

A journey into the lost web

by Giancarlo Buzzanca

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Description of research theme

The idea behind this proposal is to reconstruct the history of the web (relating to the early years of development 1993-1995) in the sector of the figurative arts and the preservation of cultural assets. Given the rapid development of the web, this valuable information is gradually being lost without anyone being aware of how important it is. (The birth of the web has already been well researched¹; it came into being at CERN in Geneva as a communication tool for particle physicists.)

The first aim of this project is to slow down the loss of information. The use of web technology in the world of the arts began slowly around 1993, but increased to breakneck speed in the following years. Since the whole subject has never been examined in detail, the idea is to reconstruct the early phases by tracing pioneer work, documents, the people involved and their memories. The research area would include websites available to the general public, dealing with the humanities, the arts and the preservation² of cultural assets.

A reference point was the *World's First International WWW Conference*³ held at CERN in Geneva, May 1994. The conference, attended by around 400 users and developers, was held just a year after the launch of the first web applications, and included the prize Best of the Web '94⁴.

¹ See annexed bibliography

² <http://www.w3.org/History/1989/proposal.html>

³ <http://www94.web.cern.ch/WWW94/>. The Conference was described as the "Woodstock of the Web" and received wide media coverage. The slides that Tim Berners Lee presented can be seen at: <http://www.w3.org/Talks/WWW94Tim/>

⁴ <http://botw.org/1994/index.html>

The second conference⁵, with 1,300 participants, was held in October of the same year, and one of the thirty session themes was devoted to museums. It is certainly possible to reconstruct the story of these two events fairly accurately, and from these fixed points to research the first projects (sites, content, people) that were launched on the web (using bibliographic and non-conventional web sources).

In addition, we are lucky enough to have a draft history of the web, dealing only with museum sites, thanks to an ICOM discussion list:

*By 1993 museums had started to place collection-based and other information on the Internet. (...) Museums and their collections played an important part as a test-bed in the development of web technology and in its early applications.*⁶

Case study: Getty Art and History Program

The website for the Art and History Program (AHIP) was one of the first to be launched.

The first official information on the Getty website (technical features and objectives) can be garnered from several articles online written by Ben Davis, one of the technical supervisors of the Getty website, and webmaster in the second half of the 1990s. The first Getty website went online in 1993 and was an experiment to better understand the potential of the web for distributing information in the fields of history and art. The stated aim was to encourage the growth of the community of restorers, as well as researchers, specialists and students, by creating a website that was graphically stimulating, and that contained up-to-date information which could be rapidly modified so as to be always interesting for users.

Thanks to its layout and well-organized information, the Getty website was able to offer a wide variety of databases, all accessible to external users.⁷

⁵ <http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/IT94/IT94Info-old.html>

⁶ the list's postings can be viewed at the url <http://home.ease.lsoft.com/archives/museum-l.html>

But the AHIP's and the Conservation Institute's websites can only be described (on the basis of currently available information) because, as things stand, it is difficult to know whether copies of the website's early programs and official versions still exist (and if so, in what format and on what type of support):

*I believe there might be some old backups at the Getty, but I am not sure. In the early years we were more interested in understanding and developing technologies than in writing papers, so I do not believe there are any published papers about this early time.*⁸

Interviews and research into the technical archives of the web design and management group, as well as work reports, minutes of meetings, digital memories of all types from AHIP and from the Conservation Institute, may help to reconstruct the development and growth of the website in greater detail.

In a more general field, an important milestone is the www.webhistory.org website, where the stored material includes a priceless records in the form of emails exchanged between members of the groups involved (or SIGs, special interest groups)⁹ stored on the CERN server. This represents one of the first serious attempts to gather together the experience and documents relating to the activities of web pioneers:

*Our goal is to establish a permanent process for recording and disseminating the ongoing history of the Web and networked information, in as close to real time as possible. Much of our work on the Project has been clearing up the six years worth of myths and half-truths which have accumulated around the Web's origins, precisely because there was no definitive history.*¹⁰

⁷ <http://www.mit.edu/people/davis/LongSum.html> . Databases for consultation include the Art and Architecture Thesaurus, the Union List of Artist Names, the Thesaurus of Geographic Names, Categories for the Description of Works of Art, Census of Art and Architecture Known to the Renaissance, the Guide to the Description of Architectural Drawings, as well as the Bibliography of the History of Art, the Provenance Index, and the Avery Index of Architectural Periodicals

⁸ This and previous information comes from an email on Feb. 15, 2003, from Marty Harris to Giancarlo Buzzanca, re: the Getty AHIP website

⁹ <http://www.webhistory.org/www.lists/>

¹⁰ <http://www.webhistory.org/project/about.html> and <http://www.webhistory.org/project/book.html>

This is the reference model which applies to the web in artistic and conservation terms.

What to research

The history of the web is made up of fragments. Berners Lee and Cailliau, the original web pioneers, have attempted to describe the milieu surrounding the birth of the web (within the framework of CERN in Geneva) using original material drawn from their personal experience. The two publications they produced are the bibliographic reference points for this proposed research project.

Regarding the web in humanistic and conservation terms (assuming it is possible to distinguish between “specific” information relating to these sectors), what is missing is a “systematic” approach to its roots, partly because information and original sources are almost completely lacking. I have conducted some general research into the story of web conservation, with the title “*Hating History*”¹¹. All the people I contacted were very surprised since few of them had ever thought about their experience in historical terms. They viewed their experience as part of the daily routine, and imagined it would be sufficient to draw up a list of the technologies used in order to describe the basis and the motivation behind their work.

But we feel that the simple history of the technology involved is not enough in this case to serve as a critical tool to understand the situation fully.

Subjects relating to managing digital continuity were treated in 1998 by the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Information Institute in a project entitled “Time & bits”, edited by Margaret Mac Lean and Ben Davis.

It seems likely that the material forming part of the above project can be reviewed and adapted to the subject of the development and conservation of the web. In this way, the

¹¹ My previous article was published in Kermes as a first general release.

proposed project would serve to alert experts about the problem of targeted web conservation by pinpointing appropriate ways of doing so.

But only by writing a reliable web history in humanistic terms will it be possible to validate the selection of material and the means of conserving the web.

And this is the subject of the proposal.

Tools

- Interviews (either live and/or via e-mail) with members of the team who designed, developed and ran the website (1993-1995);
- Research and critical study of the technical documentation (reports, documents and other information in the archives – paper and digital – and in the Getty library);
- Finding and collecting all the articles/papers published by the team;
- Finding and collecting all the articles published on the Getty websites.

Dissemination

- A full report on the methodological approach
- Basic material (interviews, documents, technical reports, articles, etc...) on paper and in digital form
- Creation of a website devoted to the history of the web, in historical and artistic terms, with special reference to themes regarding conservation on (and of) the web.

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http://www.icomos.org/~fleblanc/projects/p_com_internet.html

Getty - Ben Davies

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ImageLib Getty Art History Information Program web site
<http://library.wustl.edu/~listmgr/imagelib/Jan1995/0029.html>

Timelines & Histories

Hobbes <http://www.aber.ac.uk/continuingeducation/internetcourse/timeline.htm>
Hobbes' Internet Timeline - the definitive ARPAnet & Internet history
<http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/>
Internet History and WWW History Sources on the Net
<http://telemat.det.unifi.it/book/Internet/Applications/netbib1.htm>
Internet history, design, advanced usage, security issues, and more
http://www.livinginternet.com/?w/wi_lee.htm
Mastering Cyberspace A Guide to the World Wide Web
<http://www.pacificspirit.com/Courses/WWWCourse.Aug95/index.htm>
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Internet History Hotlist <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/pages/listinternetma.html>
A Short History of the Web <http://webadmin.dsic.upv.es/webadmin/varios/historia.html>

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A guide to cyberspace
<http://eserver.org/internet/Entering-WWW.txt>
WWW-Talk 1991 by thread
<http://www.webhistory.org/www.lists/www-talk.1991/>
The What's New Archive
<http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docs/whats-new.html>

Cool Documents

Control all the messages at the URL <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/cdl/1994/>.
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