Integrating Real Time Communications Applications in a Museum's Web Site

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Abstract

Real time communications and messaging software is a powerful technology that allows people and groups to talk and collaborate together using the Internet. This poster examines its practical use in a museum setting for distance learning and enhancing an institution’s Web presence.

It's 10 am on Wednesday, and Christopher Browning, well-known Holocaust scholar, is live and on air. In the small room with him are a cameraperson, technician, and other interested parties. Mr. Browning is seated behind a desk—here as a convenient prop—and is looking into the camera, lights shining, delivering a ten minute introduction about the motivations of Holocaust perpetrators. After ten minutes, the first question is asked, “My question concerns your feelings when reviewing the testimonies of the perpetrators. Did you take them at face value or did you question their validity at all?” Mr. Browning responded, “an historian questions the validity of any source he uses. Even if I am reading original documents written at the time I always have to ask ‘For what purpose was this written? Did this person have a certain agenda?’” And so it went for 50 minutes with excellent questions, in-depth answers and great engagement from the audience and the host.

Mr. Browning is not a guest on Larry King Live, nor is this some news talk show endlessly discussing the latest fad. But it is certainly no less important to the audience who is attentively listening. This is the Web, live from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The conversation carries on for an hour. After, the participants remark that they feel lucky to have made contact with the author of a book they were reading for class. The Museum staff in the room celebrate because, for all the technical glitches, this was a success. We used a new technology to facilitate a compelling seminar. And we would do it again.

For the first time the tools to deliver real time communications are within the reach of museums because it has become more affordable, easier to use for the participants, the availability of high speed internet connections has increased, and have been packaged into reusable components, making the development of customized applications cheaper and faster than before.

This also allows individual institutions to build applications from scratch based on these components—thus allowing the construction of complex and rich web conferencing environments in house. It has never been this easy to create advanced multi-user applications.

Conferencing is just the most obvious aspect of real time communications. The core technology allows users to communicate and interact with each other using a “shared space.” This can easily be used to build and cheaply host online educational games that make sites more interactive and fun. Users could play against or with each other to solve problems with an historian who offers hints and instruction as the users play the game. A museum could use this technology to deconstruct art to visitors. The technology allows art experts to draw on top of pictures and talk at the same time thereby providing a sound track. The USHMM is planning on facilitating question and answer sessions with survivors. If there is one aspect of this technology that is most important it may be that it makes human resources more available. Instead of traveling, survivors can engage with students in classrooms around the world at the same time. Historians and curators can make themselves available to members-only audiences possibly creating a real demand for a “Web membership.”

In another live session at the USHMM, the last question comes from a young woman in an Ohio high school class. “How did Hitler come up with the ideology for blond hair and blue eyes?”

Our historian, Dr. Meineke, answers, “ah that goes back to ‘Aryanism,’ if you will. The Nazis weren’t the first racist thinkers…”

Before signing off the teacher asks one final question. I will be at the Museum with my class on January 27 and we were hoping to meet you.

“Great,” Dr. Meineke responds, “I’ll check my calendar.”