Involving People

Online exhibitions: a great way to promote your collection

(Edited notes taken from a presentation by Vicki Court at a Museums Australia (Victoria) seminar, Online exhibitions – writing for the web, in April 2008.
The presentation used examples of two online exhibitions to show how online exhibitions can promote historical society collections.)

A large number of historical societies now have websites. Websites provide the opportunity for historical societies to promote their organisations and their collections. However many of the websites are static with the content rarely changing.

An online exhibition may be created, as an extension of the basic website, in order to promote a section of the collection or to tell the story of an event, family or organisation. Online exhibitions can also serve as an addition to or extension of a physical exhibition. In 2007 and 2008 four online exhibitions were added to the RHSV website - www.historyvictoria.org.au.

➢ *Woodbury Panorama 1855*
➢ *Travellers' Tales: Photography, Travel & the Proliferation of the Postcard*
➢ *MacRobertson's Round Australia Expedition 1928*
➢ *The WCTU & the 1891 Woman's Petition.*

These online exhibitions were created using standard, readily available, software and equipment. Guidelines for creating online exhibitions are described in a blog - *Information technology and local history* - http://itlochist.blogspot.com.

An example of a small online exhibition is *Woodbury Panorama 1855* – http://210.15.209.254/Woodbury/woodbury.html – which showcases four images providing an interesting portrayal of Melbourne in 1855. Walter Woodbury made a series of four collodion "wet plate" photographs from the top of the Gasworks chimney. The Royal Historical Society of Victoria holds four glass negatives in the Image Collection which appear to have been made from matted copies of the photographs taken by Woodbury.

Copies of the images were included in an exhibition held originally in conjunction with a conference on life in Melbourne in the mid 1850s.

Buildings in each image were identified and noted in the images used for the exhibition. Research was undertaken to establish where the original images were taken from and permission gained to enter a room in a high rise building in the Docklands area to photograph the same area as it is today.

Information was located in an article in *The Argus* describing the opening of the chimney from which the photographs were taken. Biographical information was researched about the photographer, Walter Woodbury, and also James Kearney who produced a map of Melbourne in the mid 1850s. Sections of the map can also be viewed in the online exhibition.

Research was also undertaken about the buildings identified in the photographs. All this information was then assembled to create an online exhibition which used resources from the RHSV collection to provide a snapshot of the development of Melbourne in 1855.

Online exhibitions are a useful way of telling a story.
Like any exhibition there are a number of tasks to be undertaken:

➢ Planning
➢ Resources available
➢ Research
➢ Story board
➢ Designing the pages
➢ Putting it all together
➢ Checking the end product

The following section looks at how these tasks relate to the development of an online exhibition.

Planning
The online exhibition, *MacRobertson's Round Australia Expedition 1928 –* http://www.historyvictoria.org.au/MacRobIntro.html – took two years to develop. It was created to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the expedition, consisting of two trucks, an Oldsmobile and 12 men, which left Melbourne in April 1928 for a five month journey around Australia. As well as telling an interesting and special story the online exhibition provided an opportunity to promote a special collection held at the RHSV. As the aim of the exhibition was to run parallel to the time-line of the journey undertaken in 1928 it had to be ready to go online by the corresponding day that the expedition left Melbourne eighty years earlier.

Resources available
The RHSV collection includes an archive of photographs, papers and memorabilia relating to the business and other interests of MacPherson Robertson. The collection includes albums of photographs taken during the expedition as well as carbon copies of typed notes as well as newspaper articles providing information about the five month journey.

Using the information from these resources the story of the expedition, the challenges faced by the expedition party and their view of the often remote parts of Australia visited is portrayed in this online exhibition.

Photographs from the albums were scanned. Normally images for Internet projects are resaved as 72 dpi jpg images but as the original images were small, for this project they were resaved as150 dpi jpg images for Internet use. A thumbnail program - Easy Thumbnails - was used to ensure all the images were no wider or longer than 350 pixels.

The story of the expedition was told from two sources - a carbon copy of daily notes on the progress of the expedition prepared for MacPherson Robertson and newspaper cuttings reporting on the expedition published throughout Australia.

As the typed notes were blurry and at the time we only had an old elementary entry OCR program, transcriptions were made of the notes and the entries for each day were entered into a database (DB/TextWorks). Report forms were created so that the records could be read chronologically. When there was an image that related to the daily record it was included.

The RHSV is able to publish DB/TextWorks databases online but if there was not that facility it would have been possible to save sections of the records as html files to include in the online exhibition.

Information from the notes and the newspaper articles were used to provide a summary of the expedition and together with the images tell the story of the journey in html pages.

Research
Much of the research was carried using the items in the collection. The large scrapbooks of cuttings provided a wealth of information. Books about Mac Robinson were read. The Internet also helped provide additional information. In the initial stages time was spent carrying out additional research checking background information about people met during the journey, events described plus information about other expeditions undertaken in the 1920s. Not all of this information could be included. For this project choosing the material to use and to leave out was a major consideration.

Storyboarding
Story-boarding this online exhibition was relatively straight forward. The main section is the story of the expedition which is divided into eight stages - Melbourne to Adelaide, Adelaide to Perth, Perth to Broome etc. A number of pages cover each stage and much of the story is told using images from the albums. In the early stages of the trip only a few photographs were taken but further into the trip many images were taken of sites of interest. In this case a link to a separate page provides more detailed information about the town or event.

The introduction section provides background information about the expedition and also information about material used for the online exhibition.

The daily reports section provides access to the actual reports made by the expedition party regarding the journey and can be read in stages or searches can be made for specific information using the Advanced Search option of the database in which the pages of the daily reports are stored.

Other sections of the website include information about MacPherson Robertson and also about his confectionary business using a selection of images from the boxes of glass negatives in the MacPherson Robertson archive. The further information section includes a bibliography and links to websites relating to MacPherson Robertson.

Designing the pages
For this project the web pages used for the online expedition were all created from original html but web design software could have been used. A template page was created with text and images added as required. The design of the online exhibition was kept relatively simple

using tables. The background colour was the same for all pages with the colour of the borders changing for each section of the expedition. A cascading style sheet controlled the uniformity of style and size of print throughout the site. A small version of the MacRobertson map, located in the top left hand corner of each page, serves as the link back to the home page.

On the first page options for navigating the site include a map of the expedition containing links to the beginning of each stage and hypertext links to each stage beneath the map.

The information about the expedition was to be progressively added to the web pages and database following the timeline of the original journey eighty years before. The first stage was added on 12 April, the second stage on 18 April etc. Stage links became 'live' as each new stage was added.

A major challenge when designing anything for the web is that those viewing the pages use different browsers. The pages were checked in Internet Explorer and in Mozilla Firefox browsers and a number of alterations were required before the pages would work as required in both browsers.

Web users also often change the settings on their computers resulting in print on the screen being a different size from that envisaged by the web designer. It is rather disconcerting to view pages that work well on one computer screen not looking as designed on another screen (even using the same browser) because the screen settings have been changed from the default.

Putting it all together

A number of options were tried when it came to putting the material together. Initially the story was summarised with the emphasis on the images but increasingly the words of the participants from the text of the daily reports was used to tell the story. That is when the decision was made to make the complete text of the journey available in a database and use the images and a summary of the text to tell the story in the main section of the online exhibition.

Checking the end product

Checking the content is an ongoing process, especially checking that the hyperlinks link to the correct pages. The pages have been read and reread to try to eliminate typing and other errors. Misspelling the word expedition in the main heading and then cutting and pasting the error for multiple pages was an initial embarrassing error. At least it is easier to make minor alterations to an online exhibition than in a traditional exhibition.

Like any exhibition, developing an online exhibition is a team project requiring considerable planning, research and preparation before the actual creation of the website can begin. It is important throughout the project to keep in mind the central framework of the project and of the story being told.