

The art of Communication selecting interpretive media

The fourth in the series of Interpret Scotland guides to interpretation. Mary Hudson, an interpretive planner with the National Trust for Scotland, looks at selecting interpretive media.

One of the greatest sins committed in interpretation is that of choosing interpretive media before the other elements of planning have been completed. There are some fantastic media solutions out there and it is easy to be seduced into thinking about how wonderful they could look without first deciding what you want to say and who you want to say it to? Below is a list of some of the pros and cons of some of those media options:

Medium	Advantages	Disadvantages
Graphic Panels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach a large audience • Low maintenance • Need no supervision • Combine text and images • Help to orientate visitors • Can be produced on a relatively low budget. • Can be produced using a variety of materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour of reading, even a concise amount of text, may put visitors off. • May have a negative landscape impact • May be prone to vandalism • Difficult for visitors to retain information, eg, orientation panels
Creative installations, sculpture etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be designed to be sensitive to the surrounding landscape • Can be interactive • Provide aesthetic interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often expensive to commission • Can be difficult to make message clear • Can be fragile and may not age well
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used on and off site • Can contain more detail than a panel • Aid orientation • Can be produced on a relatively low budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be effectively distributed • Reprints can be costly • May be discarded as litter

Medium	Advantages	Disadvantages
Live interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very effective form of interpretation • Flexible • Can present a complex story • Can encourage interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strict quality control is required • Can be costly in terms of salaries, training needs and consultant fees • Needs good marketing and administration
Audio tours & PDAs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can use narrative to tell a story • Can hold a significant amount of information • Quantity of information can encourage repeat visits • Can help with visitor flow and orientation • Potentially more captivating than written forms of interpretation • Can be multi-lingual • Visually unobtrusive • Can generate income • Flexible – can be adapted to work with ipods, mobile phones etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive to produce and maintain • Can isolate users from each other • Operational considerations for distributing tours • Not easy – or cheap – to update
Multimedia installations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can encourage interaction • Modern appeal • Can combine pictures, text and sound • Can allow access to an archive of information • Can be reproduced for sale and generate income • Can encourage repeat visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive to develop and install • Hardware costs can be high • Maintenance can be extremely costly • Staff required to deal with everyday operation of equipment • Can be solitary, eg touch screens • If broken, leaves a void

Medium	Advantages	Disadvantages
AV presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can communicate a significant amount of information • Can use a variety of presentation methods • Can reach a large audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production and hardware costs can be high • Noise pollution can be a problem if no dedicated space for screening
Visitor Centres & exhibitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a complex story • Can be a major attraction • Can contain a wide range of media and presentation styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very expensive to build and run • Lots of competition • Needs highly professional management • Maintenance costs can be significant

With such an overwhelming number of options, selecting interpretive media can be a complex business. However, by weighing up the pros and cons of each medium, it is possible to produce interpretation that is worth its weight in gold.

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All that glitters is not gold.

William Shakespeare, the Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene VII