

A Comparative Study of the Attitude of Museum Administrators in Thailand and the United Kingdom Towards the Role of On-site Digital Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

The use of on-site digital interpretations in museums is growing. While many have discussed the interpretations from different perspectives, few have looked at the attitudes of museum administrators towards the roles of digital interpretations – and, in particular, that between Asia and Western countries. This paper compares the attitudes of museum administrators in Thailand and the United Kingdom to digital interpretations. The author carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with museum administrators at four museums in the two countries to collect primary data. Significant differences in the attitude of the two groups of administrators were found. The Thai administrators used the digital interpretations to appeal to and attract today's youth, who have a strong affinity for digital technology. In contrast, the administrators in the United Kingdom used the digital interpretations to help visitors better understand the context of exhibits. For the most part, they did not suggest using digital interpretations as a means to attract visitors. These differences might have their roots in the different sociocultural contexts of the countries. Museums in Thailand targeted young people, who are not traditionally interested in visiting museums. Museums in the United Kingdom targeted the general public, who have a habit of visiting museums. These findings provide new insights on digital interpretations for museums and academia.

Keywords: Attitude, Museum administrators, Thailand, United Kingdom, On-site digital interpretations, Sociocultural context

INTRODUCTION

"The digital revolution [has] arrived in the museum world" (Din and Hecht, 2007). The use of on-site digital interpretations in museums is growing. Today, it is common for museum visitors to encounter a series of digital interpretations. There are digital signs to welcome them, audio guides to aid them on their tour, touchscreens to help them interact with the exhibits, and IMAX theatres to provide visual and audio excitement.

Many researchers have studied museum digital technologies from different perspectives. Marshal McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* helps readers understand the theories and rudiments of digital interpretations (Parry, 2007). Stevens and Toro-Martell's *Leaving a Trace: Supporting Museum Visitor Interaction and Interpretation with Digital Media Annotation Systems* look at ways of enhancing the visitor experience and learning through digital interpretations (Stevens and Toro-Martell, 2003). *Summative Evaluation of the British Galleries: Report of Research Findings* prepared by Creative Research for the Victoria and Albert Museum evaluates responses of visitors to the digital interpretations (Creative Research, 2002). However, little research has looked at digital interpretations from the perspective of museum administrators.

This paper is a comparative study of the attitude of museum administrators in Thailand and the United Kingdom towards the role of digital

interpretations. The study compared four museums: the Museum of Siam and the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall (REH) in Thailand and the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Horniman Museum in the United Kingdom. The sociocultural contexts of these two groups of museums are very different. Despite the differences, museum administrators in both countries were committed to applying digital technologies, in particular, to their on-site interpretations. However,

- What are the attitudes of these museum administrators towards digital interpretations?
- How are these attitudes shaped differently from a sociocultural perspective?

Through the answers to these questions, the author would like to achieve the following objectives:

- To understand the similarities and differences in the attitudes of these administrators towards the role of digital interpretations and
- To understand the extent to which the sociocultural context of these museums influences their attitude.

Interpretation, according to the National Association for Interpretation, is defined as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource" (in Tilden, 2007).

Interpretations give meaning to the sites to construct a sense of place for visitors (Steward and Kirby, 1998) and to enrich their lives (Bacher et al., 2007). The enrichment provides visitors with novel experiences, enhances their enjoyment, and/or increases their understanding of the site (Steward and Kirby, 1998). Interpretations also let visitors discover and understand the true meaning and significance of a heritage site. The revelation of truth instills heritage with “enough meaning and significance” to arouse in the public trust a sense of preservation interest and concern (Bacher et al., 2007).

Digital interpretations merge advanced digital technologies, such as sound, moving images, graphics, and animation, with museum interpretations. The Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts features a 7,000-square foot visual interactive learning center with installed Acoustiguides (Denison, 2003). The Newseum in Washington, D.C. includes a theater that combines 3D videos, motion-based seats, air and water sprinklers, leg ticklers, and bottom kickers (Horwitz-Bennett, 2010).

Although digital interpretations are expensive and unaffordable for some museums (Din and Hecht, 2007) and the concern that they might turn museums into theme parks (Thian, 2012), museums need to adapt themselves to the digital technology trend, otherwise, they will find themselves left behind (Hennes in Horwitz-Bennett, 2010). Competitors for museum visitors, such as

cinemas and amusement parks (Kotler and Kotler, 1998), are increasingly using high-end digital technology to provide enjoyment and excitement. Theaters feature IMAX 3D and IMAX HD and monuments, such as the Empire State Building, and zoos, such as the London Zoo, have adopted handheld guides (Denison, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The museums

Four museums were chosen because of their significance to their countries and use of digital interpretations.

The Museum of Siam was established in 2004. It was a project of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime Minister of Thailand, to materialize his policy of self-development and acquisition of knowledge by the Thai public (Sritama, 2004). The Museum uses an interactive and multi-disciplinary approach, such as hands-on exhibitions and audio-visual multimedia, to trigger thoughts of visitors to enhance their self-learning skills (National Discovery Museum Institute, n.d.).

The Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall was opened to the public in 2010. The hall is a royal project and belongs to the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the property of the royal family of Thailand. The REH uses advanced on-site digital interpretations, such as four-dimensional multimedia techniques, touch screens, and multi-media animation technologies (Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, n.d.)

The Victoria and Albert Museum, one of the United Kingdom's 20 national museums, claims to be the world's leading museum of art and design (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013). The museum has relied on traditional interpretations. However, in the museum's annual report in 2013, the museum committed to delivering its *Digital Futureplan Programme*, with a particular emphasis on the visitor experience and business support (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013). In December 2012, the museum introduced digital interpretations in its Furniture Gallery, the first in the museum to employ digital labels (Dyson, 2013).

The Horniman Museum was founded by Frederick John Horniman in 1901. The website of *Your Paintings: BBC* described the museum as holding one of the most significant ethnographic collections in the United Kingdom (BBC, n.d.). The museum aligned its digital activities – in particular, those of social media – with its long-term strategy (Horniman Museum and its Garden, n.d.).

Data collection

This study used a qualitative research methodology. As attitudes are intangible and difficult to measure or observe (Blythe, 1997), the author conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the museum administrators at four museums to collect the following data:

- General information, such as the history, number of visitors, and

target market of the museums,

- The opinion of these administrators on the role of museums, and
- The types of digital interpretations the administrators have used and their reasons for choosing them.

Some of the data on the attitudes of the administrators of the Museum of Siam and the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall in Thailand were derived from a previous research paper of the author and a colleague. The research paper looked at the extent that interactive and on-site digital interpretations helped museum visitors understand the messages of three museums in Thailand, including the two in the current study (Subhamitr and Chen, 2013).

In Thailand, the author interviewed the following museum administrators:

- Museum of Siam: the Museum Enterprise Manager and the Funds Development Officer on 4 April 2012
- Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall: the Chief of the Business Project Division of Crown Property Bureau and Operation Manager of Right Man Ltd. on 20 February 2012. Right Man Ltd. helped manage the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall.

In the United Kingdom, the author interviewed the following administrators:

- Victoria and Albert Museum: the Acting Team Leader, Digital Programs, Learning and Interpretation on

27 August 2013.

- Horniman Museum: the Schools Learning Manager, the Community Learning Manager, the Digital Media Manager, and the Keeper of Musical Instruments on 28 August 2013.

RESULTS

On-site digital interpretations inside the four museums

Museum of Siam. The permanent exhibition of the Museum of Siam, 17 galleries in all, is called “The Account of Thailand”. It presents the 3000-year history of Thailand, from early human settlement in the region of Suvarnabhumi, the Golden Land, until today. Visitors to these galleries are expected to learn how the ancestors of today’s Southeast Asia developed their societies, cities, and eventually countries. To convey the contents of its exhibits, the Museum utilizes an interactive and multi-disciplinary approach, such as hands-on exhibitions and audio-visual multimedia. Visitors discover knowledge in a playful way, such as through touching screens, beating drums, playing games, and excavating relics.

The Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall. An LED graphic sensor welcomes visitors to the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall. Each visitor then receives an audio guide, through which the tour guide introduces the contents of each gallery along two routes (exhibitions) of the REH. The first route consists of 13 galleries. They introduce visitors to the communities, arts, culture, tradition, and architectures of the Rattanakosin Era (current dynasty

of Thailand). The second route tells the evolution of Thai society – from its past as a water community to its cosmopolitan present. The galleries use various types of on-site digital interpretations, such as 360-degree screens and 4D theaters, virtual hosts, graphic sensors, touch screens, and photo-shot techniques.

Victoria and Albert Museum – the Furniture Gallery. The Furniture Gallery is the main gallery of the Museum to use digital interpretations. The gallery tells the story of furniture design and production from the 15th century until today. The main digital interpretations of the Gallery are digital labels, video presentations, and, most of all, interactive material tables. The digital labels use touch screens to replace text labels. The video presentations illustrate details, such as the production processes of making furniture. The interactive material tables ask visitors to touch sample materials on top of the tables. After visitors have touched one object, the tables will illustrate the distinctive features and texture of the material.

Horniman Gallery – the Music Gallery. The newly refurbished Music Gallery was inaugurated in 2002. The gallery displays more than 8000 examples of musical instruments. The new gallery features some of the latest on-site digital interpretations of the Museum, including showcases of screens and speakers for fieldwork videos associated with the displayed objects. However, the main feature is the three oval activator tables that enable visitors to select and listen to

the different sounds of a variety of musical instruments.

The role of the four museums

The two museum administrators of the Museum of Siam said its purpose was to provide visitors with a better understanding of the meaning of Thai-ness, Thailand, Thailand's neighbors, and the world at large. The Chief of the Business Project Division of the Crown Property Bureau said the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall was a Corporate Social Responsibility program intended to educate Thais – in particular, students and young people – to make them proud of their origin, history and country.

The Victoria and Albert Museum uses decorative arts to arouse the interests and engage the daily life of visitors in their search for art. The School Learning Manager of the Horniman Museum said its purpose was to guide visitors to better understand the world from the context of its environment, people, and culture.

Reasons for choosing on-site Digital Interpretations

To be relevant today. The museum administrators in Thailand saw the importance of using digital interpretations as giving relevance to today's visitors. However, they defined the meaning of 'relevance' slightly differently. For the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, 'relevance' means associating people's daily living with digital technology. Both the Chief of the Business Project Division and the Operation Manager stated, "The

Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall targets young people. They were brought up in the age of the computer. Hence, it is essential for the Hall to use digital interpretations to give them a sense of relevance".

The Museum of Siam defined 'relevance' as fitting to the characteristics of young people. The Museum Enterprise Manager stated, "Our target market is young people, who are active and curious. The Museum has to use interactive digital interpretations and the tactic of *Plearn* (playing and learning in Thai language) to arouse their curiosity of discovering knowledge to activate their learning".

In contrast, the museums in the United Kingdom saw the importance of using digital interpretations quite differently. According to the Acting Team Leader of the Victoria and Albert Museum, digital interpretations assist visitors to better understand the museum's displayed objects. He said, "The use of digital interpretations (inside the Furniture Gallery) is to give relevance to visitors the techniques of art and craft of the objects". The School Learning Manager and the Community Learning Manager of the Horniman Museum defined the purpose of digital interpretations as to create for visitors a sense of ownership and engagement with the objects inside the museum. They said, "To give visitors relevance is to link them with their living environment, physical geography and anthropology. It is through this linkage that visitors can

find the relevance of their relationship with the world and to have a better understanding of the world at large”.

To compete with other visitor attractions. Both the Museum Enterprise Manager of the Museum of Siam and Operation Manager of Right Man Ltd. saw the necessity of using digital interpretations to make their museums a visitor attraction. According to the Museum Enterprise Manager, “The basic concept of the Museum of Siam is a playground. The Museum is to arouse the curiosity of and bring enjoyment to museum visitors to compete against playgrounds of other nature such as theme parks”. The Operation Manager added, “Theme parks that use substantial digital technologies are traditionally considered main competitors of museums”. The Manager concluded, “To compete against competitors and to attract tourists to visit the REH, it is essential to use digital technology to enhance the attractiveness of the REH”.

In contrast to the two museum administrators in Thailand, the Acting Team Leader of the Victoria & Albert Museum said that the use of digital interpretations was not to give a ‘wow’ or new experience to museum visitors. He remarked, “If the main purpose of using digital technologies is to provide this experience, this will result in giving visitors a crass experience”. The School Learning Manager and Community Learning Manager of the Horniman Museum also felt that digital interpretations were not gimmicks to compete against other attractions. According to the adminis-

trators in the United Kingdom, digital interpretations facilitated dialogues between visitors and objects to help interpret the museums’ message.

To entice people to visit museums to learn. The target market of the two museums in Thailand is young people, in particular, students. Both the Museum Enterprise Manager of the Museum of Siam and the Operation Manager of Right Man Ltd believed digital interpretations were a good means to entice them to visit their museums. “Our visitors liked the presentation of the Hall (Ratanakosin Exhibition Hall). They gave us good comments, such as the visit was impressive and entertaining”, said the Operation Manager. “I am very sure that they will recommend their friends to visit us”, she added.

However, according to the Acting Team Leader of the Victoria & Albert Museum and the School Learning Manager of the Horniman Museum, digital interpretations were not tools to attract people to visit museums. They said that students were not their target market. The School Learning Manager of the Horniman Museum noted that students comprised only 5.5% of the museum’s visitors. She said that the Horniman Museum did not try to entice or force young people to visit the Museum, but to make museum visits one of their habits instead. “The Museum (Horniman Museum) has to approach parents to introduce more family-oriented programs and to build networks with community learning centers to encourage parents to bring their children to visit the

Museum”, she said.

To facilitate learning of visitors inside museums. According to the Museum Enterprise Manager and the Fund Development Officer of the Museum of Siam, digital interpretations were used to encourage visitors to involve themselves in the process of learning: “The Museum is a discovery museum that utilizes an interactive and multi-disciplinary approach. The approach is to trigger their (visitors) thoughts, induce their curiosity to ask questions and enhance their self-learning skills”. The Chief of Business Project Division and Operation Manager at REH believed that the use of digital interpretations could make visitors concentrate on the contents of exhibits.

The Acting Team Leader of the Victoria and Albert Museum said that the importance of digital interpretations was to help interpret objects: “The interpretations are to tell visitors information that visitors could not get by looking at objects”. He gave an example of a video that showed the techniques of making a piece of furniture inside the Furniture Gallery. He said that visitors could not get the details simply by looking at the piece. The Digital Media Manager and the Keeper of Musical Instruments of the Horniman Museum agreed with the suggestion that digital interpretation was to provide information that visitors could not get from simply looking at objects. The Keeper of the Music Gallery saw the importance of the activator tables inside the Music Gallery as helping visitors understand

the musical instruments: “Musical instruments could not let visitors know their sound. It is through these tables visitors can know these sound”. Apart from these, both the Acting Team Leader and the Digital Media Manager saw another usage of the interpretation – the necessity of applying the technology to mobile applications to facilitate orientations of visitors inside their museums.

DISCUSSION

The attitudes of the administrators in the two countries, Thailand and the United Kingdom, towards the role of digital interpretations differ, with these differences stemming from the differences in the sociocultural contexts in which the museums reside.

The Thai museum administrators ask visitors to look at the world from a micro perspective. They hope that museum visitors will better understand and appreciate their identity as a Thai, as well as their relationship with their country, Thailand. These administrators believe that through this identification, visitors will generate in themselves a sense of self-understanding and pride. In contrast, the UK administrators ask visitors to look at the world from a macro perspective. They hope that museum visitors will better understand their self-identity and the world, and their relationship with the world at large.

Museums use digital interpretations as a mediator to make visitors aware of and understand relationships. Tilden (2007) remarks the chief aim of interpretation is not to instruct,

but to provoke. The Resource Guides of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (2005, 1) writes, "Interpretation is the way you help a visitor engage with and make sense of experience". Museum interpretations are both a means to assist visitors and a process to help engage visitors understand messages of museums. The museum administrators in Thailand engage their audience by using interpretations to encourage visitors to visit their museums and arouse their curiosity to discover their relationship with the world. The administrators in the UK use the interpretations to assist visitors understand the content of exhibits. Through this understanding, visitors will then understand their relationship with the world.

The two groups of museums target different types of visitors. The two museums in Thailand target young people, in particular, students. The two museums in the United Kingdom target the general public. This difference might also affect the way these museum envision the role of digital technology.

In Thailand, the administrators, understanding that today's youth access many forms of digital entertainment, see the necessity of making use of digital interpretations to increase the attractiveness of their museums as destinations. Furthermore, knowing that Asians are not in the habit of visiting museums (Meechul, in Supachokeaueychai, 2007), they try to entice visitors by bringing excitement to their senses of sight, hearing, touch, and even smell.

The thinking of the Thai administrators echoes Vosniadou (2001), Professor of the Department of Philosophy and History of Science, the University of Athens. She writes that to encourage and help children learn, people have to look at the habits of children, who like to explore, understand, and master new things. Hein (1998) also agrees that children like to engage in fantasy play, investigate, and interact with objects. It is through a process of interaction that children "will be gratified with a sense of ownership" (Hein, 2000). This thinking helps explain why museum administrators use digital interpretations – to fit the exploratory nature of young people and arouse their curiosity to discover the world. John Burroughs, an American naturalist and nature essayist, once write: "Knowledge without love will not stick. If love comes first, knowledge is to follow" (in Sobel, n.d.).

In contrast to Asians who do not typically visit museums, the British are in the habit of visiting museums. Thirty seven percent of UK adults, over 17 million people, visit museums and galleries at least once a year, one of the highest proportions in Europe (NMDC et al., 2004). Hence, UK museum administrators do not see the necessity of using interpretations to attract visitors, in particular, young people. To attract the young, they ask parents to bring their children with them. Vosniadou (2001) said that learning is a social activity that it is mediated by and correlates with other people. Parents play the prime role in

encouraging children to visit museums and to interact with them inside museums. To these administrators, the primary role of the interpretations is to invite visitors to interact with exhibits inside museums – to give them information that they could not get by looking at the objects alone. This thinking echoes the findings of the British Audio Visual Society – people remember 10 percent of what they have read, but 90% of what they have said and done (Anne Fahy in Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). Furthermore, the UK administrators propose applying digital technology to upgrade mobile applications to inform visitors about locations and contents of galleries, exhibitions, and facilities inside their museums. This proposal echoes the suggestion of Hein (1998) and Dierking and Falk (in Tallon and Walker, 2008) to provide visitors with a degree of comfort and precise orientation.

This study has several limitations. First, while many types of museums exist, the study focused only on history, arts, and ethnography museums. Second, attitudes about the role of on-site digital interpretations might differ between science museums and art museums. Third, the sample size is small, so the views may not be truly representative.

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