
American Str@tegy: A Report

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This paper is a personal, unofficial report on a national American project called American Strategy. I was involved in American Strategy as the representative of the now dissolved Getty Information Institute, one of the three founding partners of the project. American Strategy addresses the need that Seamus Ross and Maria Economou identified in an article in the June 1998 issue of *DLib Magazine* entitled "The Need for National Strategies." Ross and Economou note: *A national ICT strategy for the cultural sector is vital to support both the retroconversion of existing heritage resources in digital form, as well as the creation of new digital collections.*¹

It is one thing to call for a "national strategy" and quite another to actually implement one. American Strategy brought together representatives from over 22 federal government agencies to develop and implement a national strategy to enhance access to America's federal collections. While the project has many successful components, it is evident that an Achilles' heel is the long term political will and commitment for different agencies to work together to undertake national strategies. While the need for such efforts may be evident, sustaining them requires a fundamental shift in the way organizations operate. It is not enough to exhort, "The relevant public bodies need to respond to these opportunities in a consistent and coherent way, driven by the information needs of the heritage community and the public, rather than the technology."² Planners must account for the fact that departmental goals and objectives will, over the

long term, be more important than the national strategy.³ Unless the departments and agencies adopt the national strategy as fundamental to achieving departmental goals, the strategy will fail.

Thinking back to the past to examine why it is so difficult to integrate departments and agencies in common goals, I was reminded of my very first museum conference. It was a think tank in a somewhat remote part of the world called Coochiching, Ontario where a small, but very interesting group of Canadian museum professionals met in 1976 to discuss museums in the year 2000. There were many prognostications about the relationship of audiences and museums and much discussion about the purpose of museums. The most prevalent fear raised during the meeting was that in the year 2000 museums would be filled with holograms rather than real objects. Ernest conversations focussed on the importance of the real object and the visitor experience. Most of the attendees thought of the year 2000 as being far away and remote. It seemed as if many of the attendees knew or hoped they would be retired by the year 2000 and would not have to deal with the future. I remember thinking that if things went well, by the year 2000 I would be in the middle of a wonderful museum career as an expert on Canadian historical gardens.

What I am doing now was inconceivable to me in 1976. I don't remember the words "databases" or "computers" being uttered at the meeting, and if they were, I was not interested. Some mention was made of a new program, a national inventory of Canadian heritage, but no one seemed to know much about it. No one discussed the role of museums in the information society, much less the learning society. Given all of this, it

might appear that there has been an enormous change over the last twenty-five years. However, having spent the last two months working at ground zero (in a museum), I believe this assumption would be flawed. Most of people I now work with go about their business in the traditional manner of the people I met with in 1976. Most of my museum colleagues today have the same aspirations and issues as my colleagues of 1976.

Perhaps a critical difference is that they use word processing systems and collections management databases instead of typewriters and catalogue cards. However, since the most of the information generated in the word processing systems is not networked or managed as a corporate resource, technology has offered only an incremental improvement in workflow. Because of their origins, museum databases are, for the most part, object centered rather than context (events, people, places, etc.) centered. While the National Museum of the American Indian has an automated collections inventory; is rapidly imaging the collection and the original catalogue cards; and has a Web site; most staff focus on the actual physical exhibitions, undertake research on the collections, develop and release publications, and prepare on-site education for visiting school children. And, just as I quoted in a talk given at a previous *mda* conference in 1987, "specialties are deeply engrained in museums, greatly limiting staff effectiveness."⁴ Integrating information within a museum continues to be a challenge. Information is not viewed as a primary museum collection. At best many museums think of their information investment being in object centered records and discuss sharing these records through the integration of databases. Integrating contextual information across a community of

museums is discussed by only a select few. Integrating museum, library, and archival information is thought by many to be an innovative idea. The idea of the cultural heritage resource as an open system to which staff, the museum's audiences, and the museum's partners (i.e., libraries, archives, performing arts centers, community centers, arts councils, etc.) can contribute information is slow in evolving, as this is not the primary mission of any of these institutions.

Museum staff tend to look inward to their collections and exhibitions rather than outward to the information society. The same seems to hold true for libraries. While libraries are very keen to make their information catalogues available, just as with museum collections databases, these catalogues are book, article, grey matter or image centric rather than the more interesting contextual information. It is extremely difficult to break through established processes.⁵ A new study issued by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Identification and Analysis of Library and Museum Partnerships-highlights and executive summary are available at www.ims.gov) examines the nature of museum and library partnerships and suggests that these two types of organizations do not often consider partnering together. The study notes: "Seventy-seven percent of libraries have partnered with other organizations in the past two years; but 16 percent of libraries report those partnerships were with museums."⁶

Museums place their focus on traditional work (preservation, research, exhibit, interpretation, etc.) and consider participation in collaborative projects useful only so long as it supports their individual missions. In a talk given at the Getty/UCLA Summer Institute for Knowledge Sharing, Max Anderson, Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, said, "The age of networked information is very disruptive, I think, to the way in which we have habituated ourselves to working... Unless we take the time to think about the connections among institutions, fields of endeavor, and

audiences, we risk going back to the desk, latte in hand, bleary eyed, and not actually moving forward the potential of our institutions through the advent of networked information."⁷

As much as technology offers potential for change, we cling tightly to traditional paths and ways of doing things. How do we move forward? American Strategy participants decided that a powerful vision was needed. American Strategy participants worked together to develop and illustrate a vision of what the project might achieve. The vision bound American Str@tegiists together through difficult discussions and encouraged participants to determine the value of undertaking this project for themselves and their agency or department. The vision has been shown to a wide variety of audiences including members of Congress, members of the Executive Branch, heads of agencies, museum staff, library staff, archive staff, and potential funders and supporters. The vision was developed with the intention of prompting the question, "How can we help you achieve this strategy?" This vision proved to be extremely successful, many people asked how they could help, but few⁸ offered money. American Strategy participants were surprised by how hard it was to provide an answer that went beyond the phrase "Please give us money" and how hard money was to find.

American Strategy developed a demonstration project to illustrate a collaborative gateway to enhance access to the national collections—including information, images, and sounds. You can see the demonstration gateway on the Web at AmericanStrategy.org. The demonstration project is hosted by Artsedge at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The Getty Information Institute supported a component of the Web site that provided a search tool across different agencies' information resources and an image retrieval tool (ARthur). Technology was not the difficult part of the project.

American Str@tegy has a clear and concise mission statement: American Strategy is a collective action, to cooperatively connect Federal cultural heritage information resources and make this available as a public good. Its goals are easily graspable and achievable:

Enhance access

- Produce electronic products that enable the global public to access America's cultural heritage resources residing in federal collections.
- Expand the network of linked collections and cooperation in the future to include non-federal collections.

Extend public service

- Heighten public appreciation of and relation to the American cultural experience through the availability of these digital resources.
- Create interactive evaluation and assessment mechanisms that will enable cultural heritage organizations to improve their products.

Increase value from past and future investments

- Establish a systematic method for digitizing and linking cultural heritage collections information the help of public-private partnerships.

However, it was in the achievement of its objectives that American Strategy had problems. The objectives are:

- Explain the project.
- Demonstrate the Federal government's commitment to realize the public's right to access their collections.
- Increase ease of information sharing and interaction among departments and agencies.
- Create official support mechanisms: Interagency Council/Executive Order.

- Develop a coordinated, searchable electronic gateway.
- Negotiate public-private partnerships to provide funding, increase technical knowledge and capabilities.
- Extend federal cultural technology initiatives beyond wiring and hardware to content and context.
- Inventory existing resources.
- Improve evaluation and audience feedback mechanisms, adopt quality controls, and collaboratively implement standards.

The objectives require staff commitment and time. While department and agency staff are willing to attend meetings and support the undertaking of actions, carrying out the actions has been difficult. Everyone has a daily workload, existing and past due commitments, and pre-established work plans that do not allow for time and attention to be given to the strategy. American Strategy never made the leap to being an agency priority with committed staff and financial resources. It is seen as "a good thing, something worthwhile" but it is one among many urgent projects competing for staff time and attention.

Participants anticipated such a problem and recommended that a high level "Executive Order" be issued by President Clinton in support of the project. American Str@tegy participants tasked the Steering Committee to develop a draft Executive Order to establish an Interagency Council on Electronic Access to Cultural Resources to oversee and coordinate the work of its members and partners. On behalf of the project, the National Park Service is shepherding the draft Executive Order through the Department of the Interior, which the Park Service is part of, to the Office of Management and Budget, and then onto the President. It is a long route, but one that needs to be taken to endow such a Council with the necessary authority. The project requires the proclamation of the Executive Order to drive it forward. It is relatively easy for working groups

or task forces to come together and undertake specific tasks, but it is much more difficult for individuals to sustain the same level of intensity and interest in a long term project when management support has already shifted to other issues.

An issue within American Str@tegy is no single department or agency can take the credit for the project. An important strategy within the project has been to provide leadership opportunities for its participants, i.e., the Kennedy Center hosted the demonstration project, the National Endowment for the Humanities will host the permanent Web site, and the National Park Service is sponsoring of the Executive Order. However, it is difficult to offer all the participating organizations the appropriate leadership opportunities or acknowledgements and this has had an effect on the level of participation of many organizations.

A large part of the success of any project is leadership. American Str@tegy is in a dormant stage right now; there have been changes within two of the three initiating partners and in other agencies as well. The Getty Information Institute no longer exists. The director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Diane Frankel, has left and been replaced by Acting Director Beverly Shepherd who occupies a more difficult interim position. The third founding partner, the American Association of Museums, continues to be supportive of the endeavor but this is not enough to carry the project. The American Association of Museums is not a government agency. The Secretary of the Smithsonian, I. Michael Heyman, gave support to the project, but he recently announced his resignation as of January 2000. Two key staff participants from the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress will have babies early this fall. A strategy cannot be based on personalities, yet the commitment and drive of certain individuals are key components to ensuring the success of a project.

Raising the necessary funds to carry the project forward has been difficult. Foundations have been reluctant to provide funding in the absence of the participants providing direct contributions-in kind work does not count. While admiring the goals and organizational infrastructure, foundations voiced concerns about the long-term sustainability of such a project. Hopefully the Executive Order will provide the necessary authority for the participants to contribute funding, but participants will only do so if a direct benefit can be seen at the department and agency level.

There are many components that must be in place to take an innovative project forward over the long term. A powerful vision is important, but unless the funding support is dedicated to the project the vision will not be achieved. Leadership is equally important, but in the absence of strong leadership, the relationship of the participants to each other and to the goals and objectives can hold the project together, but only for so long. Even the much envied projects of the European Commission's Third, Fourth, and Fifth Frameworks have had relatively little impact on shared cultural heritage knowledge resources.

Unless a fundamental shift in mission statements, commitments, and operations occurs, the cultural heritage sector will continue to do business as usual. In doing business as usual, museums, libraries, and archives risk being marginalized by for-profit corporate institutions focussing on "edutainment" or as Max Anderson says, "have much more access to resources to create the "eye candy" that will attract our young." Goodwin Watson writes, "The more usual strategies of increasing pressures by persuasion and dissuasion raise tensions within the system. If the opposite strategy-that of neutralizing or transforming resistance-be adopted, the forces for change already present in the system-in-situation will suffice to produce movement. For example, administrators may try by exhortation to get teachers to pay more attention to individual differences among pupils. Or they may analyze the factors which

now prevent such attention (e.g. large classes, single textbooks, standard tests) and by removing these pressures release a very natural tendency for teachers to adapt to the different individual pupils.”¹⁰ American Str@tegy has exhorted change and tried to lead by example, but this has not been enough. A more careful analysis of the factors which prohibit change is needed and then attention must be given to removing or dissolving the barriers and the cost of so doing.

Forces for change are present in the system-in-situation, but these are insufficient without fundamental changes in the review and evaluation process of how departments and agencies successfully meet their goals. Large financial incentives need to be given to encourage collaborative work among departments and agencies. The American government’s encouragement of departments and agencies to seek funding and support from private sector corporate sponsors leads to competition rather than collaboration. The ways in which cultural agencies, funding bodies, technology developers, universities, etc. work together needs more study. Powerful visions are only the first step. Answers to the question, “How can we help you achieve this vision?” are needed.

(<http://www.nara.gov/education/classrm.html>), but for the most part these projects focus on the institutions’ own collections.

- 1 Ross, Seamus and Maria Economou. *DLib Magazine*. “Information and Communications Technology in the Cultural Sector: The Need for National Strategies.” June 1998. <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/june98/06ross.html>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Trant, Jennifer. unpublished comment. 1999.
- 4 Daniel T. Gallacher. “Role Specialization and Collections Management.” *Gazette*. Volume 15, 1982. pp. 24-29.
- 5 Exceptions to this include the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project (memory.loc.gov) and the National Archives and Records Administration Digital Classroom

- 6 *Identification and Analysis of Library and Museum Partnerships*, Executive Summary. <http://www.ims.gov/publmsumm.htm> as of Sept. 1, 1999.
- 7 Anderson, Maxwell L. Getty/UCLA Summer Institute for Knowledge Sharing. “Remarks”. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, August 1999.
- 8 The Getty Information Institute and the Institute of Museum and Library Services supported American Str@tegy by providing operational funding between 1997 and 1999.
- 9 Andersen. Op cit.
- 10 Watson, Goodwin. “Resistance to Change.” in *The Planning of Change*. Edited by Warren G. Bennis, Kenneth D. Benne, and Robert Chin. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., Second Edition. p. 488.