

# Vitus Vestergaard:

## A new plea for time: The significance of museum exhibitions in today's media landscape

### RESUMÉ

Gennem anvendelse af Harold Innis' begreber time-bias og space-bias undersøger denne artikel betydningen af museumsudstillinger i medielandskabet. Der argumenteres ud fra et medieøkologisk perspektiv for at udstilling bør betragtes som et time-biased medie i et udpræget space-biased samfund. Efter som museer i højere og højere grad vender sig imod det spatiale, bliver balance et centralt tema. Denne artikel diskuterer også rollen af såkaldt virtuelle udstillinger og konkluderer afslutningsvist, at det er vigtigt at øge opmærksomheden omkring – og forståelsen af – udstillingsmediet, samt at museer bør overveje deres rolle som medieskabere.

### ABSTRACT

Based on Harold Innis' concepts of time-bias and space-bias this article examines the significance of museum exhibitions in the media landscape. From a media ecology perspective, it is argued that the exhibition should be seen as a time-biased medium in a highly space-biased society. Since museums are increasingly turning towards space, balance becomes a central issue. The article also discusses the role of so-called virtual exhibitions and ultimately concludes that increased awareness and appreciation of the exhibition medium is important and that museums should consider their role as media makers.

### EMNEORD

Museer, udstillinger, media bias, medieøkologi

### KEYWORDS

Museums, exhibitions, media bias, media ecology

## Introduction

In his famous essay, *A Plea for Time*, Harold A. Innis argued for the significance of time in a modern world obsessed with present-mindedness and expansion of the spatial reach of communication (Innis 1964). Innis' plea lies in continuation of the central thesis of his book *Empire and Communications*, namely that in Western civilization, a stable society is dependent upon striking a balance between concerns of the control of space and time (Innis, 2007). According to Innis, the "character of the medium of communication tends to create a bias in civilization favourable to an over-emphasis on the time concept or on the space concept" (Innis 1964, 64). To achieve stability, the bias must be offset by the influence of another medium.

At the time of Innis' writing on these topics (the early 1950s), he saw no such stability. Instead, he found that "the balance between time and space has been seriously disturbed with disastrous consequences to Western civilization" (Innis 1964, 76). The Cold War played a part in what has often been seen as pessimism in Innis' works, but the central problem addressed by Innis is more profound and pervasive. In his introduction to *Changing Concepts of Time*, communications theorist James W. Carey describes Innis' thesis as follows:

The spatial bias of modern media, the attempt to extend lines of communication further and further (...) inevitably shrinks time down to the present, to a one-day world of the immediate and the transitory. The future disappears into the present; everything changes at a blinding speed, making it difficult to maintain continuity in time and culture (Innis 2004, xv).

Carey continues by summarizing a favourite maxim of Innis', that "the more the technology of communication improves, the more difficult human communication becomes" (Innis 2004, xv). Innis provided no easy solutions for the crises of his day, but he suggested that universities could play a part in the solution. For Innis, the purpose of the university in a culture is essentially to train individuals to think and "to appraise problems in terms of space and time and (...) to take the proper steps at the right time" (Innis 1964, 85). In this article, I focus on the role of a much younger societal institution, namely the museum. Through the medium of the exhibition, museums have a unique potential to actually maintain continuity in time and culture, thereby offering a

counterweight to the overwhelmingly space-biased media dominating the media landscape. But this is dependent upon a proper appreciation of the differences between the exhibition medium and other media used in museum communication.

The aim of this article is threefold: First, I will demonstrate that an exhibition is in fact a medium. Secondly, I will discuss the time-bias of exhibitions in relation to our highly space-biased society. Thirdly, I will argue that, provided that the Innisian idea of balance holds true, museums today have a unique opportunity to play a significant role in the media landscape through the exhibition medium.

### **Media as environment**

This article's theoretical point of departure is media ecology in the tradition of Innis, Ong, McLuhan, Ellul, Postman, and others. Postman, who coined the term, explains: "We put the word 'media' in the front of the word 'ecology' to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character and, one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance" (Postman 2000, 11). For some theorists, such as McLuhan, the focus is on the inner, psychological interactions with media while others, such as Innis, have focused instead on media in society and history.

The word 'media' and the study of media can, of course, refer to many different phenomena. Communication scholar Joshua Meyrowitz argues that there are "three core metaphors that have operated silently and simultaneously beneath the surface of research on communication technologies and have led to confusion and misunderstanding among those drawing on different metaphors" (Meyrowitz 1999, 44).

The first and most common metaphor is medium-as-vessel/conduit. Here the underlying idea is that media can be filled with content and that we can analyse this content separately from the particular medium. In relation to exhibitions, this suggests that the topic of an exhibition, e.g. 'dinosaurs', could also have been disseminated in a book, a documentary film, a web page, or other media. One might feel that exhibitions are relevant places to show fossils, but a fossil

can nevertheless also be shown in a book or even be described with words on a radio program. In this sense, media are simply vessels for content.

The second metaphor is medium-as-language. Here the idea is that different media have different, unique, expressive potentials and that the 'grammar' of the medium in question therefore becomes the object of study. When media are seen as 'language', it is acknowledged that communication is coloured by the 'grammar' choices made within a particular medium. In e-mail, for instance, emoticons might be used to convey a certain mood, whereas in film mood can be created with lighting or background music. Exhibitions indeed have their own grammar, and the abundant literature on exhibition design is concerned with this topic. Although this article focuses on the characteristics of exhibitions, it does so in a much broader sense than grammar choices alone. The question is not how to make effective exhibitions but rather what makes exhibitions unique compared to other media and why exhibitions are significant. So here, exhibitions are seen as environments or settings within a media landscape.

This corresponds to the third metaphor described by Meyrowitz, namely medium-as-environment. Medium-as-environment concern the characteristics of and differences between media, regardless of content and grammar choices. Meyrowitz explains that, on a micro-level, "the key issue is how the choice of one medium over another influences a particular situation or interaction" (Meyrowitz 1999, 49). On a macro-level, however, "the primary medium question is how the addition of a new medium to the existing media matrix may alter social interactions and social structure in general" (ibid.). In this article, the main exploration is a macro-level discussion concerning the time-bias of the exhibition medium and the role of museum exhibitions in a highly space-biased society. The micro-level discussion is only touched upon briefly.

### **The exhibition medium**

To understand the societal role of museum exhibitions, it is necessary to first understand that exhibitions are truly media and therefore part of our media landscape. At first, it might seem counterintuitive to view an exhibition as a medium; with most media, our immersion is entirely cognitive, not physical. Books, newspapers, and TV screens are located next to us, whereas exhibitions

are media into which we physically enter.<sup>1</sup> Exhibition rooms are themselves, of course, full of media, but that should not come as a surprise, considering that McLuhan reminds us that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan 1964, 23). We might regard exhibitions as ‘multimedia’, to use a term popular in the 1990s. Because most of our media contain a mixture of photography, drawing, writing, and so on, it seems to me wiser to simply use the word ‘medium’.

It is important to distinguish between a museum and an exhibition – two concepts that are often confused with one another. Like the Alexandrian Μουσείον, from which the museum takes its name, the museum is an institution. The relationship between museums and exhibitions is equivalent to the relationship between universities and auditoriums.

I use the word ‘museum’ in a broad sense, covering various institutions that collect, preserve, and display objects for the benefit of public learning. This would include, for example, museums of cultural history, museums of natural history, and art galleries as well as many science centres, historic houses, memorial sites, and botanical gardens.

Museums place varying emphasis on collection, registration, preservation, research, and display. This article concerns display, but the other activities are implied: Without them, there would be no context for what is displayed and ultimately nothing to display at all.

### Origins of the exhibition

Tracing the origins of exhibitions makes it even easier to see that exhibitions are best understood as media. If we disregard the fact that even the most ancient merchant must have needed to organize and display his goods in some form of exhibit, the first resemblance to modern curated exhibitions is found in the ‘cabinets of curiosities’ emerging during the Renaissance. Ever since the famous art historian Julius von Schlosser wrote his scholarly work on these *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* (Schlosser 1908), they have often been mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> Audio played by a loudspeaker also creates a space in which the listener is physically immersed.

as precursors to museum exhibitions. The cabinets existed in many forms: Usually they were rooms, although smaller versions in cupboards or boxes are known. They contained collections of marvellous artworks, plants, and stuffed or even live animals, all put together without the typical present-day division between exhibitions of art, science, natural history, and so on.

The cabinets of curiosity were owned by rulers, wealthy merchants, and scientists, and they served purposes ranging from the glorification of God to the display of personal power to pedagogy and scientific study. Science historian Anke te Heesen points out that an “often disregarded aspect in the literature on curiosity cabinets is the social element: These sites also served as meeting points” (Heesen 2002, 142). This, however, neither means that they were open to everybody nor that they would necessarily catalyse the free flow of ideas. Instead, cabinets of curiosity served to establish what Innis (1964) calls ‘monopolies of knowledge’. To give a sense of the ‘social environment’, Heesen (2002) mentions an incident in which Linnaeus and a colleague recovered a few samples of herbs brought back from America, after which they tossed the remainder into the fire to keep the herbs a secret from other scientists.

With the rise of museums allowing public access, such as the Ashmolean Museum and later the British Museum and the Louvre, the focus shifted more towards preservation of national memory and public education. An increased focus on education inevitably prompts an increased focus on the media of education, and thus George Brown Goode of the Smithsonian Institution famously wrote that an “efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen” (Goode 1895). In Goode’s thought-provoking description, mediation is the core activity of the museum, whereas collection is secondary. This, of course, makes more sense in the context of science museums than art museums, and the ichthyologist Goode has received some criticism from curators of unique works of art. Still, it is relevant even today to ponder the importance of categorization, explanation, and related activities as distinguishing museums from other institutions or individuals in possession of a collection.

Media researcher Jenny Kidd (2014) describes museums as both ‘media makers’ and ‘object makers’. She paraphrases media researcher Michelle Henning, who noted that “in the very act of displaying a ‘thing’ in a museum context, that ‘thing’ is detached from its use-value and turned into an ‘object’” (Kidd 2014,

4). Having turned something into an object, the institution then becomes responsible for offering ways in which that object might be given meaning. The media-making is key here, and within the medium of an exhibition, instructive labels are just one of many options for the media maker.

### **The time-bias of exhibitions**

It is easy to see that exhibitions in local history museums or historic houses have a strong time-bias, connecting the present with the past on location. But I argue that the exhibition is a time-biased *medium*, and any exhibition therefore has a time-bias, regardless of its topic.

First and foremost, exhibitions are time-biased because, with a few exceptions, they are stationary. Innis (2007) uses the examples of heavy materials, such as parchment, clay, and stone, to describe early media that emphasize time, whereas light and less durable materials, such as papyrus and paper, are used as examples of media that emphasize space. Innis' point here is that the first category of media has a propensity to extend into time, even across generations, whereas the second category of media are better suited to extend into space, even across borders. It is the difference between the reach of a rune stone and that of a radio broadcast.

The general rule of exhibitions is that visitors come to the exhibition, and not the other way around. There are two obvious exceptions: travelling exhibitions and virtual exhibitions. We can almost immediately disregard the first exception because of the huge resources involved in travelling with an exhibition. A space-biased medium such as radio is able to reach hundreds of cities almost instantaneously and at a very low cost. A time-biased medium such as a rune stone can also be transported, but the speed, reach, and cost is fundamentally different. The same is true for a travelling exhibition. And even when a travelling exhibition reaches its destination, visitors will still travel to reach the exhibition. All the travelling exhibition does is shorten the distance for some. The second exception is more complex and requires an analysis of what we actually mean when we discuss 'virtual exhibitions'. This problem will be dealt with separately in a later chapter.

It is worth noting that, from an Innisian point of view, time-bias and space-bias are biases, not absolutes. Innis does not mention exhibitions, but in utilizing his

concepts, it becomes clear that an exhibition is better suited to extension into time than into space. One might point out that the content of exhibitions will change and that exhibitions are sometimes closed or rebuilt entirely. This does not change the inherent bias of the medium, which is time. Innis, for example, includes parchment as a time-biased medium, although it is of course possible to distribute parchments in space. Parchment can also change: It can be cut up and even reused as a palimpsest. By the same token, a wax tablet can be filled with new content, but this does not change its relative bias towards time and durability – rather than towards extensive distribution in space. Thus the physical reality of a medium is important, and one might ask what exactly constitutes an exhibition, both physically and as a medium. Here we might turn to Postman (2005), who draws a helpful analogy: A technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Wax on wood is a technology, but used for writing in a certain way, it becomes a medium: a wax tablet. An exhibition is a physical space large enough for a person to enter into, in which objects or themes are mediated. Like any other medium, it becomes a medium only “as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts” (Postman 2005, 84). But as Postman later writes, each technology – in the case of an exhibition, the physical space or room – has “an agenda of its own” (ibid.). The clear technological propensity of an exhibition is the spatial presentation of objects within a closed space. These objects may even include objects with online connectivity, such as an interactive kiosk, but this still does not change the physical reality or the ‘technology’ of the exhibition itself: Visitors enter into the exhibition, and the exhibition is to a high degree fixed in space while being able to extend in time.

In addition to the more-or-less stationary nature of exhibitions, I wish to suggest two somewhat connected qualities of the exhibition medium that underscore its time-bias. One concerns memory; the other concerns social interaction.

Museum researcher John Falk writes: “One of the more striking things I have discovered in more than thirty years of research on museum visitors is how persistent are memories of the museum visitor experience. Beyond all reason, people remember their visits to museums” (Falk 2009, 133). In line with this, Anderson, Storcksdieck, and Spock (2007) have offered a review of the research on museum long-term memory and visitor experience, providing good evidence for long-term memories of museum visits. Exactly what is remembered

seems to depend on many factors, such as the quality of exhibits, visitor motivation, visitor goals, and social context.

The researchers also find that: “Affective school field-trip memories have a strong influence on future visitation” (Anderson, Storksdieck, and Spock 2007, 202). If exhibitions can, in fact, create strong long-term memories and recurring visits, it means that an exhibition has the potential to create connections in time and continuity on a personal level. But examination of the social interaction taking place at exhibitions suggests that the connections in time are not just personal. The museum experience is profoundly social, and as Falk writes, the “overwhelming majority of museum visitors arrive as part of a social group” (Falk 2009, 99). But he goes further, stating that “all visitors, even those choosing to visit alone, find themselves quickly immersed in the socio-cultural milieu of other visitors, museum staff, and volunteers” (ibid.). Falk explains that much of the conversation taking place is actually focused on the content, and he finds that the conversations can “ultimately have more impact on a visitor’s memory of the experience than the object and labels themselves” (ibid.).

My main point here is that exhibitions (and perhaps other parts of a museum building) are places of oral communication. This makes the exhibition unique among media. There are, of course, other media supporting oral communication, such as the telephone and radio, but they focus on the linear order of space. In the words of Walter Ong, these media have “brought us into the age of ‘secondary orality’” (Ong 2002, 133), a more deliberate and self-conscious orality. From Ong’s perspective, the old orality is virtually gone, but I wish to suggest that, at an exhibition, a family group spanning two or three generations – sharing their wonder, stories, and knowledge – might establish connections in time resembling those of primary orality.

At the end of this section, I will briefly mention an apparent paradox, namely that many exhibitions, despite their time-bias, seem to be preoccupied with space. Exhibitions are internally spatial, and regardless of the exhibition topic, the themes and artefacts are by definition spatially ordered within the exhibition. If the exhibition design is clever, then the spatial relationships between artefacts tell the visitor something about typology, chronology, or other relational issues. Despite this spatiality, all of this is related to what Meyrowitz (1999) calls the micro-level of a medium-as-environment, not the macro-level, and while it is true that exhibitions (on the micro-level) are internally spatial, it

does not necessarily follow that exhibitions (on the micro-level or the macro-level) are externally oriented towards space. However, in a geographical sense, many exhibitions seem to reach far and wide. In one hall at the British Museum, the visitors find themselves walking among the marbles from the Parthenon, and in another room they are among the casing stones from the Great Pyramid of Giza. Walking around for a few hours, visitors will stand face-to-face with moai from Easter Island, plastered human skulls from Jericho, and gilded Bodhisattvas from Nepal. Here we must be clear that while the appropriation of oriental artefacts is a result of an empire's spatial expansion, the curation and exhibition of these artefacts serves another purpose: a temporal expansion of the empire.

### **Museums and the media landscape**

While the exhibition is by nature time-biased, there is today a rather strong push from museums towards a colonization of space. Whereas the cabinets of curiosity and the early public museums made huge efforts to import artefacts from distant places into the exhibition, many museums today make export their primary effort. The goal is to reach audiences far and wide, and the focus on communication within the museum building now competes with communication outside of the museum building.

The famous museum researcher Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007) refers to some of the changes as a movement towards the 'post-museum', and she links this with post-modernity and changing conceptions of learning.

Museum historian Steven Conn credits Hooper-Greenhill, as well as Tony Bennett, with the dubious honour of standing "among the first and certainly the most influential of those who brought Foucault to the museum" (Conn 2010, 3). Michel Foucault's writings are focused on themes such as transgression, power, and punishment as well as on institutions such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals. So it comes as no surprise that, as Conn rightly observes, the introduction of Foucault into museum studies has created an entire body of work describing museums as insidious and repressive places that "resemble penitentiaries, but with better interior decorating" (Conn 2010, 3). We need look no further than Eilean Hooper-Greenhill herself to see this demonstrated. Fifteen years after she published her book *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, in

which she analysed museums using Foucault's concept of epistemes, she published *Museums and Education*. On the very first page of this book she writes: "Until recently, museums could be described as repressive and authoritarian symbols of unchanging solid modernity and indeed there are still some museums that cling to this out-dated identity" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 1). The remedy, according to Hooper-Greenhill, is the notion of the post-museum, which includes a new approach to museum audiences as well as "the promotion of a more egalitarian and just society" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 1).

This idea is connected to broader ideas on inclusiveness, outreach, and participatory practices, which have characterized museum discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The post-museum is not the only label for new ways of thinking about the museum, and in recent literature one may find notions such as: the responsive museum (Lang, Reeve, and Woollard 2006), reinvented museum (Anderson 2004), engaging museum (Black, 2005), constructed museum (Hein 2005), participatory museum (Simon 2010), interactive museum (Drotner et al. 2011), total museum (Šola 2010), and dialogic museum (Tchen and Ševčenko 2011) and more.

Museums embracing these new identities might end up promoting actual dialogue and a sense of connection among the visitors, or they might end up focusing on the 'now' and on popular contemporary agendas to the point where they render themselves twisted versions of news media. The latter is a real risk. On her blog, museum researcher and designer Nina Simon recalls her time working at a museum that was supposed to be "the museum of Silicon Valley – not of its material history, but its pulse of innovation." She continues: "This was impossible. The exhibits we put on the floor were immediately dated. Their physicality, long timelines, and big budgets made them immutable objects. They didn't speak to the thrilling drumbeat of change at the heart of innovation."<sup>2</sup> The quest for relevance can easily turn into irrelevance for the simple reason that any medium, including the exhibition, has certain propensities.

What Simon was asked to do is the equivalent of asking her to create a painting to report on an ongoing sporting event instead of utilizing a live-broadcasting

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2 <http://museumtwo.blogspot.dk/2015/08/meditations-on-relevance-part-2-content.html>

medium. The exhibition medium, with its inherent time-bias, is ill-suited to display the present. Instead, the strength of an exhibition lies in its ability to offer visitors some points of reference with which they themselves can connect temporally. Yet one of the pitfalls of a new museum identity is the tendency to turn towards space in search of relevance, thereby shrinking time to the present day. In 2013, The Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum adopted a new so-called 'rapid response strategy.' In an interview in the architecture and design magazine *Dezeen*, V&A Senior Curator Kieran Long explains the new strategy: "The rapid response collecting strategy is a new strand to the V&A museum's collections policy, which can respond very quickly to events relevant to design and technology."<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, we can read that items acquired under the scheme so far include fake Katy Perry eyelashes, the first 3D-printed gun, and a pair of jeans purchased from high-street retailer Primark. The question here is not so much whether the items, as such, are relevant. The question is whether the focus on collecting items mentioned in today's news is really the right focus for museums. Nina Simon asks: "Does collecting more stuff faster help improve relevance? Or does it accelerate an unhealthy emphasis on the 'now?'"<sup>4</sup> Later, she concludes: "'Now' matters, but not as much as utility and meaning. 'Now' can distract from the real work of relevance--making cultural institutions useful, meaningful, and connected to people's lives. Not just now. Later, too."<sup>5</sup>

Steven Conn (2010) shrewdly identifies a certain group of newer history museums such as the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as 'therapeutic museums'. They are concerned with telling a story and making us better people, and they are more dependent on themes rather than on collections. Conn explains: "They want to convey values rather than knowledge, and they use language and images – in various old-fashioned and newer electronic forms – rather than objects to do that" (Conn 2010, 46). Lessened focus on objects means more focus on other means of communication, which might just as well take place outside of exhibitions.

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3 <http://www.dezeen.com/2013/12/18/rapid-response-collecting-victoria-and-albert-museum-kieran-long>

4 <http://museumtwo.blogspot.dk/2015/08/meditations-on-relevance-part-2-content.html>

5 Ibid.

From a broader perspective, we see more and more examples of museums lessening their interest in time and continuity and deepening their preoccupation with their spatial reach here and now. Paraphrasing Wyndham Lewis, Innis writes: "The essence of living in the moment and for the moment is to banish all individual continuity" (Innis 1964, 90). Through exhibitions, museums have a real chance of offering a counterbalance in a medium landscape preoccupied with connecting humans with 'just the right content' here and now. Unlike the fast-moving content of electronic media, objects in exhibitions are not transitory.

### **Virtual exhibitions**

One of the methods of spatially extending the lines of communication employed by cultural institutions today is the creation of online resources, such as 'virtual' (or 'online') exhibitions. With a virtual exhibition, obstacles such as opening hours, travelling time, parking spaces, and staircases immediately evaporate.

In the foreword to a fairly recent volume on museums in the digital age, editor and museum researcher Ross Parry writes that "museums might recall some of their initial defensiveness to Internet technologies that appeared to encourage an arms-length proxy contact with collections and that seemed to threaten even the primacy of the physical exhibit itself" (Parry 2010, 1). He continues: "And yet, two decades after the birth of the Web, museums increasingly see their distributed online audiences as important as those physically on site" (ibid.). Online audiences take as many shapes as the online resources offered, and museums today have readers, viewers, listeners, and even gamers. For this discussion, it is necessary, however, to be clear about concepts. What we are talking about in relation to virtual exhibitions is not just any online resource, such as a website with information on opening hours or a social web page for dialogue between curators and visitors. Most such resources are aimed at attracting and maintaining relations with visitors, serving much the same function as brochures, posters, and public lectures. Instead, we are discussing the online display of curated collections of objects, with the primary function of exploration.

If it is true that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (McLuhan 1964, 23), then the question of whether virtual exhibitions are in fact

exhibitions must begin at the top layer. Here the answer is clear: If the virtual exhibition is located on a website (as most are), it is first and foremost the medium of a website. So, without risking any ontological problems, we can safely refer to a virtual exhibition as web, just as an online newspaper is also web. But unlike online newspapers, which (despite small differences) still have writing and photos just like physical newspapers, an online exhibition does not have sounds, smell, or spatiality like those experienced in a physical exhibition room. We might also note the lack of another important yet non-essential property of exhibitions: The presence of other visitors.

All things considered, it seems difficult to reconcile the concept of an exhibition with a virtual exhibition. It gets even worse when we consider that most virtual exhibitions offer exactly what Parry referred to as a 'proxy contact' with the collection. Even though any object on display in an exhibition is mediated and even though many exhibited objects cannot be touched, they are still co-located with the visitors, unlike in virtual exhibitions, where visitors experience a representation (often through digital photography) of objects. In a way, 'virtual exhibition' is here an appropriate concept because it is as much an exhibition as virtual reality is reality.

However, we must distinguish between two kinds of virtual exhibitions: One is the aforementioned display of representations of physical objects. This is the digital equivalent of exhibition catalogues or coffee table books and might share some of the same merits and shortcomings of such visual representations of objects. The other kind of virtual exhibition is an exhibition of objects that are, in essence, digital. They are 'born' in that medium, so to speak, and the exhibitions are therefore more the equivalent of artists' books than of catalogues. Parry (2010) points out that some professionals refer exclusively to digital-born objects as 'digital heritage' whereas others employ the concept of 'digital heritage' in a broader sense, referring to various kinds of digital representations and activities that relate to the preservation of heritage. I prefer the former for purely semantic reasons. It seems logical that digital heritage concerns preservation of actual digital resources, just as natural heritage concerns preservation of actual natural resources.

There are, of course, many problems involved in collecting, preserving, and exhibiting digital objects, such as web pages or rich Internet applications. I previously mentioned the space-biased, volatile nature of the web: Websites

change, sites go offline, formats change, and one object might be composed of several other objects located on different servers. Internet researcher Niels Ole Finnemann writes that “much of the material placed on the net vanishes with disturbing speed” (Finnemann 2001, 32). He cites studies showing that after one year, 40% of the material on the web is gone, and another 40% has been altered. Finnemann pleads for collection and preservation of a considerable portion of this digital heritage and argues that “this interactive communication comprises precisely some of the most characteristic and often quite unique material for understanding our times” (ibid. 41). Huge efforts have been made for over a decade to collect and preserve digital heritage, but there are still unanswered questions, not just in relation to archiving but also to display. There can be educational and experiential strengths in the format of a curated virtual exhibition, but unlike the (physical) exhibition medium, it is also possible to offer user-friendly access to archives of incredible size through simple search and browsing features.

Going back to the virtual exhibitions of representations, which, as Parry (2010) put it, some might see as threatening even the primacy of the physical exhibit itself, we may bluntly ask: Why would anyone go to an exhibition if they could behold high-resolution images online showing even greater detail of objects than can be seen with the naked eye? The question was raised by many when, on February 1, 2011, Google launched the Google Art Project, in which 17 international museums offered high-resolution digital reproductions of more than one thousand artworks. Nancy Proctor of the Baltimore Museum of Art put it plainly: “Could the Google Art Project even make the museum irrelevant as a place to see art?” (Proctor 2011, 221). Her answer is no, and she goes on to suggest that: “In the second generation of museums on the Web, we need to move beyond false binaries and futile contests between ‘the real thing’ and its online representation” (ibid.).

It is quite likely that there is no contest (in the sense that one activity might replace the other) between seeing a representation of a work of art online and seeing the artwork in the exhibition. Even though we have yet to see firm evidence of the impact on attendance from its launch, there has been praise from museums participating in the Google Art Project. It is safe to say that attendance cannot have suffered greatly: In July 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Art – one of the founding participants in the Google Art Project – announced

an annual attendance of 6.3 million. This was the highest visitorship in more than 40 years.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the question of binaries, however, there is still a fundamental difference between 'the real thing' and its online representation. This is not a false binary but a very true distinction between media. And when new media are introduced, they reshape the old media. Television reshaped theatre, but some of us still go to the theatre. Recorded music reshaped concerts, but concerts remain popular. Live broadcasting reshaped political debate, but there is still debate. It would be foolish to think that digital representations of curated objects will not change exhibitions. Walter Ong (2002) rightly notes that electronic devices did not eliminate print but actually produced more books and articles based on the electronically taped voice. So, the point is not that exhibitions will lose visitors. The point is that exhibitions will be reshaped. Yet we might have to wait several years before we can clearly see the shape of the transformation.

### **Understanding balance**

Ultimately, this discussion is all about balance and effects. Media ecology is dialectic, acknowledging that the introduction of one medium will offset and change other media. Innis was interested particularly in how the character of a medium "tends to create a bias in civilization favourable to an over-emphasis on the time concept or on the space concept" (Innis 1964, 64). It might seem alarmist to suggest that a balanced society should recognize the need for counterpoints to the colonization of space through digital media, but this is essentially the point. In an article that seeks common ground between media ecology and mediatization theory, media researcher Lynn Schofield Clark notes that Neil Postman, who was the main figure in synthesizing what was labelled 'media ecology', "adds a specifically ethical dimension to his description of culture by implying that there is some need for it to 'maintain symbolic balance'" (Clark 2009, 88). This is true for media ecology as a whole, although some media ecologists have been more outspoken than others.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/press-room/news/2015/met-attendance-fy-2015>

McLuhan stands out as one of the media ecologists who seems less worried by the changes brought about by the introduction of new media. Postman remarks of McLuhan that “I feel sure he would not have much liked my books, which he would have thought too moralistic, rabbinical or, if not that, certainly too judgmental” (Postman 2000, 11). When McLuhan, in his famous television debate with Norman Mailer, was challenged to take a stance on the global effects of media, he simply replied that he “wouldn’t know how to make a value judgement on such a scale.” Still, in the very same dialogue, McLuhan refers to the global media’s effects as a “demolishing” of the Western and Oriental worlds by new technology.<sup>7</sup> We do find value judgment in some of McLuhan’s writing, but McLuhan is less candid than Innis and certainly less candid than Postman, who says: “To be quite honest about it, I don’t see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context” (Postman 2000, 11).

The literature on possible problems introduced by electronic media ranges from Andrew Keen’s often criticized polemic on social media *The Cult of the Amateur* to Nicholas G. Carr’s Pulitzer-finalist book *The Shallows*. Both Carr (2010) and Keen (2008) write about the Internet, but there are also works such as Jerry Mander’s *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* and Neil Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which primarily deal with the television medium. Postman (2005), Mander (1978), and Carr (2010) all make compelling comparisons to printed text, showing that electronic media have a quite different impact on individuals and society. All of these works underscore consequences that have much more to do with the logic of the medium itself than with its particular cultural content.

I am not suggesting that the metaphor of time- and space-bias can account for all of the changes introduced into human affairs by new media configurations. I think that the metaphor of ecology is more comprehensive here. But in the context of museum exhibitions, the dimensions of time and space seem fundamental to and helpful for understanding one of the unique characteristics of the exhibition medium. It is my hope that, by better understanding the medium, those who are involved with museums – from politicians to curators to visitors

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<sup>7</sup> CBC, Nov. 26, 1967, ‘The way it is’.

– can increase their awareness of exhibitions and acknowledge their role in the media landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Harold Innis' plea for time was all about balance. He saw a society that was biased towards space and pleaded for awareness of the consequences. Innis published his essay in 1951, one year before his death. Towards the end of the essay, he mentions a few examples of a growing concern with the problems of time, but in his analysis, these are mainly "the result of acute emergencies of the present" (1964, 87). He concludes: "Concern with the position of Western civilization in the year 2000 is unthinkable" (ibid.).

Today, museums have an increased focus on reaching new audiences through new means of communication. This is largely motivated by a sincere desire to provide wide public access to important learning opportunities, and in many cases the results are positive. But museums should ask themselves where the line should be drawn. The exhibition medium has a unique time-bias that offers a counterbalance to the almost exclusively space-biased media of our society. The exhibition offers important possibilities for genuine dialogue and mutual engagement with objects and themes.

Exploring exhibitions is profoundly different from engaging with reproductions in digital space. Museums should be aware of the precious proclivities of the exhibition medium and of the transformations it undergoes when it is offset by other media. Museums are indeed media-makers, but they should ask themselves what separates their media-making from that of other institutions. The answer is not straightforward, but part of the answer is that they are also object-makers, and this ultimately points back to the significance of the exhibition medium. Museums are not the only institutions in the media landscape that have social responsibilities, but they can make important differences in society and in the lives of individuals.

The danger for museums is that they may one day find in themselves a growing concern with the problems of time, which are in the main a result of acute emergencies of the present. To avoid this, I make – like Innis – plea for time, in order

to achieve balance in a society preoccupied with space. Increased understanding and appreciation of the significance of the exhibition medium may be one step along this path.

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