ONLINE COLLECTIONS ANALYSIS:

TATE, MOMA AND THE CENTRE POMPIDOU

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Cultural Museum

In what we now know as the digital age, the process of creating, presenting and consuming information has dramatically changed. Institutions of democracy, such as education systems, libraries and museums that were established to disseminate knowledge in order to foster a more informed, egalitarian nation, are now posed with the challenge of adapting to this change (Clough, 2013). As digital information consumers, people are no longer just static bystanders but are taking on greater roles as creators of content and have higher expectations in regards to participation, engagement and availability of content as the capacity of technology continues to develop. For some institutions, this adaptation has come more easily, as with libraries whose collections are two-dimensional and generally already standardized, but for museums, adapting their diverse and often expansive collections and purpose to the digital world poses much greater challenges (Clough 2013). These challenges can be reflected in the many diverse examples of online museum collections which vary as greatly as the institutions from which they originate.

Authors and researchers have spoken to the fact that, in general, museums are fairly static institutions, often unchanging, and burdened, in a way with large collections of physical objects requiring massive investment of resources for fixed display mechanisms that are often not easily adaptable (Clough, 2013). Due to their stationary nature, it is even more important that museums establish ways of connecting to outside audiences who may not have access to the physical location. Online collections play a major role in that effort, bridging space and time between potentially limitless audiences and all that the museum has to offer. The availability and dependence on technology coupled with a more visitor-oriented approach means that online collections must suit a variety of needs in order to be successful, engaging and representative of the museum and its mission. They must look outside of tradition in this age of constant change in order to create unique digital experiences that push the boundaries of museum and audience relationships (Honeysett, 2011). This analysis focuses on the collections of three major contemporary art institutions: the Tate in London, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It then compares the online collections of the three museums in terms of ease of navigation, content and organization, and design, with a final recommendation for improvement for the online collection of the Centre Pompidou. Even though they are all high-level institutions, not all of their online collections are of the same caliber, ranging from extremely participatory, educational and easy to access to almost entirely inaccessible.

It is fascinating that while the Tate required more information, as it represents three distinct museums, its interface was actually much easier to navigate and engage with than that of the MoMA or Pompidou. Much more than any others, the Tate collections interface operates more organically in a much similar way to how one would experience a exhibition in person, with an engaging structure that allows

the viewer to go deeper and deeper into an area of their choosing should they be interested. For all three, the online collection is tucked away within the site and was easiest to reach through MoMA's very present and simple navigation bar. It was almost impossible to find within the Pompidou's pages, and it took many clicks to get there, often not in obvious places within the site. Not only was Tate's collection easy to navigate, but the viewer can easily see where they are in the process. The collections homepage of the MoMA also had its navigation options readily available, although there was little prioritization. All of the elements are treated equally, and therefore it is somewhat overwhelming. Navigation within the online collections of the Centre Pompidou, on the other hand, was either too simplified in some areas or overly complex and misleading in others. This demonstrates that there must be a balance between ease and simplicity and adequate information. The gateway to the collection could be easily missed as it is not in an expected location, and once you get to where it lives, it is difficult to see because of design. The process of getting to it is arduous and requires several clicks and considerable contemplation to ensure that you are reaching your destination. There are two options for viewing the collection, one being "the search engine" and the other "Navigart." The difference between them is not clear. Both of them warrant exploring because each had elements that were stronger than the other.

While the navigation of each digital collection varied between institutions, the content and organization of this content also manifested itself in different ways. Again, the Tate is notable in this area as well. The way that the information was presented, the quality of the information and the amount of text and resources there was not enough all at once to overwhelm the visitor, but it provided a framework for exploration in which the more one looked, the more they could gain. It was clear that the Tate had given immeasurable thought to the quality of online visitor experience as the online collection provided visitors the opportunity to experience the artwork in much the same way as they would in the physical space. It utilized captivating imagery and written content, opportunities for cataloging and engagement, and a great depth of complementary material for each artwork. While the other collections created gateways around artwork types and mediums, Tate pushed beyond the obvious parameters to consider what visitors might be looking for within the online collection and how a newcomer or art novice might best navigate. It is clear that Tate forged its own way in the development of its digital collection, providing an element of "openness" and allowing the viewer to curate their own experience (Poole, 2014). There is an element of visitor control that permeates the entire digital sphere of the Tate, marked by many options of how to view the work, explore the collection, and interact with the content. There was a section catered specially to exploration, providing "highlights" of the collection where an experience seeker or explorer might gravitate to first. The collection placed more emphasis on exploration than the other two museums, while still allowing great depth of content if the viewer chose to dig deeper. While Tate's online gallery appeals

to both what Falk terms as "Explorers" and "Experience-seekers" it also provides opportunities for "facilitators" to easily share material with others and create their own gallery to share and "professionals" to dig deeper into the material, finding not only more information about a work of art or artist, but complementary materials such as relevant exhibitions and articles (Falk, 2009). It also easily made connections to other themes, other artworks and artists. It reveals more to the visitor the longer they are there. The lifespan of the Tate's digital collection was much longer than that of the other two to which it is being compared.

The MoMA, in contrast, placed more of an emphasis on exploration by media than general self-directed browsing. The "Browse the Collection" link is hidden amongst the links to each medium and leads you to a general list of all works from which you can sort from there. Otherwise, the viewer can select a specific medium, browse the collection within and search or filter a selection of works. Both options require a certain degree of existing knowledge on part of the viewer: an understanding of art mediums and the ability to refine their search. There is a directory of mediums and artists, but the medium directory does not lead you to all works in that medium, simply a description and handful of examples. The artist directly is useful for professionals, but useless for explorers or newcomers as it is simply a list of names without context. The viewer must have more sense of what he or she is looking for as there is much less scaffolding guiding them on their way through the search parameters. This is unlike the Tate, which rather than relying on the viewer to formulate ideas to search, presents clear and detailed lists of search categories to select, allowing for a more specific and manageable search. The viewer can even search by exhibition, and is therefore able to view the artwork in a specific display, bridging the gap between the remote visitor and the physical museum experience. Within the Centre Pompidou's digital collections, the search bar itself is nicely designed and consistently present, and the visitor is prompted with search categories immediately upon entering the digital collection page but the keywords seem auto-generated and do not seem very functional. A few of the keywords and categories are ambiguous, making the search and refinement feature more cumbersome than it should be.

There is an emphasis on viewer participation within the MoMA collection, specifically saving favorites and sharing through social media, but it is not emphasized as much as the Tate. The "buttons" are smaller, less noticeable and their integration feels more institutionalized rather than emphasizing viewer control and participation. The artwork pages contain similar detailed information as the Tate, but in exploration you cannot seek out as much. The information is also prioritized differently. For instance, when looking at a specific artwork in the Tate collection, there was great emphasis placed on sharing, and cataloging, versus MoMA highlights the link to related items their store, seemingly skipping connectivity and heading straight for the end goal of funding.

All of the digital collections provide links to read more about specific artworks and the artist but the Tate takes the lead here as well, with engaging content that is informative yet linked to the actual exhibit and the rest of the collection in unique ways. All of them tell you whether or not the item is on display, but the Tate actually tells you where it is, including what specific exhibition and room. The only element missing is a map. It provides everything that is standard (summary, artwork details, other works by the artist) but adds details to connect the artworks digital presence to its physical self. There is even a category map that visually demonstrates tags associated with the artwork and allows you to view other associated works. This includes a digital of the actual display caption, catalogue entry and illustrated companion. The viewer now has almost everything that they would have if they were physically visiting. But the page does not offer every detail and every word immediately. There are links to then take you into each section, allowing the visitor to decide their own viewing preferences. The artist pages of the MoMA are also fairly rich but they seem to be more of a dead end. The viewer is essentially restricted to the content presented there, with few options to move beyond. They can view more of the artist's works, including works in a specific series.

Within the Centre Pompidou site, when the viewer chooses to learn more about a specific artwork they are even more constrained by limited information, viewing options and inability to move beyond that point into a more comprehensive study of artwork and artist. There are some participatory elements which, more like the Tate, are strongly emphasized. Viewers have the capability to add and edit keywords, which might be why the keywords are so disorganized, and there is a strong emphasis on cataloging favorites and sharing through social media. The fact that the vibrant orange color is only used to distinguish participatory elements is positive aspect of the collection. The viewer can easily see options for engagement, and there is a pop-out bar to the left that serves as a home-base for personal interaction. While the participatory element of the collection is well-done, the content leaves much to be desired. The artwork pages do not include collections, very little description or any information about the artists. The content is essentially a catalogue framework with the bare essentials and very little to provide context. Ironically, even though there is very little information about the artist, there is an extensive list of outside materials that can be accessed, including publications, exhibitions, learning resources and links to related items in the store.

The biggest problem with the Centre Pompidou digital collection was that even though it gives the viewer the option to select English as language it often does not translate much of the content, including search details and artwork titles. The bulk of the page is in English but the keywords remain in French. Language consistency is a continuing problem, which is not important for all international institutions, but should be a priority for such a major museum in Paris, a center for international tourism.

Design was probably the most consistent aspect between all of the museums. They all utilized simple, clean design with subtle tones and lines to organize content and pops of bold color to create emphasis and interest. Color provided emphasis on interactivity, but for the most part did not distract from content. Especially within the Tate collection, the design and structure allowed content to take center stage. There were elements of change within both the Tate and MoMA collections as images and color toggled between transparent and opaque, creating a more dynamic space in which viewer interaction would create subtle change in design. This was often used to direct viewer attention and to demonstrate areas of interactivity. Both the Tate and Pompidou collections utilized a dynamic sidebar with participatory information for either connecting to social media or refining a search. They were both easy to open and close and creates a strong line at the left of the page with added asymmetry and sometimes and a bold design element. The design of the Tate and Pompidou collections were also more open than that of the MoMA which is rather squished, with small text throughout and often too much of everything in one place. A prominent issue within both the MoMA and Pompidou collections was very small text, especially for the Pompidou which, in some cases, made information almost impossible to read.

All of the collections incorporated different mechanisms for viewing images and for viewer participation. Once again, the Tate maintained the most consistent design throughout, with smooth transitions between each page that carried the simplified, yet effective, design throughout the entire experience, similar to the importance of creating connection between all of the physical spaces of a museum. Large visuals acted as evocative gateways into different areas of the collection. There was a good balance of space, color, text and imagery whereas the MoMA was often heavy with images and color and the collection of the Centre Pompidou featured tiny thumbnails drowned in a vast sea of white space. The curation of design-purposed images within the MoMA collection homepage was not as purposeful either, with several of them seeming repetitive and not very relevant so a visitor who has never been to the physical space.

The presentation of images, while being one of the most crucial elements of a digitized collection, varied in many ways between each institution. The MoMA cropped its thumbnails, sometimes harshly, while the other two utilized the full images. While the cropping created consistency between images, it left out considerable information and actually disrupted the interaction between the object and the viewer. This is especially evident for viewers who do not have prior knowledge of what the object looks like as a whole. When hovering over images, they do open up into a very small light-box. The images are still small but they have been expanded slightly to show the full composition. The viewer also does not get access to the artwork details (artist, title and year) until they hover. It may be frustrating to some, specifically those exploring the archives, to not have the capability of seeing the full composition, artist

and title at a glance. There is simply not enough viewer satisfaction when viewing the thumbnails presented in such a limited manner. While the Pompidou featured images that were not cropped, they were so small as to be almost impossible to see and the viewer has to click into them in order to see a larger image which is a tedious task. They are also organized into one long column that is difficult to look through and which only shows a small number of images, but does not allow you to see how many pages of images there are or where you are in the list. The Tate utilized differences in tone and a structure of subtle lines to create a framework around the images so that, even though their sizes are inconsistent, they are organized by a frame that gives the perception of consistency.

The slideshow mechanism is an important method of viewing the images for each artwork, but there were prominent differences in the way it was presented for each site. Within Tate, the image was presented larger than any other, with a clean surrounding, easy navigation, details that could be easily accessed, but there was no opportunity to zoom for detail. The ability to curate what text and headers were visible was highly valuable, and accentuated the aspect of viewer control. In contrast, the MoMA slideshow kept all of the headers and additional text in place, which leaves too many distracting elements that interfere with the viewing experience. It also leaves the "edges" of the previous and upcoming artwork to each side which adds to the distraction. There is no ability to zoom, which is an issue here because the images are smaller than that of Tate and many of the images are presented with a thin gray background which in essence becomes part of the artwork and is additional distraction. The "slideshow" element in the Pompidou collection is built in once you click into the artwork. There is the capability to zoom but this happens automatically when the viewer has their mouse situated over the image and then scrolls, making navigation a little bit tricky. Viewers can pull up a light-box, but the image overlaps the previous and is not large enough to warrant using the lightbox.

It is interesting that three predominant institutions, all with high visitation and large resources, can have such differing digital collections. This comparison highlights three varying stages of success, with the collection of the Centre Pompidou likely benefiting from adjustments the most overall. I would recommend that the changes could be implemented to improve almost every aspect of the digital collection experience including ease of navigation, design and content. It is vital that language translation be more consistent throughout the site. The collection must be easier to find and this could be accomplished by creating more distinct headings or creating drop-down menus for easy access. Text must be larger and more diverse in size in order to create better organization. It is essential that thumbnails be larger and organized in a more horizontal format rather than vertical, to take advantage of the immense amount of white space that could be better utilized. There should be greater content to access for each artwork, including descriptions and artist information. Overall, each of the institutions have laid the

foundation for strong digital experiences within their online collections, but there are many elements that must be improved upon in order to encourage dynamic online visitor experiences that bridge the gap between remote audiences and the museum collection.

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