Gadget Fever

A recent research project, funded by Scottish Natural Heritage together with Forestry Commission Scotland, has been looking at the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in interpretation. There's an increasing interest in the potential of new technology, but little accessible advice or guidance for site managers or funders in this fast-changing field.

The research was a response to this situation. Carried out by Imagemakers, James Carter, and Heritage Multimedia, it included a wide-ranging literature summary, concentrating on any reports that had assessed ICT-based interpretation, and a detailed evaluation of four UK projects. In an era when your washing machine probably contains a more sophisticated computer than your bank was using ten years ago, it can be difficult to keep a study like this within reasonable bounds. The project defined ICT as 'the combination of computers, networks and software to create interfaces to digital information' – a definition that emphasised media that enable greater interaction between visitors and the content of interpretation. This meant it could include emerging techniques such as mobile phones and hand held computers, but not get diverted by technologies like high-definition television, or the programs that control audio-visual presentations.

One of the most interesting areas for ICT applications is in the increasing ability of mobile phones to handle high-speed data transfer, so they can receive 'rich' media, such as video or interactive web pages. More sophisticated devices, such as hand-held computers, combine this with 'location awareness': signals from a satellite network pinpoint the user's location to within a few metres, so the content on offer can be directly relevant to individual places. Since many visitors already own these devices, there is less need for sites to provide expensive (and rapidly obsolete) hardware.

But there are several catches to this apparently exciting potential. Perhaps the most important finding of the research was that successful ICT-based interpretation projects need high quality content that presents an interpretive insight into its subject. This may seem obvious, but a surprising number of schemes use cutting-edge technology to present rather poor content. ICT media are simply communication channels. It is easy for the 'gadgets' to be so appealing in themselves that they become the focus of the project.

There is also the issue of how fluent people are at using technology, or how widespread the latest gadget will be. Everyone knows the stories about how people never use their videotape machine to record programmes because they don't know how to program it – there is every sign that the same is true of the latest wave of technology. Several museums and galleries now offer tours based on podcasts (audio commentaries available from a website that can be played on an mp3 player), but they may only reach a very narrow subset of the potential audience.

Another salutary technological tale comes from the history of text messaging. The technology that keeps a mobile phone in touch with its network allowed messages of up to 130 characters to be sent at no cost to the network provider. The mobile phone companies offered this to consumers as an after-thought, never thinking that it would catch on. Now u cnt go neware wout cing people sndng msgs 2 their m8s.

It seems clear that developments in ICT will change the ways in which visitors will be prepared to access interpretation, just as they have changed the way we communicate with each other. Exactly what those changes will be, and which communication methods will become as accepted as reading text or listening to another human being speak, remains to be seen. And that means that for the foreseeable future, most ICT-based interpretation will be an experiment.

Hardware and software guidelines

An important guideline is that the cost of developing high quality content should be a major element in your budget. Consider these guidelines on the 'gadgets' you might use:

- Widely available hardware and software is more appropriate and cost effective than tailor-made or 'latest version' systems.
- Check that you have appropriate back-up equipment, warranties, and maintenance and support agreements.
- Have a rescue plan for what happens if your software developer goes out of business. Some suppliers will agree to place the program source code (to which they have intellectual property rights) in a bank deposit box so you can get at it if their company is no longer around when you need help.

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The report on ICT media and interpretation will be published shortly by Scottish Natural Heritage and will be available on the SNH website.

Doing research on the Web is like using a library assembled piecemeal by pack rats and vandalized nightly.
Roger Ebert, American film critic