since published evaluations are very rare and most presentations focus exclusively on the positive experiences. Critical statements are most common from museum professionals who fear that information technology will steel the fascination of the 'real objects'. One of the most common night mare is that the expected large scale dissemination of museum information will keep the visitors away form the museums. Why come to the museum, when you can sit comfortably at home visiting the virtual museum on your television?

Our most important task is thus obviously to define how we want to use multimedia technology in museums. Maybe we will have to redefine the museum idea, influenced by the rushing information society, if we don't want to end up as museums of museums!