

From tagging to storytelling: enriching museum collections

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The web is widely used by museums as a low-barrier platform to inform people on activities in the museum and publish their collections online. It is not uncommon that this publishing consists of a simple web interface connected to a database that holds records with limited information about the artifacts; information that is more relevant for managing the collection than for informing a wider public. It is not uncommon for a description to have no reference at all to that what is visible in the picture. Moreover this situation is hardly a worst-case scenario. In the Netherlands over 20 million artifacts in museums await a description, artifacts that do have a (scanty) description only half of them is available digitally.

Not only can the web be used as a low-barrier platform to publish but it also has all the potential to address the public in a more active way, in order to establish communication, participation and involvement. The continuing success of web 2.0 technology and social media services are a clear case in this regard, although one should not exaggerate the relative proportion of people actually contributing content in the form of tags, comments, blogs, videos et cetera. Still it has become clear that there are web users willing and capable to contribute in time and effort in building communities and exchanging knowledge (e.g. Wikipedia). This potential has also been spotted by museums, examples are the possibilities for web users to build their own virtual gallery or in letting users tag artifacts in order to enrich collections and provide better search results.

Four museums in the Netherlands (Naturalis, Museon, University Museum Utrecht, Dutch Institute of Image & Sound) together with three research and knowledge institutes (University of Applied Science Utrecht, Novay, BMC Group) decided in 2008 to explore the potential of user groups tagging collections and the effects of this on the involvement of these people towards the museum. For this purpose a dedicated social tagging tool was developed and implemented: www.ikweetwatditis.nl

('Iknowwhatthisis'). Specific collections of the participating museums were made available and uploaded to the website.

This paper presents the results of the experiments we did over the last year. These experiments include a comparison of tagging behavior between layman (students) and experts, and a comparison between the Flickr community and our own community of taggers. Furthermore we did experiments with storytelling as a more elaborate way to enrich collections. We captured over 60 interviews with experts telling a story on specific objects and we asked museum professional to rate these interviews on for instance usefulness. Two stories (one favored and one not favored by museum professionals) were presented to students in three modalities (text, audio, audiovisual). They were questioned on their involvement with the specific objects, their overall stance towards museums (before and after), and their judgement on the 'goodness' of the story. These results will enable us to evaluate effects of digital storytelling on user involvement with museum collections.