Podcasting

Some Advantages and Opportunities for Cultural Institutions

Mal Booth, Australian War Memorial

The Australian War Memorial (AWM) website (2.5 million hits per year and an average stay of over 15 minutes) gets almost three times as many visitors as the museum itself. How could we build on the website's success to encourage more people to visit the museum? Well, we've ventured into podcasting. I don't think many — if any — other Australian cultural institutions have tried this. Podcasts are less expensive than developing and investing in hardware for new audio guides. Our first podcasts were designed to accompany a 'Treasure Trail' in our museum over summer 2005/06. The link is http://www. awm.gov.au/treasuretrail/index.asp.

Our podcast is best enjoyed on an MP3 player in front of the object in the museum, thus tying the website and its content to actual visitors. So we didn't include the basic material about objects given in the wall text panels or the displays themselves. We wanted curator talks of around 2 minutes. The short conversational pieces about the 12 selected 'treasures' aimed at a youngish audience. I told our curators to say what they would normally tell people about the object in question if they were standing in front of it, offering information that is not common knowledge nor readily available elsewhere in the Memorial.

Getting the message out

Up to 29 January 2006 we had 359 subscribers to the podcast. Our web team are still pulling out more detailed statistics. We're trying to find out whether people subscribed or listened to the files online, how many came from the iTunes music store, how many from the website, what software they used, what files they listened to... (it's still early days).

A good deal of time is needed to get the message out there to those who use the internet that the AWM (or any institution) is offering podcasts that they might find interesting. Perhaps we need to use other recent online initiatives like blogs (as opposed to more conventional advertising and communications means) to help get our message out there in cyberspace. Getting these read by a wide audience will also take some time and a history that indicates they are worth reading! Certainly I think the web technician's idea to get the podcast submitted (as free content) to the iTunes Music Store was very wise. (Although finding it in the Podcasts Directory, even if you are very determined, is easier said than done; mostly because of the inappropriate categories iTunes uses.) Whatever we (as a cultural institution) might think about our website, it is not the most popular destinations on the internet, particularly with younger audiences, so whatever we do on our sites will take time to be publicised by links and other people's blogs. Obviously, clear tags and file names will help them be found by subject searches.

Staff involved in preparing and delivering the podcasts were enouraged to become familiar with the longer podcasts of various ABC radio shows now freely available http://www.abc.net.au/services/ podcasting/. We used the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a bit of a role model, even though we are a history museum, suggesting staff listen to the short interpretive podcasts available at http://www. moma.org/visit_moma/audio.html. These related better to our purpose and role as a cultural institution than the ABC's longer pieces.

Many people have to download the podcast before coming to the exhibition. This reinforces the necessity of allowing time for word about the podcasts you've done to 'seed' on the internet. The majority of MP3 players are iPods, which due to digital rights management (DRM) technology are 'tied' to a particular computer. We could provide a computer terminal at the Memorial so people could upload the podcast to their players when they arrived, but if they use an iPod, *all* of their existing music would be overwritten. 'NOT happy, Jan!' On other players with less strict DRM this isn't an issue, but they may need specific drivers or software to be installed. We haven't provided an upload computer in the galleries and will wait to see what feedback we get (if any). In the long run, I think there'll be a technological solution to all of this.

So, the future?

Podcasting and RSS in their most basic forms are just a bunch of links to HTML or MP3 files, the same thing is achieved by having a normal web page with links on it. The only tricky thing about this system — and it's the beauty of RSS — is the 'push' factor: that the updated content is automatically delivered to people, they don't have to hunt around for it. With that in mind, gathering together all the video and audio on our site would work (ie, it could be 'pushed' out), but it would then be quite out of context, just a jumble of files. Sure, more people might find it, but they would not learn or benefit from it and would likely unsubscribe from the service, doing more harm than good. For RSS to be useful you have to be delivering material in some sort of context and have a co-ordinated plan set up.

Podcasting isn't a suitable medium for delivering large masses of collection material. It's real use is for the delivery of frequently updated material. If we initiated online video and we were adding several videos a week to the system, then it would be a perfect mechanism for alerting people that there was new content. Something like a collection access system will still be needed for searching large collections.

I think it has been good for the AWM to learn how we can use this new technology, regardless of its uptake by actual museum visitors, which will come. We now have a good feel for what needs to be done and by whom and are no longer scared of the first steps! Our next step should be to take the small risk involved (in devoting resources to doing it) and develop podcast material to support permanent and temporary exhibitions, thematic and educational guides (kid's tours, veterans, specific wars, relatives who lost loved ones, recent highlights, icons), talks of all sorts, and material related to anniversaries.

I imagine that MP3 use will only rise in Australia and this will eventually include the museum going public. The technology should eventually be more 'portable' to other devices (phones, PDAs, etc.). So wireless broadcasting of audio, text and even video files within the museum and galleries will be more feasible. We may eventually get around the challenge of having to download at home first, by combining the use of the same material with wireless networks in certain galleries. (Currently most MP3 players are not wireless compatible.)

I still think we may be able to partner with or get sponsorship from some technology firm involved in producing the hardware that people use for podcasts. (Not that Apple need it, but the article we did was a good advert for them!)

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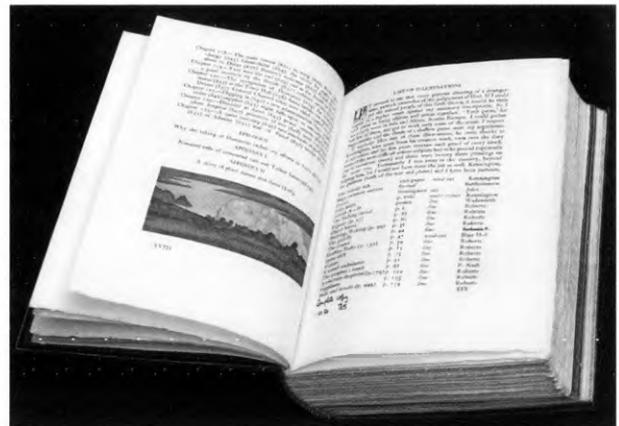
One of the 'Treasure Trail' items included in the podcast: a rare copy of Seven Pillars of Wisdom *by T E Lawrence.*