

Brave New World?

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and interpretation are potentially natural partners. They are both concerned with communication. This partnership can be made to work to our advantage, or it can become a costly entanglement of unreliable equipment and high tech 'gloss'.

ICT media encompass a range of digital platforms, including multi-media, digital audio, digital video, and the Internet. This article introduces some key issues to consider if you are thinking about using this new technology for interpretation.

Don't be cool, be smart

The initial danger of using new technology is that it seduces us into the "What Would Be Cool to Do?" paradigm. In this paradigm, coined by US interpreter Sam Ham, we begin by thinking about what's cool, and our minds are filled with visions of new gadgets and fab tecchie stuff. We think about what groovy sound effects, visuals, lighting and interactivity we can use to capture attention.

In this paradigm, the message comes second. It is made to conform to whatever the medium will allow, and in the worst case, the medium actually precludes communication. I've seen too many web sites that look good, for example, but take too long to navigate or download.

But there's a better way. Sam's alternative is the "What Would Be Smart to Do?" paradigm, which begins with the design of the message. Here, interpretive planning enables us to identify what messages we want to communicate first, before considering what media to use.

When the conceptual design of the message has been worked through, then we can think about media, materials and artistic design. Appearance does matter, but it matters most once a strong, consistent and meaningful message has been developed.

So why use new technology?

Once your message has been designed, why might you then decide to use ICT to deliver it? There are many good reasons¹:

- Well-designed high-tech displays can be great fun, and do attract attention.
- Computer technology can provide your visitors with a flexible, non-linear platform that allows them to choose what interests them and how far to follow an individual story.
- The same digitised content can be carried by different media – like a web site, computer interactives and wireless PCs – and be linked with collections and curatorial databases.
- Computer technology can provide a 'virtual' platform for visitors to use at home or in school, or for a Virtual Reality tour of a sensitive or inaccessible site.

- Computer technology enables you to digitally manipulate images to show how something might have looked, how it worked or how it was made.
- Computer technology can be highly interactive and creative, with the potential only limited by your imagination (and budget).
- Computer hardware can keep track of visitors' preferences, thereby automatically providing you with evaluation data.
- Computer technology has good flexibility, with different content delivered for different audiences from the same piece of equipment.

This is a strong list of plusses, but there are potential drawbacks too:

- The hardware, programming and content can all be expensive.
- Computer technology dates quickly, and something brand new can be yesterday's news in no time.
- Computer technology can get in the way of experiencing the 'real thing'.
- Computer technology can be expensive to maintain, and when (not if!) it breaks down you can be left with no back-up and disappointed users.
- Computer technology can end up excluding people who are not comfortable using it.
- Specialist suppliers can go out of business, leaving you with a bespoke system that cannot be serviced or upgraded.
- The use of new technology can end up in the hands of technology experts, who end up driving the process instead of the interpretation manager.
- Additional security may be needed to protect from theft and prevent computer viruses and 'hacking'.

The cost of new technology²

The following budget ranges are a guideline for the use of multi-media (Lord & Lord, 2002, adapted from \$ equivalent):

- Exhibitions with intensive use of multimedia £2,520 m²
- Exhibitions with moderate use of multimedia £1,800 m²
- Exhibitions with occasional use of multimedia £1,000 m²

Do also bear in mind that one or two well-designed and properly resourced ICT displays have more impact than a dozen poor productions.

Summary

Digital technology is an exciting and fast developing medium. But to get the most from it, let your decisions be guided by an interpretive plan that puts the message first.

David Masters, Editor. Tel 0121 441 1198

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”
Arthur C. Clarke, writer and futurologist, (1917-)

- 1 Further advice on the specific pros and cons of audio and multi-media technology is given on pages 5 and 6.
- 2 See Manual of Museum Exhibitions, Lord & Lord, 2002