

Abstract

New Frontiers for Museums: Exploring the Intersection of Globalization, Youth Culture and Technology

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From its inception, CultureWear has been a transnational project with the concept of using children's clothing designed with ethnic motifs as a non-intrusive, non-didactic way of stimulating youth to be engaged in developing interests in exploring multicultural understanding. Using adult garments as the raw materials, a collection of CultureWear children's clothing was created by the faculty members of Sungshin Women's University and displayed during CultureWear events in New Haven, Connecticut and Seoul, Republic of Korea. Because the logistics associated with continually move a clothing collection around the globe to various events limits the opportunity to encounter these modern "artifacts" of various cultures, one of the long term visions for the CultureWear project is the establishment of a "virtual diaspora museum" where artifacts, beyond simply clothing, from numerous cultures, can be accessible remotely. Museums have historically been associated with the physical collections that they house but what would a virtual museum look like? This presentation will not attempt to answer that question but rather we examine already existing examples of behavior in which modern telecommunication and commerce is used by the electronically connected youth of this world to access content and information that originates outside of their geographical or cultural boundaries. Though this collection of behaviors does not constitute a systematic framework for helping us establish a virtual museum it can show us examples of both successes and challenges associated with transmission and consumption of cultural content across various boundaries.

Traditional museums have served as repositories of cultural or scientific artifacts which tell the story of our human presence on this planet and the natural history of the world in which we exist. The acquisition, preservation, and presentation of artifacts have been important aspects of a museum's traditional function. Thus physical collections and presentation spaces have had significant impact upon the work of museums. Rather than simply being places to visit, many modern museums also actively seek to have a proactive influence upon the cultural life, public discourse and educational experience of the communities they serve. In the context of museums culture can be considered with a very broad meaning in the sense that even a technology museum is cultural in the sense that the items in their collection are, or represent, objects which are human-made¹.

Technology has played another traditional role in museums besides being simply the subject of the collections found in technology museums. Many advanced scientific techniques are utilized in the preservation or minimally-invasive analysis of items in museum collections. The latter include x-ray diffraction, gas chromatography and atomic mass spectroscopy². Today technology is poised to possibly play a different role in making the virtual museum a reality. Already most museums have websites that go beyond merely serving as a form of software-based brochure, but attempt to serve some interactive purpose that allows people to engage in a sort of museum experience without actually visiting the museum. Nevertheless, the online museum is generally intended to supplement the physical museum. However technology has reached a point that one might envision a museum that has a predominantly virtual (online) versus a physical presence. Websites are just the beginning. More exotic technologies such as virtual reality are already present in the commercial and military realms³. Exactly what kind of technology will be found in "constructing" a virtual museum is not the focus of this paper but frequent mention of websites will be made in the examples in this paper because the world wide web is the most prevalent form of virtual presence available today. Rather, for the purposes of an international diaspora museum, we examine examples of how today's youth are already making use of technology in order to access materials, and more importantly cultural media, or develop online cultures, in manners which require the crossing of some sort of boundary, whether it be national, cultural, generational or otherwise.

¹ Two well known examples of very technologically-focused museums in the United States are the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. and the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California.

² A reference that is intended for the museum professional is Organic Chemistry of Museum Objects by John Mills and Raymond White. ISBN 0750646934

³ The use of flight simulators in aviation is already a well known and long standing practice. A very practical example of more recent 3D virtual reality training simulator is found at <http://www.vertual.eu>. This is a company that produces virtual reality environments for training of professionals who operate radiation therapy equipment in hospitals. Because the therapy machines are very expensive to purchase there is great pressure to maximize their utilization in treating patients. This means that students who are being trained to becoming clinical operators of these devices have limited access for the essential hands on training. The virtual reality environment exists inside a training room where the students are presented with a virtual 3D view that appears to be the exact same physical dimensions as the real clinical treatment room. Students must actually move around inside this room as if they were in the clinical treatment room.

The first example or lesson we can learn from successful internet-based information sources is how frequent updates of information are important to drawing in visitors. People will frequently visit a website (or perhaps a virtual museum) if they come to expect that there will be something new each time they visit. Not only must the material be new, but it must be of sufficient quality too. This presents a dilemma for the people who generate online content because there is great pressure to continually produce high-quality material. Many websites have taken to becoming aggregators of content. For example the financial section of the American portion of Yahoo.com has a few stories that were written by Yahoo employees and consultants. Most of the stories there are actually hyperlinks to articles on the websites of more traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and television stations. Many of the traditional media have watched their advertising revenue erode as these aggregators allow website visitors to access the content on the aggregator's website without actually going to the website of the news media company. This has created a very adversarial relationship between the media companies and the internet "portals" such as Yahoo. For a virtual museum, because of the ease of visiting, there may also be the pressure to present something novel each time someone visits. This is very different from a physical museum where a particular exhibit can be on display for over a year. One possible approach for a virtual museum is to develop relationships with physical museums so that the online content of the physical museum may be accessible to visitors of the virtual museum. Additionally, the online museum can offer its expertise in digitizing or virtualizing the physical collection of the traditional museum. The assumption here is that the virtual museum due to the nature of its existence should typically have greater in-house expertise in software and machine/human interface development than a traditional museum whose technical experts would have conservatorial or craftsman skills. So rather than follow the adversarial relationship between online and traditional media, the virtual museum will find it useful to forge content partnerships with traditional museums.

Next we examine how corporations use online media to market products to children in a manner that will engage the parents. The latter is necessary because it is the parents who control the finances of the household and not the "end user", who in this case are children. This is not quite the same dynamic when it comes to a virtual museum. For a physical museum, an adult may have to accompany a child on the journey from home to the museum and also monitor the child's safety while inside the museum. This is not necessary for a virtual museum. However one thing we can learn the corporate world is how online connection with the parents can be used to drive internet traffic to a website which then serves as a captive audience for targeted advertising. Children may not be naturally inclined when presented with free time to visit a virtual museum as opposed to playing video games on the computer. There is virtual barrier online in the sense that the child's favorite video game websites are "bookmarked" in their web browser but that educational websites are not. However by reaching out the parents with the educational benefits of a visit to the virtual museum, the "welcome lobby" to a virtual museum targeted to youth may actually be one that is intended for the parents. Corporations also try to market their products to children by offering an associated "free item" that is typically of minimal production cost but deemed more desirable by the child than the actual product being sold by the company. In the pre-internet days a very common example was to include a toy in a breakfast cereal. A modern example would

the marketing campaign by a popular brand of children's yogurt in America. The Gogurt brand of yogurt includes a special code printed on the packaging of their product which allows children to download free music from the internet if they visit the Gogurt website. This marketing campaign has a double effect in that the free music is an inducement to buy the yogurt but then the visitation to the website allows the company to then direct more marketing and advertising towards the children. Not only that, but there are "stealth" methods to drive both real world traffic to the grocery store and virtual traffic to the website by targeting parents. Today there are many websites devoted to parenting. Therefore a message posted about the yogurt/music campaign by one parent on a "mommy chat group" suddenly becomes a viral marketing movement for the company.

Moving beyond simply the boundaries of the particular interests of youth and whether or not they would want to think of actively expanding their own cultural education, a virtual diaspora museum will have to deal with the issues of language translation. A very stark example of this nexus between youth culture adoption, technology and translation is in the tremendously rapid international proliferation of Facebook⁴. Most companies today know that due to global interconnections that an international presence is highly desirable if not essential to their long term sustainability and growth. Facebook started as a website for American college students but recently announced that the company had over 500,000,000 users. That would make it bigger than all but three countries in the world. Facebook realized early on that it would have to make the effort to translate its software into the local languages in order to build its international user base. It is important to be first because once online communities are established around a certain website such as Facebook it becomes difficult to move en masse to another. This is seen for example in Orkut. Orkut is a social networking website that is owned by Google. However Orkut is completely shadowed by Facebook everywhere except Brazil. Orkut got an early start in Brazil and that has allowed it to remain "sticky", keeping Facebook at bay, for now. Facebook is not a large company and so does not have the resources to translate its software into all the different native tongues of its users. Rather Facebook allowed users to submit their own translations of the primary English software which then were incorporated into local versions of Facebook. Not only did this permit Facebook to leverage its user base to provide free translation service that would have been very costly to purchase, but the translations sound authentic because they were produced by native speakers rather than professional linguists or language instructors or academics. This approach to using the wisdom (and generosity) of the "crowd" has come to be known as "crowdsourcing" and although widely touted, it is not necessarily easy to do well. Whatever limitations in resources that a virtual museum may have, its very nature may offer it an opportunity to crowdsource something like translation of its virtual environment to its visitors and volunteers.

Whereas Facebook used its users to generate localized versions of its software in numerous countries, a slightly different approach is used by the commercial website YesAsia.com. [YesAsia.com](http://www.yesasia.com) is a business that operates out of Hong Kong and is targeted to an international English-reading audience interested in purchasing media from Asia.

⁴ Details of Facebook's approach to international translations are explained here: <http://dealbook.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/08/facebook-makes-headway-around-the-world/?scp=3&sq=facebook&st=cse>

There are several different target groups that this site can reach. First is the general English-reading consumer who is interested in Asian media. Second are members of the Asian diaspora community. An American who is interested in obtaining DVDs of Korean television dramas cannot navigate Korean websites, and such a person likely will also need to find DVDs with English subtitles because they may not understand Korean. Children of Korean immigrants in America may understand verbal Korean but are less likely to be able to speak it or read and write. Therefore, whereas they may not necessarily require English subtitles, they too cannot navigate Korean websites. Because parents communicate verbally, but formal education in their parents' native tongue is not always available, many children of diaspora communities can find themselves in similar situations. They may have some basic knowledge of their ancestral tongue that is sufficient to locate the name of the musician or movie they are interested in purchasing, but they cannot navigate on online creditcard transaction in that foreign language. In the case of certain Korean media websites for example, one needs to enter not only a valid credit card but a Korean-government-issued ID number in order to purchase a video. Diaspora communities may not be completely fluent in their ancestral tongue but would like to listen to the media in the native tongue while reading English subtitles. The subtitles permit them to understand the media but hearing the native tongue also permits them access to some of the linguistic and cultural nuances that are not possible in the English subtitles⁵. Another curious phenomenon is a kind of pan-Asian media consciousness that is embodied in a website like YesAsia. A person of Chinese descent living outside of China may seek to buy a Japanese movie. The person does not read Japanese but finds that the Japanese movie may be searched by its Chinese title on the web site which would indicate that the movie has a Chinese subtitle or translation available on the DVD. The lesson to be learned from YesAsia which is somewhat different than what we can learn from Facebook is that diaspora communities may not always feel fully comfortable in one language. Therefore if one of the target audiences of a virtual diaspora museum are diaspora communities themselves, the need for mixed language virtual presence may be necessary.

When we consider that anyone in the world may seek to access, acquire or purchase media internationally, it brings up the issue that the consumer does not know if they are purchasing or accessing illegally copied versions of media. Therefore copyright issues may become important for a virtual museum unless it has its own extensive physical collection of items that can be photographed or otherwise captured for distribution in a virtual environment. Similarly, any such copyrighted material owned by a virtual museum also faces the possibility that it will be copied by others. Because the laws are different in different countries one approach that has been used by producers of Japanese manga and anime is to officially license their materials to a business partner in the United States. Viz Media is a San Francisco-based company that owns the rights to many manga titles and publishes English language versions in America and in turn sells the anime rights to television stations in America, notably Cartoon Network. Rather than the Japanese companies pursuing legal action and other actions to protect their intellectual property in America, Viz Media the American company does this because it

⁵ Honorifics and familial pronouns are common examples that are understood by diasporic children with incomplete knowledge of their parents native language but are not translated literally in English because they would not sound natural in English.

is familiar with American laws, it has legal standing as a business entity operating in America, and it has a commercial interest in protecting the intellectual property. For a virtual museum, this approach to partnering with other organizations in the respective countries may be a way to assist in navigating the issues related to intellectual property law as well as present or promote the material in a way that is culturally acceptable to the local market. Issues related to intellectual property law are not easily understandable to children and it is not unusual for them to freely exchange copyrighted material amongst themselves⁶.

Another thing we can learn from the transmission of Japanese anime to other countries is the important issue about differences in cultural sensitivities. Many anime series in Japan are intended for youth. Typical of stories intended for boys involve sword fighting or other examples of violence that may not be considered inappropriate for youth. However these very same anime are shown only late at night on the American television stations during a portion of the Cartoon Network's programming called "Adult Swim" with a warning that the anime contains thematic elements that may be inappropriate for children. Not only may certain items be considered culturally inappropriate but they may in fact be illegal in some countries. A company in Canada called Lenscircle sells "circle lenses". These are contact lenses that are designed to give the appearance of eyes of girls drawn in manga. These lenses are very popular with Asian-American girls. Although they are purely cosmetic, all contact lenses whether they correct vision or not, are regulated by the American FDA. Since these lenses have not been demonstrated to be manufactured according the laws governing such products in the US, technically it is illegal to sell them here. [Lenscircle.com](http://lenscircle.com) is based in Toronto, Canada and therefore has so far managed to avoid legal troubles. A virtual museum does not sell physical product but rather distributes media content or intellectual property. However even abstractions such as ideas or images can be considered illegal in some countries such as counter-revolutionary notions in China, or representations of Nazi symbols in Germany, or a photo of a woman in a bathing suit in Time magazine in certain middle eastern countries.

As we can see from these examples, technology has enabled many more people to access cultural and commercial media with relative ease. The successes and challenges we observe from these examples help illuminate some of the issues and concerns that a virtual diaspora museum may need to address in order to establish itself and have a presence that distinguishes itself from merely being a museum website.

⁶ Such behavior may also not be unusual among adults but presumably adults are supposed to have a better understanding of illegality than youth.