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Inter-Institutional Co-operation

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INTER-INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION AND INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA

David Bearman
Archives & Museum Informatics
USA

In discussions of implementing interactive programs, the need for inter-institutional co-operation is an ever present theme. Indeed, inter-institutional co-operation may prove to be the most radical change brought about by interactive multimedia in museums.

Although museums have not been known for much co-operation in the past, a large proportion of the interactive multimedia projects that are being reported are dependent on it. Among the reasons that interactive multimedia projects are forcing institutions to co-operate are the attraction of these systems for handling huge quantities of data, and especially for serving as the repositories for a "union list" of holdings, such as those which characterise the multimedia databases being constructed by the Association Videomuseum or the European Museum Network. Concerns for legitimacy and interests in sharing the costs of development are equally compelling reasons for inter-institutional co-operation, as is evident in projects such as the World of the Vikings.

Co-operation in production, especially if seen to be a continuing rather than an occasional or rare incident, is likely to soon lead to adoption of common standards for documentation, co-operation in the delivery of interactive programs, sharing of copyrights, and development of multi-institutional program development, delivery and distribution networks.

Inter-institutional co-operation will not be without cost. Museums will incur temporary strains in organisational cohesion brought about by task redefinition and even job dislocation as well as by "customer" re-adjustment. Hopefully the benefits of the resulting changes will be measurable and will result in the sharing of expertise between institutions, in new jobs and the new satisfactions they bring, and in different audiences including ones which were previously not able to take part in museum life or which had only limited ability to experience the traditional museum.

In the beginning the projects which we see requiring inter-institutional co-operation engage museums with other museums, but increasingly these efforts will involve other kinds of organisations, including types of institutions which are not primarily educational or cultural, such as the mass media or the recreation and entertainment business. Because a single interactive multimedia database created by a consortium of museums around their botanical collections could be used for everything from environmental risk analysis for an irrigation project to planning plantings as part of a residential landscape architecture proposal, the kinds of co-sponsors and clients for interactive multimedia ventures cannot be defined in narrow terms, but will necessarily include virtually any organisation in the society.

As Simon Hill suggests in his paper for this conference, museums need to begin to think in terms of much larger and more expensive ventures, not unlike the scope of a major television series. Certainly this will be the case if we want to achieve something akin to Achim Lipp and Winfried Schmitz-Esser's 'World Museum of Culture', but even more modest objectives require considerable resources. After all, what we are discussing in one sense is the "re-presentation" of man's knowledge of his world and his society, acquired over thousands of years and recorded now only in analog and linear forms. To capture such a vast quantity of knowledge digitally and make it accessible in hypermedia forms will require the intellectual efforts of more than a generation of scholars and curators and the financial support of the entire society.

In many ways it will be easier to secure the financing to "re-create" our cultural knowledge-base than it will be to forge an understanding of interactive multimedia as a form of communication. For while we can co-operate to create products that employ interactive multimedia technologies, we need to co-operate equally in assessing these products, in reaching an understanding of what works and why. Museums, along with the rest of the communicators in twenty-first century will need to learn the difference between "literacy" which was appropriate to reading to "mediacy" which will be required for experiencing.