

Report on the ‘Multiplatforming’ Conference

Why Discuss Multiplatforming?

On Wednesday 19th May 2010, the University of York’s Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP) brought together a range of people working in the media and heritage institutions to talk with academics and students about the ways in which the past is packaged and presented in contemporary society. This one-day event was sponsored by York Museums Trust and the University’s own Department of Archaeology. The event was entitled “Packaging the Past for the Media: Communicating Across Museums, Television, Radio, And The Internet In A Multi-Platform Era”, and was in particular focussed on discussing the multifarious means of disseminating the past, across multiple different kinds of media simultaneously.



This notion, ‘multi-platforming’, itself deserves some remark, being perhaps for some an unfamiliar label, but we use it to describe a process that is becoming ever more commonplace within the packaging of the past especially across new and digital media. All of us, academics, heritage practitioners, media professionals, are becoming more and more aware of certain approaches being used by institutions, organisations, and even individuals when the past is being packaged for wider popular consumption. It is becoming increasingly common to look to disseminate, brand, or even sell, a particular product on more than one platform simultaneously. Major exhibitions at museums and galleries now frequently are cross-sold with television or radio documentaries. Television programmes themselves are increasingly pushing audiences towards high-profile and popularly-pitched book tie-ins; but, more importantly, both media and heritage organisations now need web presences, and these platforms are increasingly designed to promote participatory audience interaction.

Martin Davidson

Presenting the Past as TV Entertainment in an Era of Multi-Platforming



The day’s first speaker was Martin Davidson, Commissioning Editor for History and Business at the BBC, who gave a presentation entitled “Presenting the Past as TV Entertainment in an Era of Multi-Platforming”. He began by asking the audience to consider what was meant when the notion of a ‘package’ was under discussion: the packing and presentation around the central core of a narrative about the past, as framed in a media production, might be an attractive thing in itself, improving the presentation of the core element, or alternatively it might be something superfluous and soon-discarded in favour of the narrative that was being packaged. It was, he suggested, an apposite moment to take stock of the different kinds of packaging that programme-makers had developed and utilised over the course of the previous decade. If those of us who care about the past’s stories

and their media presentation shy away from this duty, and decide that we cannot become involved in the ways that the past is presented in the media, then it will be all the worse for everyone, because people less well equipped to tell those narratives, and who care less about them will certainly step in and do so; as such, even academics cannot eschew the public presentation of the past, because if they do, then others who are perhaps less trustworthy with important historical stories might well take charge themselves.

Before his survey of the previous decade, however, he asked the audience to step back with him to a moment when the packaging of narratives about the past were perhaps less sophisticated than they are now, and yet history on television was no less riveting. The audience was shown a clip of the Oxford historian AJP Taylor, being broadcast live as he gave a one-hour lecture on the Russian Revolution, on stage at the Golders Green Hippodrome in 1957. Taylor was perhaps the first 'television don', a man who succeeded through the pure verve of his narrative in making history exciting and interesting, in spite of a format that relied solely on him standing in front of a curtain, on stage, lecturing for an hour without notes. The final point made by Davidson about this format was that one might think that it was the result of a piece of high-brow BBC production, when in fact it was commissioned by Lew Grade, television popularist, and broadcast on ATV. Returning, then, to the issue of identifying the panoply of tools now being deployed by producers in the past ten years, Davidson argued that the years since 2000 really do mark a specific and distinct era in history broadcasting.



Justifying this chronological division, Davidson stated that there are two particular and noticeable changes that take place around the year 2000, to a certain extent rooted in economics, which go on to have a lasting and significant impact on the following decade of television production. The first of these key changes takes place in the twin world of academia and publishing, and saw a return to the 'Grand Narrative' in history story-telling. In the final decade of the twentieth century, both historians and publishers had largely abstained from writing (or selling) vast

sweeping authoritative narratives about the past, preferring instead to circle warily around smaller-scale dissections of bite-sized chunks of the past, perpetually armed with the tools of deconstructionism. When, in the years either side of 2000, several historians ventured forth into the market with large-scale-narrative books surveying the macro-past, the result was huge sales, and a demonstrable case that there was a public appetite for epic yet straight-forward books about the past.

The second key sea-change that happened around the same time took place in the realm of media production, and saw the rise of independent production companies. Previously, smaller production companies had worked for hire, employed by the broadcasters who owned the completed product; times began to change however, and increasingly production companies began to strike out on their own, producing material to which they retained the rights. This was an important change, because increasingly these independent production companies sought to develop a product idea in-house which was not necessarily developed with one particular

national market in mind, but instead would be applicable, and saleable, to a world-wide market. The search was on, therefore, for formats rather than one-off products, which could be translated and marketed worldwide. The further result of this was a rise in history-entertainment hybrids (such as Wall to Wall production's *The 1900s House* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*), which were particularly marketable. These two trends are not necessarily contradictory, but together they have definitively shaped a decades-worth of television history.

Davidson concluded (with the aid of a showreel of history television clips) with a survey of the tools that producers have developed over the last ten years or so, to give some idea of the extraordinary range of styles that have been developed in order to package narratives about the past: The single narrator history does still exist (most especially, perhaps, in the figure of Simon Schama), so some things have not changed so much, but in addition to this, producers have got better at using archive film mixed with oral testimony (especially with regards to *The Second World War*, and in particular, Laurence Rees' *The Nazis: a Warning from History* and *Behind Closed Doors*) and oral testimony, although both of these techniques are obviously only useful for modern and contemporary history. Living History has become particularly attractive, due to the fact that it involves doing rather than simple telling, and to watch a participant try to grapple with nineteenth-century cheese-making in *The Victorian Farm*, for example, gives the viewer a much more immersive experience of the past.

Perhaps analogous to this is the reconstruction, although this also has moved towards the sub-genre of the drama documentary, in which talking head-style discussions of the past are married with costumed recreations of the events under discussion. Genealogical programmes have provided a particularly rich seam of emotion, and *Who Do You Think You Are?* in particular has provided audiences with more nuanced understandings of the past by giving massive historical issues, such as the Holocaust or the Armenian Genocide, a human perspective. Its episode featuring Jeremy Paxman, for example, was one of those moments when the injection of emotion into a historical narrative really made a difference because it allowed a viewer to gain a personal perspective on large, sweeping issues. Finally, technology is also increasingly able to deliver the sense of spectacle to audiences: computer graphics can give an epic, 'shock-and-awe' perspective on war stories, for example, at a relatively low cost.



In conclusion, Davidson argued that programme-makers have learnt a great deal in the past ten years: that they have to frequently frame programmes around both questions and ideas – they have to explain to the audience why a particular topic or subject is interesting – and that emotion can be successfully marshalled to increase interest. Latent curiosity exists in us all; a good history producer will target that, and sate it by a skilful packaging of an interesting narrative. The concept of narrative in particular is key here, because a compelling story will always grab attention. Multi-platforming in particular can be useful here, because it allows a television programme to remain on a wider scale, with the accompanying internet sites to provide the deeper focus for those who are particularly interested. Thus, as ever, broadcasters are interested in the business of content, and finding the most suitable platform for any one particular format. Good programming should use any and all of the tools available to encourage and sustain the audience's interest.

Lucy Worsley

Producing the Past as Anniversary: Henry VIII on Display, on Screen, and on Sale



The second speaker was Lucy Worsley, Chief Curator at the Historic Royal Palaces. In a presentation entitled “Producing the Past as Anniversary: Henry VIII on Display, on Screen, and on Sale”, she reflected upon the changes made to Hampton Court Palace recently, as the institution seeks to widen and expand their audience base. It was realised in 2005 that the year 2009 would mark an important anniversary with regards to Henry VIII: 500 years since he ascended the throne. Audience research conducted with members of the public determined, perhaps oddly, that there was a closer association between this monarch and the Tower of London than there was with Hampton Court, despite the latter being his favoured residence and the best-preserved Tudor palace in the country, and the former having no contemporary material surviving from Henry’s reign. Armed with this knowledge, and

with the findings of focus groups that indicated that Hampton Court was largely not considered to be sufficiently child-friendly and therefore not a suitable destination for a family-oriented visit, the curatorial and marketing teams set about thinking how to shift what was on offer at the site, in order to make it more appealing for families. The result was a paired set of exhibitions to celebrate Henry’s anniversary: *Dressed to Kill*, at the Tower of London, in partnership with the Royal Armouries, and *Heads and Hearts* at Hampton Court, which emphasised his romantic life and its myriad entanglements.

Much of the multi-platform television content that went on to accompany the anniversary did not directly happen in partnership with Royal Historic Palaces: it went on around them, and certainly they benefited from much of it, but there was a complex web of partnerships between different media organisations, production companies, heritage organisations, and academics, and Hampton Court was but one node in this complex network. Despite this occasionally haphazard web of collaborations, all of the outputs were ultimately of benefit to Hampton Court, because of the increased visibility of Henry VIII and the Tudors, and it channelled or directed people towards the location.



In terms of their audience, the organisation determined that they wanted to expand their family-offer from those who would come for the cultural attraction, to those who would view Hampton Court as a leisure attraction. For many of these families that Hampton Court was seeking to attract, a key piece of learning was that the admissions price was not a barrier to them; the prime factor was that their children would not be sufficiently entertained or catered to, and learning this fact played a central role in their reconsideration of the whole visitor experience at Hampton Court. In deciding how best to frame this reorientation of the site, there was much anguished internal discussion about which of the numerous narratives about Henry should be central. The final decision was to focus on his (final) wedding day, and his marriage

to Catherine Parr, so that when visitors arrive, that particular event is re-enacted for them with costumed actors playing the parts at different events staged throughout the day's proceedings.

In order to help with their audience engagement research, Hampton Court was able to enter into partnerships with two universities: a collaboration with Kingston University provided them with information that enabled a redesign of their wardens uniforms based on Tudor originals, and a project in partnership with Manchester University allowed them to temporarily redisplay parts of their tapestry collection, with a coloured light-show projected onto the art showing its original colours.



One of the major underlying redevelopment themes has been the introduction of a defined narrative into the exhibits, something that took place very much under the influence of Robert McKee's 'Story Seminar'. This was attended by staff of the Historic Royal Palaces, in order that they might better package their heritage experience for the visitor as a narrative journey with a human interest story at its heart. Worsley ultimately reflected that despite some reservations that a celebrity-centred, narrative-driven, focus might end up rejecting large amounts of interesting and informative material about a site, a concomitant increase in visitors is something that is of great overall benefit to a building's fabric. She stressed the importance of a heritage institution's website that conveys information, as well as providing ticket-bookings and retail sales, and stressed that the curatorial role of

any academic at a popular heritage attraction is very much a case of 'squaring a circle': finding a whole range of suitable and appropriate compromises that will allow a historic venue to be popular, and therefore generate precisely the kind of income and revenue that will provide for the building's upkeep in years to come, whilst yet retaining at its core historical realities that are carefully packaged within a compelling (and inevitably human interest) narrative.

Panel Discussion

A History of the World in 100 Objects: the Unity and Diversity of Multi-Platforming Material Culture in Media and Museums

Subsequent to the two keynote addresses given by Martin Davidson and Lucy Worsley, two panel sessions were designed to facilitate discussion, and to widen the scope of the conference's examination of the issue of multi-platforming stories about the past. The focus of the first panel, introduced by Julian Richards, head of the Department of Archaeology, was the ongoing collaborative venture A History of the World in 100 Objects, a partnership initially between the British Museum and the BBC, founded on a 100-episode Radio 4 series, written and presented by the Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor.

The project seeks to tell a global story of human history through material culture, and not the very least of its undertakings is to present those material objects through which the story is told via



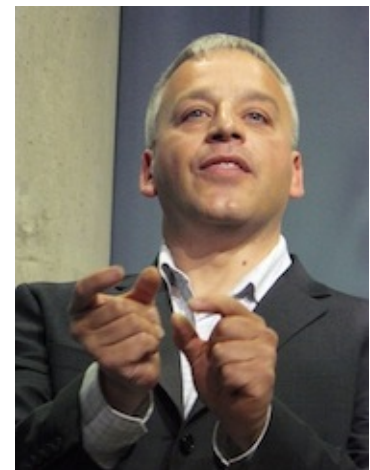
the medium of radio. A History of the World in 100 Objects (known in 'the trade' as AHOW) is not satisfied with merely situating this adventure through history and prehistory at a national level; instead, it is choosing to involve a range of local and regional partners, both in the media and in museums, enabling a range of stories to be told that tie the local and the global together in exciting and innovative ways. Yet this desire to create narratives that are unfolding on a number of different levels simultaneously does not stop there, as the project has launched a massive web-platform which is running alongside the exhibitions and radio and television programmes. Key to the success of this element is its participatory framework, which allows users to engage and offer their own objects and accompanying narratives. This draws them in to the spirit of the project and creates a truly interactive history experience on the internet.



The panel consisted of: J.D. Hill, Research Manager at the British Museum; Frances Carey, Senior Consultant for Public Engagement at the British Museum; and Daniel Dodd, Head of Interactive for Nations and English Regions at BBC Online. J.D. Hill began by stressing that this was a complex project right from its earliest inceptions. The partners, and the platforms through which they operate, had very different needs, locations, and outputs. Crucially, each also had a very different range of timescales in terms of their planning and execution schedules. In addition, he estimated, getting two massive publicly-funded organisations to work together non-commercially to produce something for the public good took in the region of 18-months worth of lawyer's work. Recalling the very earliest thoughts on the project, Hill said that AHOW began with the British Museum asking itself questions about its own role in

society: what is a national museum, and what does one do? Similarly, what is the role of a world museum, and how does it tell its global stories? AHOW was a project that remained committed to exploring the power of objects, using a selection of them to unlock a history of the entire world, and transmitting to the audience the place and the role of objects in telling stories of both the deep and recent pasts.

Another prime driver in the British Museum's dissemination strategy was to try to better understand how to get the kinds of programmes made that they, in the Museum, wanted to see get made. The answer, of course, was to be proactive in the production, and thus the Radio 4 series became a fundamental part of the partnership project. Subsequently, other potential partners approached them, not least CBBC, with their request to try to find some way of dovetailing a children's TV series with the wider project (resulting in Relic: Guardians of the Museum). Yet all through this process, the team ask themselves how the proliferation of partners and platforms affects the cohesion of the overall project, or dilutes its core values.



All partners, all organisations, have their own priorities, objectives, audiences, and particular ways of working, and a successful multi-platform partnership will include and allow for all of these different variables, without comprising the overall direction of the larger project. One other factor to bear in mind, Hill suggested, with these kinds of projects was to wonder whether or not there was an incentive to drive people across platforms, from one to another. With AHOW, the suggestion was that they did not expect much click-through between, say,

Radio 4 and CBBC (or vice versa), and it was never the intention of the British Museum to push or pull people from one to the next; rather the focus was on providing a good experience for the audience at every platform on which they experienced AHOW. Ultimately, he concluded, one can have as many platforms as one likes: the story remains only as good as its teller, and each story needs to be told in a different way to fit the platform on which it is being told.

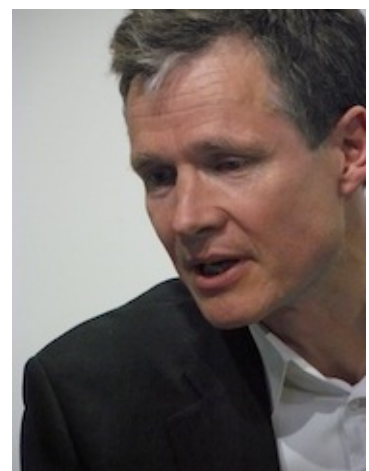


Next Frances Carey, Senior Consultant for Public Engagement at the British Museum, discussed the participatory element of AHOW, and especially how interactivity has not been restricted to the AHOW web-site alone but has also taken place at a series of live events linked to the project, which are running over the course of this year. From an early stage, it had been decided that AHOW's heritage element would not be restricted to the British Museum, as the network of local regions would be invited to participate. Each designated BBC 'region' (of which there are 57 in total) would be invited to nominate their own ten objects that tells a regional story. No museum was considered too small to be asked to participate, and Cathedrals and Historic Houses are also being asked to participate. Many of the regions are selecting objects that reflected the diversity of the contemporary

region's population, and there is, Carey reflected, no museum in the land which would say that its collection is purely regional: even local objects can tell a global story.

Alongside this network of local museums, individual member of the public are invited to submit their own objects to the project website, and using the on-line forms, tell a story about that particular item. Many of the objects chosen, from both museums and by members of the public, are profoundly interesting, and tell symbolic stories above and beyond their intrinsic materiality (such as a bolt from the crematoriums at Bergen-Belsen). In general, the participatory-side of the project has been wildly successful, with an extremely popular and populated website, regional radio programmes, numerous live events held in regional museums throughout the country, a Schools-outreach programme with notable successes, and an Antiques Roadshow crossover. All of these have proved a public appetite for precisely this kind of multi-platform, participatory way of exploring and disseminating stories about the past.

Daniel Dodd, Head of Interactive for Nations and English Regions at BBC Online, concluded the panel, and began by asking how a project such as AHOW drives engagement? This is a challenge, because the traditional means of telling or showing content or information about the past is one thing, but drawing the audiences to that material, interacting with it, and then generating content of their own is something else entirely. Although interactivity has a long history at the BBC which continues in the present, from phone-ins to message boards, AHOW needs to draw in engagement across a whole year as the series develops. In particular, though, planning needs to be implemented which considers the legacy of the project, and what the web-presence will look like in the years after the series ends. It needs to be brought within the BBC's much larger History website, and still maintained, because there remains a desire for interest and activity to continue beyond the end of the series itself. It is, of course, the website itself that allows AHOW to go beyond the simple 100 objects described in the project's original Radio 4



title, as it invites people to submit their own objects, as well as showing them the ones selected by regional networks of museums and BBC stations in their area.



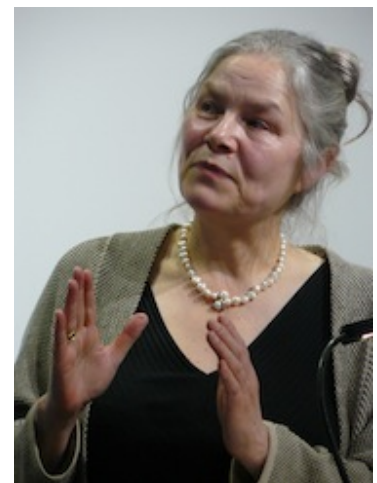
Key to this is the idea of a virtual museum, one that can grow and grow, but yet one that is dovetailed with events taking place in the world itself. Sustaining interest by putting on local events, which prompts people to add their own objects, which creates ever-expanding user-generated content, is ultimately what encourages people to come back and revisit the site, long after the series is finished. Thus the question about how to drive and encourage engagement is absolutely central to AHOW, beyond the span of the radio series: if you encourage people to create their own content, this means the website keeps expanding its content, which keeps people returning to the site, which in turn stimulates new users to submit their own new content, and a kind of feedback loop of engagement and content-generation is the hoped-for result. Inside a much larger, wider picture, the BBC

hopes to corral its resources in the future in the very areas in which it has become a global leader, and in this particular example, its high-quality and resource-rich historical content, reaching out to a global audience to tell a story that at once holds the attention and encourages participation.

Panel Discussion

The Impact of ‘Impact’: Multi-Platforming and Making a Difference Beyond Academia

The concluding panel of the conference tackled the question of the wider impact of academic research, especially of those academics working in partnership with people in heritage or media organisations, and it ultimately asked whether or not the key to engaging a wider audience with academic work on the past might in fact lie with the multi-platform approach. First to speak was Janet Barnes, Chief Executive of York Museums Trust (YMT). She gave an overview of her own organisation, and described how even a medium-sized heritage institution such as YMT, with four main arts and heritage locations in the city, has a workforce that finds time for research an extreme luxury. Much of the work that goes on in the heritage sector is concerned with the day-to-day curation and organisation of collections, and time for new research is very difficult to obtain. One potential answer to this problem is to work in partnership with academics, who might be stimulated to work with material or collections of national importance right on their own local doorstep. Together, joint bids for funding (such as Knowledge Transfer grants, or Collaborative Doctoral Awards) might be successful because they demonstrate that the academic work will have an appreciable and direct impact on a local heritage partner’s displays or collections.





Next to speak was Jake Gilmore, Communications Officer at the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who began by admitting that indeed a research grant was frequently extremely difficult to win if one was an academic, but that a partnership-style approach may be one pathway towards a successful application. Needless to say, only the very best research can ever hope to be funded, so demonstrations of social impact are neither guarantees of funding, or are even requirements, but increasingly explanations of what the social or cultural impact of a particular humanities project are being required by funding bodies. Sometimes, the management of press and the creation of interest in academic work is one particularly fruitful means of demonstrating to the wider public that the research is important, interesting, and can have an impact on people's lives. Beyond this, though, the impact agenda offers academics a real opportunity to forge and

maintain good equitable working partnerships with heritage or media organisations outside of the university-system, who may offer a route to the dissemination of research into wider social circles, and allow the academic to reflect on the place and role of their research findings in wider society.

The concluding paper of the day was given by Jonathan Glasspool, Managing Editor of Bloomsbury Academic publishers. He spoke about the difficult years ahead for the traditional forms of academic publishing, as not only are the book-purchasing budgets of universities likely to be diminishing in the next few years, but the competition from e-books and both legal and illegal forms of dissemination via the internet will increase at the same time. A new business model is necessary, he suggested, and Bloomsbury Academic are considering ways of meeting both of these problems, whilst offering students and academics the continued means of accessing books in traditional forms, if they so chose, whilst retaining high editorial standards. The new model Bloomsbury has devised proposes to offer the textual content of the academic volumes it publishes for free, via a sophisticated on-line portal, and on a Creative Commons licence; it will offer readers the chance to purchase the text in a variety of other take-home formats, including e-books for Kindle and other readers, and a print-on-demand option for an actual bound copy of the book to be mailed to them. It will also, where appropriate, offer a suite of added extras to accompany the text, as paid-for add-on content; this might include research data, or video or audio interviews. All of this, suggested Glasspool, was an exciting new venture which would test whether or not there remained a place for solid academic research to be published in an age of digital multi-platforms.



IPUP explores the role of the past in everyday life, with a mission to establish and embed new methodologies relating to understandings of the past through discussion and collaborative projects, and to explore the ways in which audiences in general engage with the past. This Packaging the Past event was the second in an ongoing series of conferences which will



consider the relationship between the past and public realm. The next event will take place on 18 May 2011, in partnership with the Department of Archaeology, entitled "Archaeology and the Material Past in the Public Realm". Issues to be discussed will include community archaeology programmes and the links between local populations and excavations nearby, the role and meaning of archaeologists in modern popular culture, and also the relationship between the past's material remains and the present's imagination. For all enquiries relating to this forthcoming conference, please contact [ipup-enquiries@york.ac.uk](mailto:contactipup-enquiries@york.ac.uk).

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