A Critical Look at Online Exhibitions and Online Collections: When Creating One Resource is more Effective than the Other

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ABSTRACT

The year 2007 marked the bicentenary of an act of parliament that abolished slave trading in the British empire. Throughout the UK, British heritage and educational institutions, the government sector, and other organisations decided to use this anniversary to look at the legacy of the slave trade as a vehicle for community outreach, sharing of their collections through imaginative, moving, and provocative online projects that also address contemporary issues related to identity, race, poverty, and migration in a multicultural, global society.

Most of the 2007 event driven websites, news articles, publications, education resources, and online exhibitions or those created just prior to 2007 or just after, which are meant to be long term resources on these issues, have been organised into a web collection on the Internet archive (IA). This paper aims to provide a critical look at online exhibitions versus online collections in the context of the 2007 bicentenary, specifically comparing the effectiveness of websites called "online exhibitions" from a user perspective with websites called "educational resources," in this IA collection. In addition to defining and providing examples of "collections" or "exhibitions" this paper attempts to explore ideas for the types of institutional and shared material that lend themselves to creating either an online exhibition or an online education resource.

Keywords: Online exhibitions, Internet archives web collection, 2007 bicentenary slave trade, slavery websites, British empire, British heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Commemorative events tend to reveal more about the people engaged in remembering than the event being commemorated."

Asif Kahn[1]

In 1807, an Act passed by parliament outlawed the British slave trade. While this was not the end of slavery, or even the end of slavery in the British empire, this act was an important step after decades of anti-slavery campaigning against this brutal, lucrative practice. In a historically strange and ironic twist, Great Britain was to go from being the world's largest commercial slave trading nation to the world's advocate for abolition—using strong arm diplomacy and its navel fleet to bully other western nations into "sweeping the seas of the atrocious commerce"[2].

Two hundred years later, British heritage and educational institutions, the government sector, and other institutions decided to use this anniversary to look at the legacy of the slave trade. In the popular press, on professional listservs, on websites, commemoration stories, programmes and exhibitions were ubiquitous and seemed to indicate the 2007 Bicentenary was a uniformly coordinated effort[3]. However, it was in fact a grassroots, organic idea that spread

from institution to institution, council to council, and region to region[4]. Sometimes with the help of government grants and heritage funding, sometimes by sheer effort of individual or group initiative imaginative, moving, and provocative online projects have emerged. This anniversary also provided an opportunity to address contemporary issues related to identity, race, poverty, and migration because of their contemporary significance in a multicultural, global society.

Most of these websites are event driven by the 2007 anniversary, but others were created just prior to 2007 or just after, and are meant to be long term resources on contemporary issues. All websites discussed in this paper are part of a web collection called British Slave Trade Legacies which can be found on http://archive-it.org/files/slavery-exhibit/. The URLs given throughout this text were last accessed on 19 May 2008.

2. BACKGROUND

The British Slave Trade collection is hosted at the Internet Archive (IA) data centre and was created using IA's service "Archive-It". As a founding member of the International Internet Preservation Consortium, the IA's mission is to archive the entire web, building a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artefacts in digital form, freely accessible to researchers, historians, scholars, and the general public. The British Slave Trade Legacies collection is subtitled "Technology Intersecting Culture" because it records use of internet technology as the communication medium to examine slavery's global impact as well as how participation in the trade affected local communities past and present [5]. Two subsections of this collection (Fig. 1) will be reviewed. Both are listed under the "View Collection by type of Work Created Category", namely the "Online Exhibitions List" and the "Education
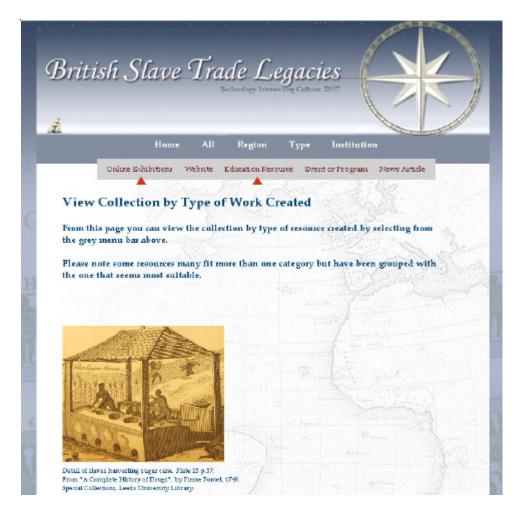

Figure 1. Screenshot of IA collection 866.

Note: This webpage can be found at http://archive-it.org/files/slavery-exhibit, then selecting "Type" from the top menu. Note the arrows indicate sub-sections "Online Exhibitions" or "Education Resource." The list of websites here is examined in this paper.

Resources List." This paper will compare the best features of 39 websites listed in these two categories from a user perspective, listing strengths and weaknesses, and then explore ideas for the types of institutional and shared material lend to create either an exhibition or education resource. This paper only examines archived websites within this persistent URL, therefore readers should be able to access sites being referred to in this article should live versions of these websites not be available.

3. IMPORTANT WEBSITE FEATURES

There are three ways for websites to have a unified look: by motif, by colour scheme, or by metaphor. For example, the masthead at the top of the page may have a sophisticated graphical logo whose style and colour repeats on subsequent pages, branding the organisation that created it[6]. Or as a metaphor example, an online exhibition may be entitled the "Faces of Leadership: the Directors of JPL" and the website will have sidebars that look like a segment of polyester film or have other visuals like a director's chair from a movie studio set[7]. Another important feature is clear site navigation enabling users to move around a website with ease. It can be confusing if the menu bar changes radically from page to page, with no clear logic, or the means of navigation in one area are buttons but in another area links[8].

Not any original material kept in museums, archives or library special collections will be suitable or automatically provide enough inspiration to make a good online exhibition. Much depends on the creativity and intuition of website designer as well as understanding of audience s/he is serving. Fortunately, the webpages under review are all visually unified and have intuitive navigation and load quickly (first column of Table 1 and Table 2).

Minor navigation problems with exhibitions and online resources that are part of larger institutional websites are noticeable on a couple of websites. For instance, *The Story of Juba Royton* on Manchester City Council website (http://www.manchester.gov.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=3359) and the *Quakers and the Path to Abolition* in Britain and the Colonies on Library of the Religious Society of Friends' website (Fig. 2 showing the Quaker's exhibition available at http://www.quaker.org.uk/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=93433). Both of these exhibitions have navigation links below the exhibition text. The navigation bar on the left side belongs to the parent organisation and users could inadvertently click outside the exhibition space. Although it seems that returning to the exhibition will not be that problematic, in an ideal situation if time and resources allow it, an exhibition should be separate from the institutional website. To make an analogy with the physical world, imagine being in a museum exhibition or art gallery exhibition, and then accidentally stumbling into a staff office. Even if the office is something like visitor services meant to assist guests, this accidental jump breaks the continuity and pace of the exhibition experience.

4. DEFINING EXHIBITIONS

With the similar topic of slavery, one may expect some similarities between the nearly 40 websites that define themselves as online exhibitions or educational resources in Table 1 and Table 2. However, quite a range of websites were created from the very simple vertical scroll structure such as Cardiff University's *Abolition of the Slavery Act of 1807: Key Rare Texts* (http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/insrv/libraries/scolar/digital/slavery.html) and Oxford University's *Am I not a Man and Brother?* (http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/projects/abolition/) to dynamic, highly visual resources such as the *Equiano Project* by the Equiano Society and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (http://www.equiano.org/); and *Parliament and the British Slave Trade 1600-1807* by UK Parliament and the 24 Hour Museum (http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade/index.html).

It is clear that many institutions had different reasons and resources for creating these websites. Some institutions used this opportunity to raise awareness of their extensive collections, and some organisations had less than one per cent of their total collection related to this topic, but used this opportunity of explore their collection and take part in this national anniversary[9]. Users can also compare the different strands of political language and the presence of the politics of new display, especially for websites generated with British Black community input. For example, the slogan of the International Slavery Museum is "Remember not that we were freed, but that we fought" (http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/). This is an empowering message, and demonstrates that the contemporary Black British perspective of this history is that slaves actively took part in their own emancipation, and that resistance to slavery took place in many forms. Abolitionist propaganda written prior to the passage of the 1807 Act was generated for the purpose of passing specific legislation, and therefore addressed to the contemporary peers of Abolitionists in order to mobilize the white, propertied class to social and political action. Historical abolitionist documents frequently use evangelical terminology that implies that abolitionists and their

Table 1. Comparison of different features of online exhibitions

Online Exhibition	Clear navigation	Visually unified	Image collection	Fits definition of exhibition	Additional resources	Visually striking	Part of larger website	Creator
A Man and Brother	x	x	x		x			Hampshire Record Office
Abolition of Slavery	x	x	x		x	x	x	National Archives
Abolition of Slavery Act 1807: Key Rare Texts	x		x	x	x		x	Cardiff University Libraries
Am I not a Man and a Brother?	x		x	x	x			Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
Black History Month: Ayrshire Archives	x	x	x	x	x			Ayrshire Archives
Black Presence in Britain: Asian and Black History in Britain, 1500 - 1850	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	National Archives
The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	UK Parliament Archives
Caribbean Identities Online Exhibition: Slavery and Negotiating Freedom	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	National Archives
Celebrating the Black Presence	x		x	collection of images				Westminster Libraries & Archives
Chasing Freedom: The Royal Navy and the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade	x	x	x	x	x			Royal Navy Museum
Cotton Threads	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Cotton Threads
London, Sugar, and Slavery	x		x	not online yet	x	x	x	Museum in the Docklands
Online Exhibition: Quakers and the Path to Abolition in Britain and the Colonies	x		x	x	x		x	Library of the Religious Society of Friends
Slavery and Glasgow	x	x	x	x	x			Scottish Archive Network (SCAN)
Slavery in Stratford	x		x				x	Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
The Story of Jubaroyton	x		x		x		x	Manchester City Council
Young Runaway Slaves	x		x	x	x		x	V & A Museum of Childhood

supporters were the saviours of Africans. Merely displaying material from a specific time period repeats and intensifies the beliefs from that time period[10]. Exhibitions that now only highlight the role of the abolitionists without also considering the role that the slaves themselves have played are considered by critics to be at best an incomplete discussion of the bigger picture, at worse ignorant, insensitive and racist.

Belcher says an exhibition is "to show for a purpose"[11]. When heritage institutions put digitised images of their collections online as part of a website, although that institution may call something an "exhibition," it may not necessarily be so. Kalfatovic says that in order to truly have an online exhibition several things are all necessary: a tight connection between a central idea, a selection of objects or documents to make this point, and a script[12]. Of the 18 online

Table 2. Comparison of features on education resources

Education resources list	Visually unified	Clear navigation	Interactive activities	Additional resources	Visually strong	Part of larger resource	Long-term use	Creator
Breaking the Silence	x	x	x	x	x		x	Anti-Slavery Internation, UNESCO, British Council
The Bristol Slave Trail	x	x	x	x	x		x	Victoria County History
The Equiano Project	x	x	x	x	x			Equiano Society & Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery
Freedom: a Key Stage 3 Resource about Britain and the Transatlantic Slave Trade	x	x	x	x	x		x	National Maritime Museum
Image Library of the National Archives	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	National Archives
NAS Guide: Slavery, the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Scotland	x	x		x		x	x	National Archives of Scotland
On the Road to Abolition – Ending the British Slave Trade	x	x	x	x		x	x	Westminster Libraries & Archives
PortCities	x	x	x	x	x	x		PortCitiesUK
The Physician and the Slave Trade	x	x		x		x	x	Royal Society Library and Archives
Racial Justice Resources	x	x		x		x	x	ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland)
Reggae and Slavery	x	x	x	x		x	x	BBC
Research Guides: Slavery	x	x		x		x	x	National Archives
Resources to the with the topic of Religion and Slavery	x	x		x		x	x	Runnymede Trust
Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery	x	x		x	x	x	x	8 Manchester Museums & Galleries
Slave Trade and the Abolition of Slavery	x	x	x	x		x		Blackhistory4schools.com
Slave Trade: a Select Bibliography	x	x		x		x		National Library of Jamacia
Slavery and Abolition: the Plymouth Connection	x	x		x		x	x	Plymouth Library Services

Education resources list	Visually unified	Clear navigation	Interactive activities	Additional resources	Visually strong	Part of larger resource	Long-term use	Creator
Slavery and Wales	x	x	x	x		x		BBC Wales
Slavery Sites in the UK	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Runnymede Trust
Towards Liberty Booklet	x	n/a		x	x	x	x	Sheffield City Archives
The Transatlantic Slave Trade	x	x	x	x		x	x	Runnymede Trust
Wilberforce - Learning Space	x	x	x	x		x	x	Open University

Figure 2. Screenshot of an exhibition embedded in institutional webpage.

exhibitions (Table1) according to this definition of exhibition, two self identified exhibitions are not exhibitions: *Celebrating the Black Presence* is a collection of images, and at the time of this writing, *London, Sugar and Slavery* is a webpage, promising that an online exhibition will be up soon.

Kalfatovic also defines five different types of websites which elicit a range of emotions and reaction from viewers. Depending on the response a designer is trying to evoke from the user, the designer will chose one or a combination of these overall styles:

⌘ *Aesthetic*: organised around the beauty of an object

⌘ *Emotive*: designed to illicit an emotion in the viewer

⌘ *Evocative*: designed to create an atmosphere

⌘ *Didactic*: constructed to teach about something specific

⌘ *Entertaining*: presented just for fun[13]

Figure 3. Screenshot of a visually striking exhibition.

5. SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE CRITERIA

In Table 1 and Table 2, if an exhibition or educational resource has been labelled "visually striking," it is because it has succeeded overall as a design to meet one of the first four categories. Visually striking also takes into account the overall effective design in practical terms as well as aesthetic terms. The typography is legible and has appropriate margins, colour, font-size and font style to match with material. For instance the online exhibition *Parliament and the British Slave Trade 1600-1807* by UK Parliament and the 24 Hour Museum (Fig. 3) uses the didactic approach and has lovely colourful images on a blue background which are well organized by topic and colour scheme. *Cotton Threads* (http://www.cotton-threads.org.uk/) by Bury Museum and Archive is evocative of a 17th century genteel home and the choice of warm wood motifs transmits the sense of English countryside living. The *Equiano Project* uses an interesting mixture of black with bright colours and serif and sans serif fonts to convey the sense of history with contemporary relevance.

As mentioned earlier, by having an online exhibition in a separate web space, the designer can concentrate on implementing the best features without having to conform to the home institution's style. The designer is free, for instance to use a serif font to visually convey historical or traditional reflection as in these examples, even if the institutional font is sans serif which generally conveys a contemporary outlook. "Pragmatic meaning is embodied graphically"[14].

There are several reoccurring themes when it comes to overall website design: having an original idea, making the website accessible, and choosing appropriate subject matter[15]. Looking at this sample of 39 websites, one can affirm they examine the topic from unique angles. The original ideas conveyed by many of them are based on their different institutional collection. Some websites focus on material in collections which reveal non-obvious connections, like a hidden economic link, some websites focus on the life of influential abolitionist individuals like William Wilberforce or Olaudah Equiano.

A good example of an audience appropriate online exhibition is the Museum of Childhood's *Young Runaway Slaves* (http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/whats_on/ exhibitions/young_runaway_slaves/index.html*). It is less graphic about the brutality of slavery, but it does not dumb-down material either. In fact, the website engages directly with its younger audience by inviting them to imagine themselves as young slaves who are trying to run away and includes a simple child's style drawing of a young black boy and other period illustrations by the artist William Hogarth.

6. DEFINING EDUCATION RESOURCES

In the British Slave Trade Legacies collection, nearly twenty websites are listed as education resources. Education resources seem to be much broader in scope than exhibitions and not dependent on displaying surrogates of original material. They can be full of ideas, facts, and personal stories, and many here tend to have more in-depth subject matter. The BBC website (http://www.bbc.co.uk/abolition/) is full on useful and interesting material, again not tied to a specific collection, but focuses on interesting bits of information and personal stories. The regional BBC websites like Scotland (http://www.bbc.co.uk/ scotland/education/hist/abolition/) and Wales (http:/ /www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/slavery/) find a way to make local connections. Interactivity is also a reoccurring component with education resources, especially ones that have been created by more than one organization. *Breaking the Silence* (http:/ /www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/) was created by Anti-Slavery International, UNESCO and the British Council, is visually appealing, has substantial subject depth, resources for teachers, and interactive maps. Users even casually browsing this resource will learn quite a lot.

Other organisations and coalitions decided to go down the route of not only creating long-term resources, but to establish long-term-contacts with local communities. For instance, a partnership of museums and galleries in Manchester created Revealing Histories (http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/). In addition to online education resources, events and lectures were schedule across Manchester before and after 2007. In depth research was done to find and spell out connections between the local textile industry and raw cotton supplied by slave plantations. This website also shows an economic history subject expertise applied to a specific local area. "The Slave Trade underwrote the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which funded the establishment of the British Empire," said Bernadette Lynch of the Revealing Histories Project, which aims to draw a more diverse and younger audience by looking at the Manchester collections in new ways that the new audiences will find relevant to their own lives and their own family histories. "The history of the slave trade is not just black history, but the story of a shared past that shaped British society and impacts on the present"[16].

7. CONCLUSION

Exhibitions are a form of advocacy for institutions with original material and lend themselves to virtual display [17]. The 2007 anniversary shows that the UK heritage sector found ways to look at their collections creatively and using websites and online exhibitions found different ways to tell complex stories. Although this paper specifically looked at 39 websites, the British Slave Trade Legacies collection has over 100 websites classified in other categories such as event and programme notices, or news articles and it is still growing until the end of June 2008. What this says is that some anniversaries carry their own momentum.

The ubiquity of all of these commemoration activities, online as well as in the real world, suggests that this anniversary deeply affects British consciousness, history, and identity. Why else would so much time be invested in these resources unless it was clear that they would appeal to a broad audience? Historian James Walvin writes that the anti-slavery movement provided an opportunity after the American Independence War, to restore the British belief in themselves that they, "above others, were a people wedded to liberty"[18]. The British were the first to provide legislation to free slaves, and that is still a point of national pride, although not without its complexities and darker histories, as these anniversary exhibitions and educational resources suggest.

As with all websites, whether they are exhibitions, resources, online booklets, the best indicator of what to use is to decide initially who the audience will be, what type of emotional or intellectual response you would like them to achieve, the level of engagement with the website, and the time and resources available to do it. Some projects were obviously well funded by the British Heritage Lottery Fund or other granting organisations, while some were mounted without any external funding to appeal to regional, local and institutional audiences. Looking at event driven commemoration websites reveals both history and historiography-built by a merger of cultural experience with those bits of code [19].

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