INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF ONLINE MUSEUM VISITORS

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Agenda

Case study: information seeking and searching behaviour

Selected findings on user interest and motivation

Next steps
Background and motivation

- Museums are embedded with technology
- Museum collections are made accessible online
- Comprehensive studies of remote access to museum collections are few and scattered
- **A user-centred approach**: In order to create improved digital access to museum resources it is important to improve our knowledge of the information seeking behaviour of online museum visitors including the social and cultural context surrounding them.
Objective of case study

• Case study at the National Museum of Military History in Copenhagen and their online collection (Skov, 2009; 2013)
• Characteristics of online museum visitors’ information seeking and searching behaviour:
  – *why* online museum collections are used, and
  – *how* users interact with online museum collections
• Focus is on what Booth (1998) denotes special interest museum visitors and Falk (2006) denotes the professional / hobbyist
Methodological approach

• Exploratory case study at the National Museum of Military History in Copenhagen and their online collection

• Triangulation of data collection methods
  – Analysis of written enquiries
  – Online questionnaire survey
  – User study:
    • Part 1: Simulated search task situations + retrospective think-aloud sessions
    • Part 2: Qualitative interviews
Results: user characteristics and information needs

• Participants are special interest museum visitors pursuing a long-standing interest or hobby

• Two groups of hobbyists were identified:
  – Collectors: ‘…develop a technical knowledge of the commercial, social, and physical circumstances in which their fancied items are acquired’ (Stebbins, 1982, p. 261).
  – Liberal arts enthusiasts: ‘…the systematic and fervent pursuit during free time of knowledge for its own sake’ (Stebbins 1994, p. 175).

• The information needs identified in the interviews were surprisingly well-defined. The majority were known-item information needs.

• However, 30% of questionnaire respondents were not looking for anything specific
Interest areas of hobbyists: collectors

A collector defines his interest area:

“The historical eras [in the collection database] suggest that you are interested in a historical period. That you interested in the political situation and from there you orient yourself towards the detail level of objects. My interest goes the other way around. I become fascinated by an object and start by examining the object and then I look into how it has been used and its historical relations”.

Interest areas of hobbyists: collectors

An *liberal art enthusiasts* defines his interest area:

“I’m interested in military history from a general historic point of view. That is, how the military history development affected the general history development. Besides that, I’m interested in German military history from 1700 and forward. I would say… social and structural war history and its influence. […] Objects become interesting because they help explain how some weapons, that apparently were judged decisive, were used.”
“Never ask a collector, why he collects. He doesn’t know. That is just the way it is. There is something fascinating about it.” (Participant O).

“I have collected objects since I was a small boy. I have also collected stamps. I have collected everything. […] Over the years I have changed focus and I have been interested in many things. I have collected English objects, Scottish and German objects – not 1939-45 – but the First World War and earlier. […] At one time, I collected objects from both the army and the marine, but that was too much. I had 350 caps, I had uniforms, 100 military decorations, badges and buttons, a collection of military photographs and other military papers and all sorts of things…” (Participant M).
Results: preferred data elements

- Preferred data elements
  - Strong visual aspect: ‘photograph of museum object’ is the most often mentioned data element
  - *Collectors* need mainly factual object-related information, photographs, and provenience information
  - *Liberal arts enthusiasts* need various types of information including associated historic context information
Results: information sources and channels

- A variety of information sources are used
- **Personal channels** and the social context of the hobby are highly important
- The physical and virtual museums are complementary
Results: Information searching behaviour

- **Broad known item/element search**
  - Broad search terms
  - High recall important and low precision accepted

- **Exploratory behaviour**
  - Topical searching is predominant
  - None goal directed browsing
  - Serendipity: finding the unexpected
  - Looking for the missing piece in the puzzle

- **Highly visual experience**
  - Photos are the most important feature
  - Used as browsing, identification, selection, and zooming device

- **Meaning making**
  - Following your own path
  - Making implicit features of information explicit
  - Making connections: how do items relate and differentiate
  - Reuse of information and photographs in other contexts

(Skov, 2009, p. 192)
Concluding remarks

• Participants’ dedication, long-standing interests, and the often considerable time spent on the hobby indicate that their hobbies are integrated components of everyday practices.

• The two identified hobby classes have distinct profiles including the nature of knowledge acquisition.
  – Objects are collectors’ primary interest, while the historical context is secondary.
  – Liberal arts enthusiasts, on the other hand, define their hobby as a broader historical interest, while the objects are secondary.

• When designing museum information systems: Important to support both browsing, keyword search and serendipitous discoveries, and the strong visual aspect of searching digitalized museum collections.
Online user motivation and engagement

- CLEF Conference 2013 – CHiC interactive track
- Focus on user motivation and engagement
- Quantitative and qualitative data from:
  - 200 online questionnaires (160 online + 40 in-lab respondents)
  - Follow-up interviews after task completion (10 in-lab respondents)
# Categorization of participants’ motivation

Why did participants look for particular objects and add them to the “Bookbag”? (n = 222 user statements)

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<tr>
<th>User motivation</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| Personal interest                      | 41.0| “An interest in Engineering and Technology history.”  
“I like very much Titian and I consider this painting one of his master pieces”.      |
| My family/university/city/country/…    | 14.9| “Minery is a very important activity in my country so the Bilston Glen coal mine picture represents this interest”  
“I live in Cornwall, and so was interested to see the areas I know as they used to look”. |
| Aesthetics or visual experience        | 13.5| “Aesthetically pleasing - nice hues.”  
“While exploring, I saw the first one and it just looked beautiful so I saved it”.       |
| Curiosity, serendipity, surprise, etc. | 10.8| “I was just browsing and found these, and they happened to catch my attention”.  
“Hunting for old objects is interesting”.                                                   |
### Categorization of participants’ motivation (continued)

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<tr>
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<th>Examples</th>
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| Places that I have visited/are going to visit         | 9.0| “The second image because Slate mines in Wales look like this when it rains and it reminded me of a happy but very wet holiday”.  
“The images of India I chose because they reminded me of my trip to India.” |
| Study or work related interest                        | 7.7| “My research and teaching area is the early medieval period, and I am always on the lookout for useful images/resources…”  
“Potential topic for an essay”                                           |
| Other                                                 | 3.2| “I wanted to show my son”  
“I am a Bowie fan and thinking of going to the exhibition in London that is on at the moment so wondered if there were any good pictures of him” |
Next steps…

• Understand motivation of online users
• … and how this impact on the way users interact with online museum content and resources
Thank you for your attention

Questions?
References

• Skov, M. & Ingwersen, P. (forthcoming). Museum web search behavior of special interest visitors. Library and Information Science Research