Life Online exhibition, National Media Museum, Bradford, England

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Trying to capture something of the effervescence and transience of digital life in a permanent gallery is both bold and intensely challenging. That said, as the UKs national museum dedicated to media, it is crucial that the Bradford site both recognises and reflects our changing media ecology, tacking that challenge head on for, as the curators assert, 'The Internet has changed our lives forever'. *Life Online*, consisting of a permanent exhibition space in the museum foyer, and a temporary display area on the seventh floor, is a new step in the museum's ambition to 'make media come alive' in a way that resonates with the diversity of its visitors.[1]

The exhibition on the ground floor, designed by NRNDesign, documents and reflects upon the social, cultural, political and ethical impacts of life online, and features four distinct spaces. 'In The Beginning' presents an overview of how, when and under what circumstances the Internet was 'Born'. 'Into The World' outlines the creation of the Web and the ways in which the Internet became publicly accessible via the Web. 'Into Our Lives' demonstrates the ways in which the web has become ubiquitous in the daily lives of the many, and how it is implicated in the practices of their self-representation. Finally, 'Into The Future' explores the Internet's continuing evolution, and what its implications for our

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[1] Text projected on one of the plasma screens on entry to the Museum and on the website, 2013, 'Make Media Come Alive this summer', http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/PlanAVisit/Families/SummerHolidays.aspx [accessed 14th June 2013]

collective futures might be. In glass cabinets under visitors' feet, the various technologies of personal computing are presented in a linear and chronological display; their presence in the everyday-ness of daily life reflected as visitors casually walk over the top of them. *Life Online* (as would be expected) uses a variety of mixed media, including interactive touchscreens, games, QR codes, digital artworks (some collaborative), various audio/visual materials and an online mini-site.

A number of organizing questions underpin the narrative framework of this gallery and help structure the visitor experience. These are explicitly framed in interpretive panels from the exhibitions outset: How was the Internet built? What made the Internet popular? How does the Internet affect you? and What is the future of the Internet? Such questions offer scope for a chronological presentation of the 'fact' of the Internet, but also for exploring the fragility of visitors' relationship with it, and their understanding of its potentials. The former is well documented in the exhibition. The latter begs bolder exploration, not least of how individuals and communities are implicated in the Internet's futures.

In the permanent exhibition the history of the Internet is presented in impressive detail, with an international focus, lively and colourful display. This is a history that is not without contestation, but the material is handled well, not least with the important but nuanced distinction made between the history of the Internet, and the history of the World Wide Web.

It would have been easy to fall into a narrative firmly rooted in the inevitability of progress; one that renders the past as primitive in its technologies and world views, and the future as altogether more progressive. Such a technologically deterministic rhetoric of unbounded 'newness' would be unhelpful, patronising and potentially divisive, and is mostly avoided here, apart from a rather curious exhibit professing to demonstrate what life was like before the advent of the Internet. A handwritten letter is presented as a discoloured relic from another time (1941), a salutary reminder that to younger digital natives, it perhaps would be.

In the opening displays, there are a number of helpful and engaging interactive games which give the user an accessible and credible introduction to the complexities of the network, and also some large-scale artworks which encourage visitors to reflect on their attitudes toward data (and the self as data), in ways that are sensory, even overtly emotional. What use-value and beauty is to be found in the shift to a semantic web? Local artist Chris Kemm's work Status 2.0 pervades the downstairs display, using a sentiment analysis of Twitter to provide a coloured backdrop to visitors' experiences that corresponds to how the web 'feels' at that particular time. During my visit to the gallery the web was feeling decidedly cheeky (when, one wonders, is it not?).

The downstairs exhibition design highlights the difficulty of identifying, prioritizing and evaluating those voices we come across in the online environment. Throughout, quotations from leading scholars appear alongside members of the public in youtube, and a seemingly endless montage of small

portrait photos and corporate logos create a bricolage backdrop to the exhibition. Such a cacophony represents well the mishmash of images, the hubbub, and the noisy communications we encounter online.

Throughout the galleries, there are many insightful video resources, interviews and short films that visitors are provided ample opportunity to sample, and a number of QR codes are playfully presented which lead the curious into a rabbit warren of information and additional artistic works.

Whilst the downstairs gallery is compact, light and airy, with clear signposting and impressive graphical display, the upstairs gallery suffers rather from a sprawling aimlessness[2]. It is a cavernous space, yet sparsely occupied by some intriguing interactive artworks and resources related to net neutrality and ethics. There is a real opportunity here to explore larger questions about the democratic potentials of the web, link to citizenship agendas, and to spark a discussion about rights and responsibilities online (indeed, how these are often undermined by the corporate interests alluded to downstairs). However, the current iteration of this temporary display space does not enable or encourage visitors to engage with such questions in any structured or productive sense.

One of the major challenges of exhibiting a mobile and evolving phenomenon (perhaps even a revolution) in progress is how to keep information relevant and reflective of the realities of such changing spaces. Statistics for facebook users, Wikipedia pages, or the numbers of registered blogs, change with such rapidity

[2] When I visited the upstairs gallery featured the [open source] exhibition.

that to commit to them in exhibition text can seem fruitless if not misguided. The truest test of the permanent gallery will be how it changes in the coming years; the extent to which it is pre-disposed to be in a state of perpetual beta.

Likewise, the upstairs gallery should prove an interesting test case for how curators respond to and document visitors' rapidly changing attitudes toward ownership, materiality, access, the archive, and the very role of the curator, which digital media are so ably disrupting. The curators have an opportunity here to address these issues head on in ways that are creative and invigorating rather than defensive or stifling of debate about the future role and purpose of public collections. Without transparency and discussion however, such a gallery risks being seen as itself a relic and nothing more.

In sum, the *Life Online* galleries ably deal with some famously complex issues related to the Internet and World Wide Web. All of the important themes and facts are here. But drawing all of that together through provocative, insightful and playful programming and staging of the upstairs gallery might encourage visitors to think more about *their* role in the continuing evolution of the Internet. This would be more in keeping with the spaces and places of the web that this exhibition seeks to open up.

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