

MSCOPE PROJECT REPORT

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Voices Speak Louder than Labels: Podcasting at MSI

The Big Idea

A pilot podcasting program has been presented as a prototype for MSI to evaluate. The podcasts would be featured on MSI's website, which would circulate information related to the museum's exhibits. The guiding principle behind this idea is to give the exhibits voices of their own which reach beyond the walls of the museum.

The obvious advantage of podcasting is that it expands the museum's audience. Podcasting is also an excellent way to give exhibits much greater flexibility in terms of content. It enables the museum to highlight multiple facets of an exhibit without altering the exhibit itself. The two prototypes accomplish this. The Nature of Energy addresses the energy as a concept to supplement the concrete presentation of energy in MSI's energy lab. The U-505 Experience addresses issues that arise when planning an exhibit like the U-505, like how it fits into the rest of the museum. Expanding the content can both expand the museum's audience and make the visitor's experience more robust and fulfilling.

The Nature of Energy Podcast

Our group recorded and produced two podcasts, one on the nature of energy and one on the U-505 submarine exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. The former podcast, that which addresses the topic of energy, was first conceived as a complement to the Energy Lab exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. Unlike a great number of discussions on the nature of energy, however, the podcast examines the subject from two different perspectives: the strictly theoretical and the everyday-use perspective. It consists of interviews with two of the leading scientists in the field of energy, Steve Berry, Professor of Chemistry at the University of Chicago and Dr. Robert Rosner, director of the Argonne National Labs.

The U-505 Experience Podcasts

The podcast based on the U-505 submarine, on the other hand, takes a slightly different approach to the material on display at the Museum. Instead of discussing the subject matter directly, it utilizes the exhibit as a tool for analyzing certain issues pertinent to the role of museums as didactic exhibition. Specifically, it is interested in asking a diverse group of people for their reaction to the integration of science and history in a museum. First, it profiles MSI visitors' responses and then it consulted two different experts, Anthony Todd, Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Chicago and Dr. James Sweitzer, Director of the Science Outreach Programs at the University of Chicago.

Process

During the pre-production phase of the project, our group defined which of the museum's exhibits we wished to tackle first. The U-505 exhibit and the Energy Lab, of course, were the two exhibits that most interested us, so we decided to work on them. Subsequently, we researched submarines and energy in order to brainstorm possible, new angles that would complement the exhibit well. At the same time, we went to the MSI to ask the visitors for their input. Using a short survey, we tried to gauge their knowledge of the subjects and we asked them what they wanted to know more about with respect to the two exhibits. Then we moved on to the production phase. This involved, of course, devising questions to ask all of the interviewees and then actually interviewing them. This process, however, was much slower and complicated than we had originally imagined. For example, getting museum visitors to respond to a few questions when they are being recorded was rather tricky and it took several attempts before we were successful. The post-production phase involved all of the editing and was, far and away, the most complicated phase of the project. Learning editing skills and coalescing different sound bytes into a cogent and interesting whole is rather difficult. Additionally, it involves a great amount of trial error, always having to listen to the audio to see what works best. Thanks are due to the members of our program for the valuable input we received.

Evaluation Detailed

We went onto the museum floor to find out about the visitors' internet usage. We conducted brief interviews with 30+ visitors about whether or not they have internet, for what purpose they use it, and how often they use it. We found that the majority of the visitors have internet access at home, and most of them use it for news and culture. A smaller, but still substantial subset use media streams or download music. Only 15% of the visitors knew the word "podcast," but this is irrelevant because a podcast is merely downloadable or streaming media, which a large subset of the visitors access. The visitors in this subset tend to be in the 18-34 age demographic. This is our target audience.

Fortunately, if implemented, continuous evaluation of the program can be conducted easily. Because the project is web-based we can track the number of downloads and number of back-links. The site can also contain a forum for users to post comments allowing for continuous interaction with the listeners.