Chapter 4 / **Strategies for a Heritage Revival in the Digital Age** / Jasper Visser

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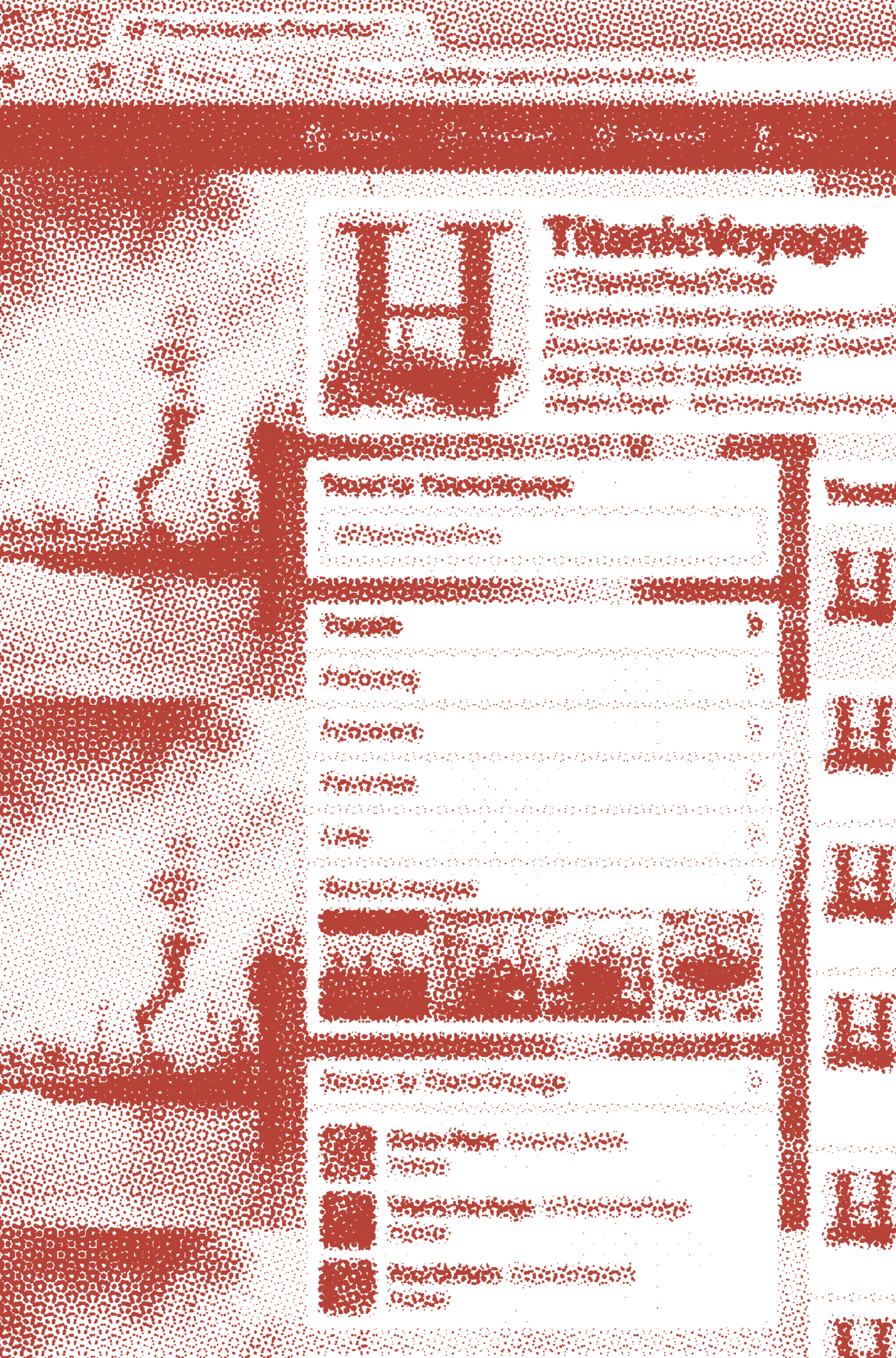


Introduction

The digital revolution has, beyond a doubt, changed the world. At first, the Internet looked unthreatening, like just another mass medium with the hyperlink being its main gimmick. By 2012 it has turned into a multi-billion dollar business for some, and irrevocably destroyed old business models for others, such as publishers and the music industry. Social media, the pinnacle of the digital revolution, have become a normal topic of conversation, and its main platforms are publicly traded top brands. The internet has also entered the 'offline' domain, as smartphones, NFC, RFID, QR, and a bunch of other acronyms ensure that people are always connected. The result of all this is, in the words of Brian Solis, one of the world's foremost analysts of the digital age, "the end of business as usual."[1]

Cultural and heritage institutions around the world have recognized the potential of the digital age to help them overcome many of the challenges they face. During the past few years or so they have been experimenting with projects as diverse as reliving historical moments on Twitter,[2] connecting Wikipedia content to physical locations,[3] and revealing hidden histories to commuters on the location-based social network Foursquare.[4] New media and technology have helped institutions connect with new audiences, build deeper and more sustainable relations with their existing audiences, open up new revenue streams, and discover their relevance in a changed world.

Indeed, the internet (in the second decade of the third millennium no longer with a capital letter, like electricity and water) *has* changed the world in many ways and especially the relationship between audiences and institutions. People come *together* to *do stuff* at an unprecedented scale. Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*[5] and Don Tapscott's *Wikinomics*[6] describe how people nowadays like to organize themselves without organizations and work together to achieve the impossible. Chris Anderson's 'long-tail'[7] makes sure there is a niche for everybody to shine in and excel at.

Yet, most people do not get much further online than watching cat videos on YouTube. Deep engagement with causes has been reduced to 'liking' brands on Facebook. Social activism and real world demonstrations have turned into online petitions that require only an email address to show one's support. Morozov argues that for all its organizing powers, the internet is especially good at distracting people from real engagement and action by providing them with bogus alternatives.[8] Heritage online, in my experience, suffers from a similar problem. It is easy to get a thousand people to like an exhibition on Facebook, but hard to get one meaningful contribution to an online discussion about the cultural value of a recently discovered object.

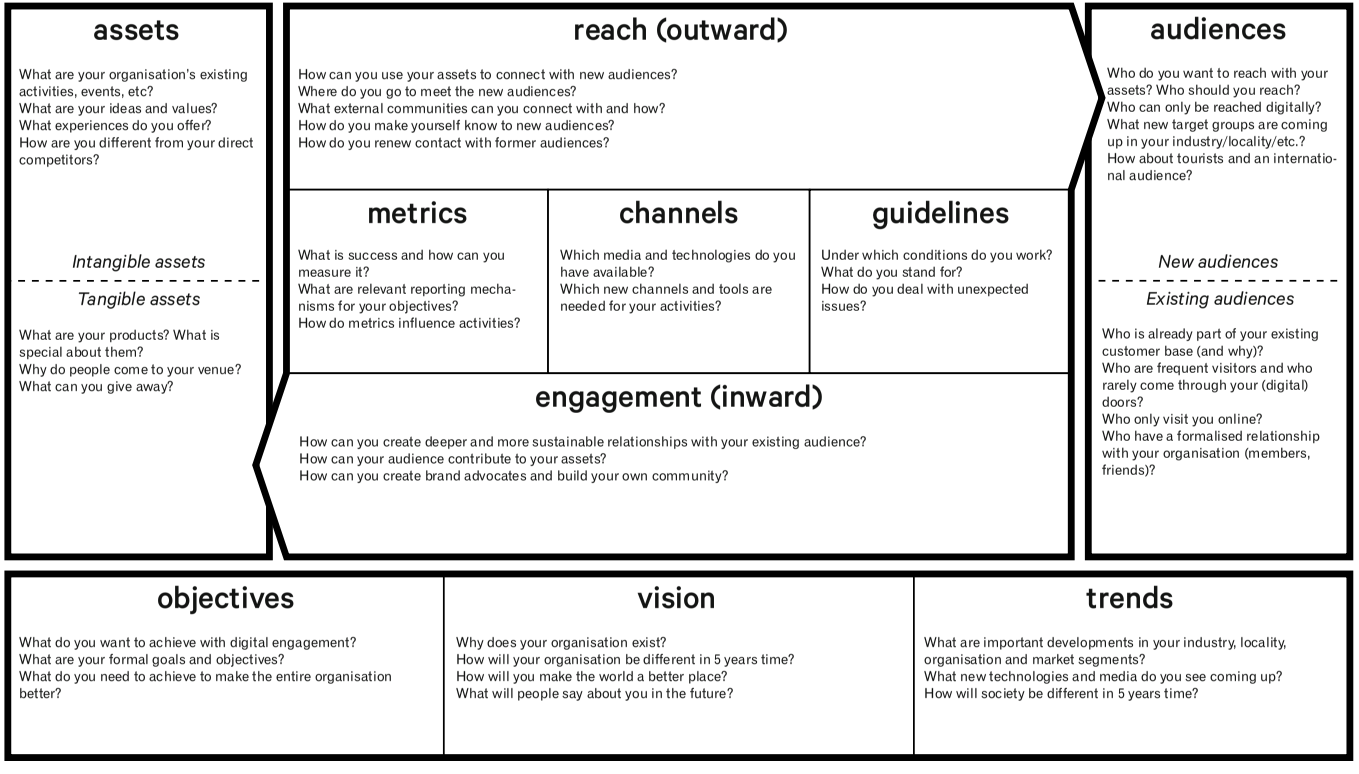
It does not have to be this way. The digital age offers great opportunities for cultural and heritage institutions to connect with and engage their audiences in a meaningful and sustainable way. It is not easy and until now the success stories are few and far between. In this article I will share some of the most powerful and promising strategies that cultural and heritage institutions could employ to trigger a heritage revival in the digital age. In this way I hope to offer tools and ideas that will help such institutions be prepared to make the most of the changes being brought about by the digital revolution.

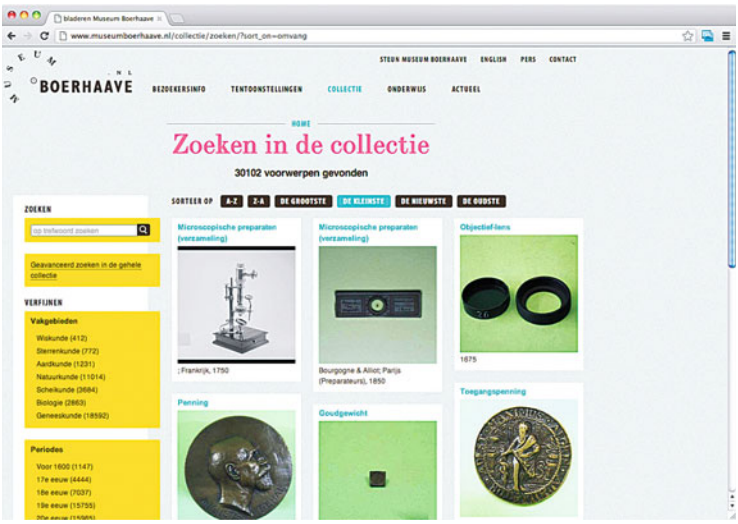
Connecting heritage content and audiences

All successful digital projects in cultural and heritage institutions manage to make a connection between the *content* of an institution and its *audiences*. Drawing on the framework developed by Jim Richardson and myself to facilitate digital strategy development in content-heavy organizations such as museums, historical societies, libraries and archives (see figure 1), we suggest this connection can function either by *engagement* or *outreach*. Engagement involves building a deeper and more sustainable relationship with existing audiences via digital media. Outreach requires addressing new

figure 1
Digital Engagement Framework (Jasper Visser, 2013).

digital engagement framework version 2.0

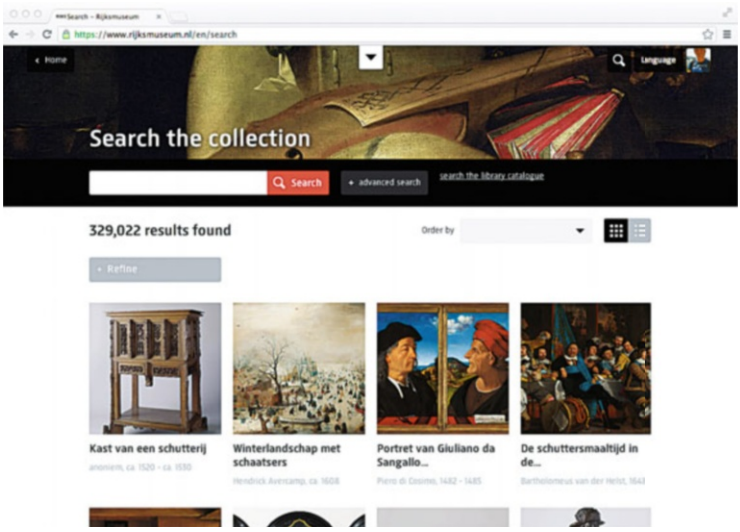




Screen capture (Museum Boerhaave, 2013).

target audiences with existing content. In the organizations where we apply this model to discover their potential to connect with and engage audiences in the digital age, we have observed that good projects always combine outreach and engagement and that outreach precedes engagement. Simply put: if nobody knows about a project or piece of content, there will most certainly be no engagement.

All heritage content, in one way or other, is about stories: grand histories, personal anecdotes, and everything in between. Making a connection between heritage content and audiences, either via outreach or engagement through traditional or new media, thus involves an act of storytelling. In an exciting talk on the popular website TED in 2012, Kevin Allocca, YouTube's trend manager, explained succinctly what is needed to tell successful stories online that will reach many people: "Tastemakers, creative participating communities, complete unexpectedness; these are characteristics of a new kind of media and a new kind of culture."[9] To these characteristics I would like to add 'generous.' Be generous with the stories you share. Most protective or limiting strategies regarding digital content have turned out to be counter-productive, as the music



Screen capture (Rijksmuseum, 2013).

industry, with its million-dollar claims against individuals for file sharing, has proven beyond doubt.

Reaching tastemakers, engaging active communities, and offering generous, unexpected content are three ingredients for projects that will reach and engage people. Of these, unexpected content is the easiest for heritage institutions to manage: the heritage itself is often unexpected, although it might need to be presented differently. For instance, instead of by period and geographical location, objects may be presented by their physical size, as in the online collection of the Museum Boerhaave in Leiden, or their primary colors, as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam does. Content and stories can also be unexpected if they have an extraordinary relation to an individual member of the audience, resonate well with contemporary discussions and themes, or for a variety of other reasons. In one project I have worked on, we turned cheap Chinese replicas of historical Dutch objects into unexpected content by accompanying them with humorous animations.[10]

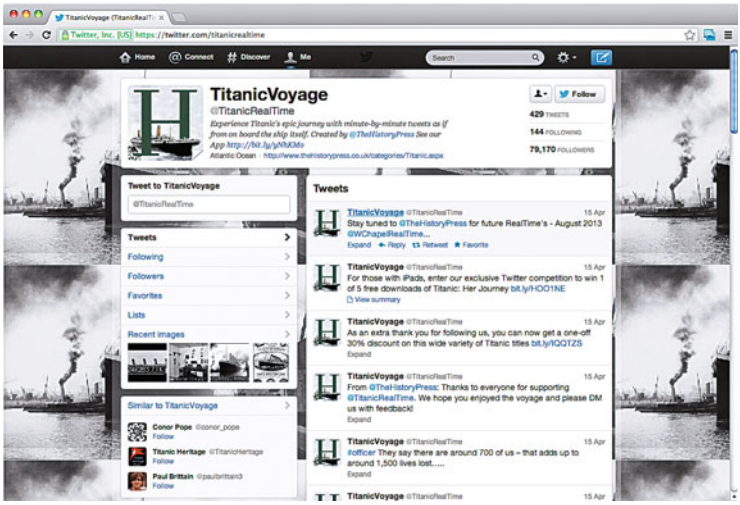
A second ingredient, reaching tastemakers, is trickier. A tastemaker is someone who can influence online behavior, for instance because he/she has a huge following on a social

network or writes a widely read weblog. Tastemakers are not always traditional celebrities, but they are likely to have a celebrity status in the niches they influence. A tastemaker in the world of museum innovation, for instance, is museum director and former consultant Nina Simon, who writes the Museum 2.0 blog. A mention of a project on that blog is sure to lead thousands of professionals to discover it. Similarly, there are influential specialist blogs on history and heritage in most countries that can generate considerable interest in a high-quality piece of unexpected content.

A further ingredient, generosity, is a means of getting a tastemaker's attention to your story. Generosity means sharing stories without expecting anything in return, often under non-restrictive copyright licenses such as Creative Commons. For example, Open Culture (www.openculture.com) is a weblog exclusively dedicated to high-quality online content that is generously 'given away' by its owner. Wikipedia is entirely based on individuals generously sharing and editing online content. Even the software of the website can be downloaded and used free of charge by anyone wishing to do so. In the digital age, all restrictions placed on stories will restrict their ability to reach and engage people.

Finally, active communities constitute the third of Allocca's success factors for online content. An active community is a node where people consciously come together to share, discuss, rate, edit, remix, interact with, etc. online content. Most well known social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are such communities, as are thousands of niche communities such as blogs and forums. If you are active online, it is likely you are part of a number of these communities. If you share a story in an active community, for instance on the Facebook wall of your institution, you will have to recognize the specific requirements of the community and its members. YouTube, for instance, can only be used to share video content, and content on Facebook has to be visually pleasing (see box 1).

A good example of a project following the strategy set



Screen capture (Twitter, 2013).

out by Allocca is the aforementioned live storytelling of the sinking of the *Titanic* on Twitter. Between March 10 and April 15, 2012, the History Press, a UK history publisher, posted 429 historically correct updates on Twitter telling the story of the sinking of the *Titanic* in real time, 100 years after the real event. They attracted almost 80,000 followers and received thousands of 'retweets,' the Twitter equivalent of sharing a story you like. Unexpectedness, of course, is in the story of the unsinkable *Titanic* itself. Twitter is an active community perfectly suited for this sort of event, and within a smart PR move they managed to have top history bloggers write about the action, encouraging a large number of people to tune in. They were also generous, sharing photos as well as telling the story from multiple viewpoints. The sinking of the *Titanic* is not the only event to be live-tweeted after the fact. The Cuban Missile Crisis, World War II, and many other historical events can be followed from minute to minute. In a variation on this theme, historical figures tweet as if they were alive: Mao Zedong, Nicola Tesla, and Charles Darwin are among the many whose accounts are followed by people all over the world.

box 1
Typical social media platforms

Typical social media platforms and their characteristics

Facebook: social network where friends exchange news and photos and associate themselves with organizations and brands. Focused on engagement and most successful if updates are short, visual and have a clear goal. A great example of a highly successful cultural institution on Facebook is the Saatchi Gallery in London. Every day they use beautiful images to engage their fans and maintain the relationship (www.facebook.com/saatchigalleryofficial).

Twitter: microblogging service where people and organizations share updates of 140 characters or less. It is focused on conversation. Organizations have started using Twitter as an alternative to the traditional help desk. Occasionally, cultural and heritage institutions from all over the world work together around campaigns that engage millions of people. Recent examples include #askacurator (curators from around the world answered questions submitted by visitors) and #collectionfishing (an ongoing project where institutions pick objects from their collection based on a central theme.)

YouTube: video sharing website and search engine which allows everyone to upload their videos, and which is dominated by cats and music. Its social networking aspects are often neglected but can be immensely powerful if used in the right way. An example of such use a good use is the Crash Course World History channel (www.youtube.com/user/crashcourse). YouTube works especially well with some humour. The Open University channel (www.youtube.com/user/OUlearn) presents 60-second animations on a wide variety of topics, easily accessible for everyone.

Pinterest: social pinboard where users create and curate collections around all sorts of topics. Pinterest is relatively new but has been embraced by organizations worldwide to share their content and involve the audience in their daily operations. An organization using Pinterest well is the Chicago History Museum. Using boards for specific topics in their collection, they connect to different communities (pinterest.com/chicagomuseum/).

Instagram: photography app for smartphones that allows users to take and share pictures with friends, using special filters to make the photos look beautiful –Twitter for people who prefer images to text. Since collections and tangible heritage work well on Instagram, the number of institutions active on it is quite large. Good examples include the Brooklyn Museum, the Amsterdam Tattoo Museum (really!), and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Blogs: online diaries or magazines where individuals or organizations share longer articles, often with visuals, about any given topic. Blogs are meant to trigger engagement (comments) and have become a full-fledged alternative to traditional media outlets. There are many different blog services, such as Tumblr, Blogger, and Wordpress. A great blog to follow for cultural heritage practitioners is Nina Simon's Museum 2.0 (museumtwo.blogspot.com).

LinkedIn: social network for professionals designed to help them keep a track of resumes, find jobs or colleagues, and discuss professional topics with members of one of its many dedicated groups. More focused on professional development than mass engagement, LinkedIn cannot be used by institutions to actively reach out and engage their audiences, but only by individuals.

Reaching out to offline audiences

So far we have mostly discussed online content, but in my experience these rules apply to all digital content. Now that the boundaries between the online and the physical world are blurring, digital media can be used to reach out to people in the physical world as well. In a special forum about mobile media at the 2010 Picnic Festival in Amsterdam, David Vogt, founder and executive director of Mobile Muse, showed how changes in media change the way people are reached by and engaged with content. When people started sharing cultural stories, they probably did so around a campfire under the open air. The stories shared were highly personal, highly relevant to the community of listeners, and involved the audience. Advances in media weakened the link between story and audience. Radio, cinema, and television created distances and (technological) barriers; stories became less personal, relevant, and interactive. Social media and web 2.0 (see box 2) reversed this trend, and mobile internet and ubiquitous technology help even more to tell stories that are highly personal and relevant, immersive, interactive, and occasionally even tangible, once again. This trend, according to Vogt and many others, myself included, allows cultural and heritage institutions to use digital media and new technology to reach out to more active communities and even to enlarge the number of active communities by creating new ones through the introduction of digital content in the 'offline' realm.

A simple and successful project that shows the potential of this approach is an experiment I did in 2010–2011 for the Museum of National History of the Netherlands using the location-based gaming platform Foursquare. Foursquare is a mobile app with a small but dedicated user base whose members share their physical location in the world using their smartphones. Foursquare users will let their network on the platform know they are visiting a museum, restaurant, or shop. Users will leave tips about venues for each other, such as the best food on the menu, WiFi passwords, or interesting anecdotes.

box 2
Web 1.0, 2.0, 3.0
and 4.0

Web 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0

At the moment, people distinguish four different generations of the internet, which all coexist on the worldwide web. Although the numbers might suggest that these are different and improved versions of each other, in reality they are different approaches to the use of internet and can co-exist in one institution and even on one platform.

Web 1.0 is the internet of information, where organizations publish information and audiences consume it passively. Web 1.0 is the web where a heritage institution shares its opening hours, directions, and other static information.

Web 2.0 is the participatory internet. Internet users contribute and co-create the information on the web and come together in communities. Heritage institutions can use web 2.0 (services) to connect with their audiences, for instance through comments on a website, crowdsourcing projects, or on Facebook pages.

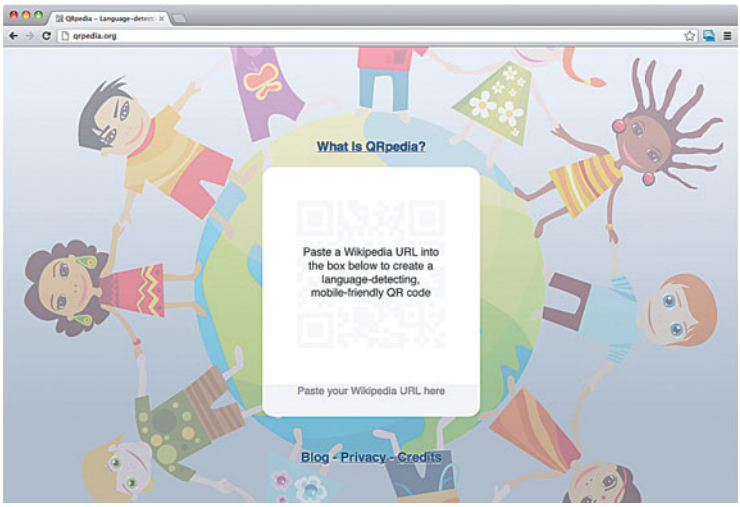
Web 3.0 is the semantic web, where information is standardised so that computers can start to make sense of it and make relevant connections. Online collections should be part of web 3.0, where, if properly set up, they can be easily integrated into larger systems such as Europeana.

Web 4.0 is the internet of things, where everything is connected meaningfully to the internet and information systems are all-inclusive. Although this web is still largely a thing of the future, some heritage institutions have started experimenting with web 4.0 projects to bridge the gap between the online and the physical worlds.

Managers of physical locations can connect with Foursquare users by offering rewards to people who visit their location. Foursquare is very much about the physical world and people's interaction with the physical world, while at the same time being an online service. In the experiment, I placed historical stories about physical locations as tips about nearby train stations. People often have to wait at train stations, giving them time to read about their surroundings on their mobile phones. The stories I shared were often unexpected, and because they were only sent to people who were in the vicinity of where the story happened, highly relevant to them. The experiment reached thousands of people of whom hundreds interacted with the stories told about their surroundings.

There is no need to use a gaming platform such as Foursquare to tell stories to people on location. QRpedia (www.qrpedia.org) is a service that allows anyone to make QR codes (2D barcodes) that link to Wikipedia articles. Printing the code and pasting it on the object it refers to makes the Wikipedia article easily accessible on location by anyone with a smartphone equipped with a QR reader. Obviously, this works well with statues and historical buildings, but it is especially promising in cases where there is no physical reminder of an historical event, for instance an old battlefield or the location of a building that no longer exists.

Another promising way to reach out to offline audiences is with emerging 3D printing technologies. A simple 3D printer is already within reach of normal households and on torrent sites such as The Pirate Bay 3D models of all sorts of objects are a fast-growing category. Soon everyone will be able to (illegally) download print instructions for all sorts of objects and print them at home. The Art Institute in Chicago embraced this new option and offers a part of its collection as 3D models online, as they described on their blog on July 31st, 2012.[11] That way, they can potentially bring their collection into living rooms and classrooms all over the world, reaching offline audiences in a very direct and relevant way.



Screen capture (QRpedia, 2013).

Engaging audiences with heritage content

Digital media and new technology are excellent tools to reach audiences. Yet, as might be clear from the examples and ideas presented so far, the true potential of the digital age lies with engaging audiences. Not only does an engaged audience have a more meaningful and sustainable relationship with a cultural or heritage institution, engaged audiences also help reach wider audiences themselves. On a platform such as Facebook, engagement is not only actively encouraged; indeed, publishing updates that do not engage your audience is even punished by Facebook. And non-engaging institutions will disappear from the timelines of individual users. Engagement is not a luxury; it is part of the fabric of the digital age.

Digital engagement can take many forms, but it always requires action from the audience. The simplest and most accepted form of engagement is 'liking' or 'favoriting' digital content. A more complex and time-consuming form of engagement is remixing original content into new creative work, such as in the video reactions on YouTube. In between are almost unlimited actions from sharing content to posting comments. We tend to

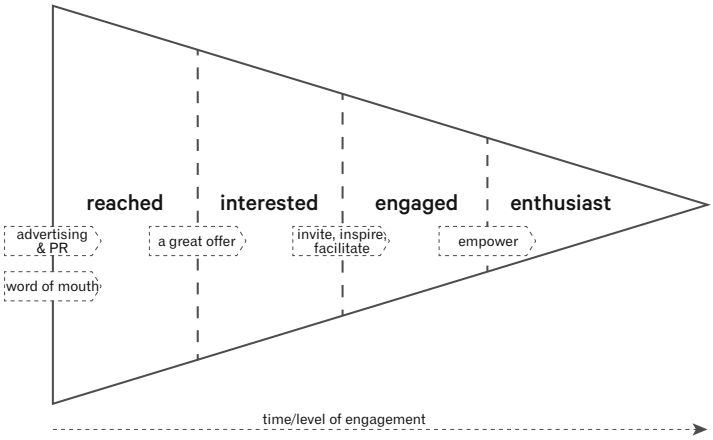
think of engagement in the form of people actively contributing to a project, as in the case of crowdsourcing or crowdfunding, but such profound levels of engagement are not always necessary to achieve one's objectives as a cultural or heritage institution.

In figure 2 you can see a simple model for digital engagement. We use this model in combination with the framework in figure 1 to develop activities that reach and engage audiences. The triangle shows the build-up and development of any group of people on digital media. The model starts with reaching people, a topic which has been extensively covered in the previous parts of this article. If you provide a great offering, people will likely become interested. In the case of cultural and heritage institutions such an offering usually is reliable, high-quality content, but it can also be regular discounts or (something which is popular on social media) association with a certain well-branded institution such as the British Museum. Interested people are your followers on Twitter, subscribers to your newsletter, fans on Facebook, and visitors to the institution itself. To turn these interested people into an engaged audience, the institution needs to invite, inspire, and facilitate them. If you follow up on engagement by acknowledging and rewarding it, an engaged audience might become enthusiastic and start inviting others to join the community. This is the often talked about 'viral effect' of digital media.

The engagement process can be viewed as a triangle, because not everybody who is reached will become engaged. Arthur[12] says that only 1% of the total audience you reach will actively contribute to and/or participate in any given project. This is an average. With projects I have been involved in, I have seen rates anywhere between close to zero and 5%.[13]

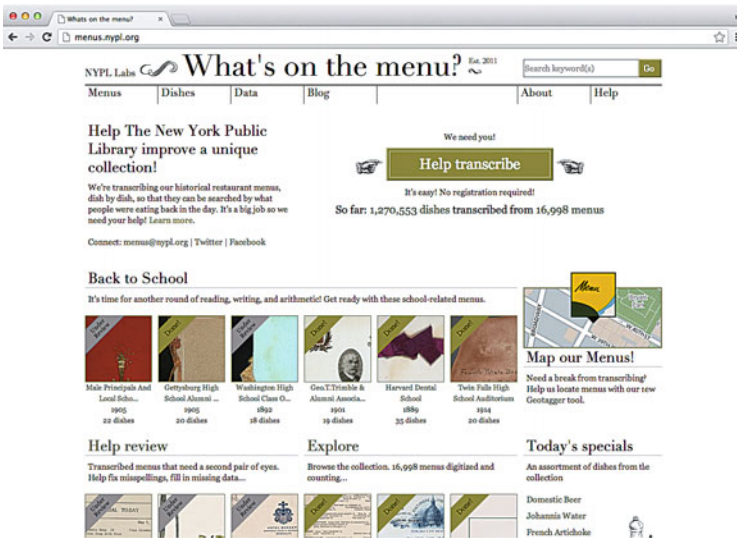
If one Googles "stimulating engagement" or "increasing engagement with your digital media," one will find hundreds of thousands of blogposts full of useful advice. I myself have made endless lists of the 3, 7 or 10 things to do to increase engagement on digital media. Recently – and after reading

figure 2
Model for Digital Engagement
(Jasper Visser, 2013).



Nancy Duarte's *Resonate: Present visual stories that transform audiences* (2010) – I have realized that a really engaging project is a story that resonates with the audience; and for it to do so the most important thing is that it makes the audience the 'hero' of the story. This means that the story and its content has to be about the audience (personal, relevant), since their engagement is essential to the success of the story. A straightforward example of such a story is the Facebook or Twitter question where with each set number of "likes" or replies a new hint is given, until finally the answer is apparent. The fan pages of major brands on Facebook, such as KLM and Fanta, are good places to discover powerful strategies to get people engaged by making them the heroes of the story.

A popular way to make the audience the hero of a story and engage it deeply with an institution is by outsourcing part of the primary process of the organization to the audience, in other words, crowdsourcing. Typically, a fairly standard and repetitive task such as transcribing historical records is made accessible through an online tool and the audience is invited to perform the task in exchange for small rewards or some form of recognition. The work done by the audience needs to have a clear objective that serves the public (especially the au-

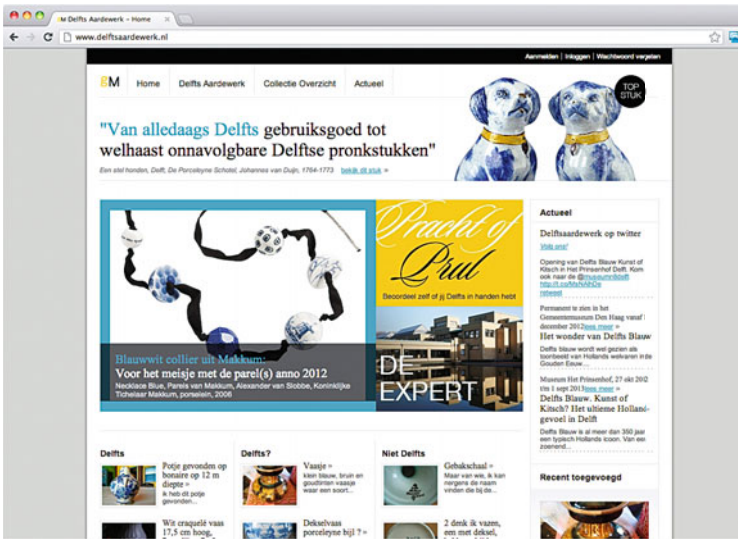


Screen capture (New York Public Library, 2013).

dience that contributed to the project). The project *What's on the Menu?* asks the audience to help transcribe the scanned historical restaurant menus in the New York Public Library in order to make them searchable by the general public.

Crowdsourcing projects acknowledge that the general audience can be more knowledgeable than the professionals within an institution, and they use this recognition to engage the audience.

A well designed engagement project recognizes that not all people will want to contribute in the same way and acknowledges different types of engagement. In order to reach and engage people with their Delftware collection, the Gemeentemuseum (Municipal Museum) in The Hague built a website (www.delftsaardewerk.nl) where experts, collectors, and enthusiasts of Delftware can share their own collections and discuss their value. Not only does the museum reach a niche audience in a meaningful way, but because of the different approaches to the website by different target groups it has become a marketplace for Delftware and a knowledge database for researchers.



Screen capture (Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, 2013).

Towards a digital strategy for European heritage

When thinking about strategies for reaching and engaging people with heritage and culture in the digital age, it is often easy to focus solely on the new media and innovative technology at our disposal. Such a focus, however, often results in failure. It is more useful, as I have tried to do in this article, to focus on the way in which successful outreach and engagement works in the digital age, regardless of the technology used, while at the same time appreciating the possible applications of recent innovations in media and technology. Consequently, to foster a heritage revival on a European scale we will first have to discover the unexpected content we can use to tell relevant stories. This content can be found in collections, oral histories, old documents, and elsewhere. We then have to determine potential active communities, both online and in the real world, and transform the unexpected content to fit with these communities. After this labor-intensive undertaking we need to present the unexpected content in a way that attracts and inspires the audience and that facilitates its engagement

with the story, preferably by making the audience its hero. If we then recognize its engagement and reward it in an appropriate manner, the European heritage revival might go "viral" and reach more people than if we simply improve the real-world, physical infrastructure. Admittedly, this is not a simple and straightforward process.

To start the discussion about shaping such a heritage revival based on digital media and technology, I want to conclude this article with three roughly sketched suggestions. Firstly, I can imagine a project that adds a virtual layer to the physical locations of European heritage, much like the Foursquare experiment I described, but as part of a more dedicated platform that would allow telling stories in video, images, objects, etc. People will be engaged by a personal relationship to locations, stories and objects and interact with them using "augmented reality" technology. An example of such a project on the local scale is the London Street Museum by the Museum of London.

Second, an excellent opportunity lies in making one of the largest heritage collections of the world, Europeana (www.europeana.eu), more tangible using by 3D technology. Europeana offers over 20 million cultural and heritage objects from over 2,000 institutions and 34 countries in one central portal on the internet. The data is easily accessible in external projects, but lacks the much-needed unexpectedness that makes a digital project succeed. Offering the possibility of printing parts of this collection in 3D would allow people to bring the heritage physically into their homes, rather than only digitally. A third idea is not to have an idea at all, but instead to stimulate a discussion between people from different countries about how to present their heritage in the first place. I can imagine a project similar to the National Vending Machine, where we asked people from all over the Netherlands to share their ideas about how to present Dutch history, but in this case on a European scale. An institution, by combining a physical and a digital presence and asking as many people as possible for relevant input, and by then acting upon this input, can engage a great many people with a project even before it develops into a finished exhibition

or presentation, giving them ownership and making them the heroes of a European heritage revival.

Of course, these are just three simple ideas that could create interesting possibilities for cultural and heritage institutions in the digital age. Certainly there are many others, and I wholeheartedly believe that if cultural and heritage institutions approach their audiences and content in the right way, the digital age holds many great opportunities in store for them.