The enactment of museum collections in digital infrastructures: Authorizing actors, configuring expertise

Sarah de Rijcke and Anne Beaulieu

Reimagining the Archive Conference

UCLA, 11-14 November 2010

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Part of larger project

Network Realism: Making knowledge from images in digital infrastructures

de Rijcke & Beaulieu (2011). Image as Interface. Consequences for Users of Museum Knowledge. *Library Trends, 59* (3).

Beaulieu, van Heur, de Rijcke. New Sites of Knowledge Production, in book *Virtual Knowledge*

networkrealism.wordpress.com

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'virtual museum'

- Jenkins (2006) *Convergence Culture*

- Bruns (2008) 'produsage'

- Knowledge production about museum collections is increasingly pursued in infrastructural settings that

  - reach out beyond established organizations
  - in new media forms

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flickr from YAHOO!

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Missouri History Museum

Missouri History Museum's photostream pro

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Civil War

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Conserving a Civil War Flag

HELLO
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STEVE: **THE MUSEUM SOCIAL TAGGING PROJECT**

Click to search...

Objects   **Terms**   **Sets**

Car Reflections

Navigation

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1970

Creator
Estes, Richard (American, 1932-)

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acrylic on Masonite

Type
Visual Works: Paintings

Institution
Indianapolis Museum of Art

▼ **Tags**   ▶ **All Metadata**   ▶ **More Like This**

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Research question

- How are configurations of expertise and authority enacted in the development and implementation of virtual museums?

  - In relation to existing institutional and infrastructural elements
  - STS & new media studies

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Authorizing actors

who is authorised to speak on behalf of the collection?

– Database shapes roles within museum

– Institutional hierarchy inscribed in implementation TMS

– Other projects change roles of actors around collection

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Tropenmuseum

> Tropenmuseum Collections online

- Home Collections online
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- Exhibited collection
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Advanced search

Thumbs	43 objects found
	◄ #8 ►

Terracotta votiefbeeld van een paard, voor de god Aiyanar

TM-number: R-514
Object name: Beeld
Dated: voor/before 2005
Dimensions: 98 x 30 x 75cm (38 9/16 x 11 13/16 x 29 1/2in.)
Subject: Zuid-Azië en vasteland Zuidoost-Azië

Current search

Any of the fields

contains all the words

aiyanar

Remove ↗

Add condition ↗

Sort according to:

Relevance

Search ↗

Available:
43 Collection

Royal Tropical Institute

Tropentheater

Done

Friendly curators at Museums and Galleries around the world are ready to answer your questions.

Here's who to ask.

Click to see other Countries

Nederland	**Amsterdam Museum**	**Museon Den Haag**	**Museum Boerhaave**
Museum voor Communicatie	**Tropenmuseum**	**Museum Willet**	**Vincent van Gogh Huis**
Zaans Museum	**Nest**	**Teylers Museum**	**Witte de With Center for**

Tropenmuseum

@Amerillo Not in our museum. We have a lot of interactives and it
is impossible to be quiet :-)
about 2 hours ago via TweetDeck in reply to Amerillo

@ErfgoeDigitaal De oude poppen zijn nu onderdeel van onze
historische collectie en laten we zoals ze zijn ;-)
about 2 hours ago via TweetDeck in reply to ErfgoeDigitaal

@ErfgoeDigitaal zeker, het gaat om het verhaal dat verteld wordt.
Waar we vroeger poppen gebruikten laten we nu mensen zelf aan
het woord.
about 2 hours ago via TweetDeck in reply to ErfgoeDigitaal

@Franc Derispin: Congratulations, you are our 800th follower on
Twitter! DM us for 2 free entrancetickets to the Tropenmuseum.
#askacurator
about 4 hours ago via TweetDeck

@OudeKoolschuur : niet alleen rode items laten zien, maar ook 't
verhaal erachter vertellen met thema's als moderne kunst, macht,
goden etc.
about 4 hours ago via TweetDeck in reply to OudeKoolschuur

RT @top_grafisch: Nieuwsgierig aangelegd? Volg vandaag
#askacurator en stel al je vragen aan conservatoren uit de mooiste
musea! #leuk!
about 5 hours ago via TweetDeck

RT @groningermuseum: Leuk artikel in de Volkskrant over
#askacurator vandaag. http://bit.ly/cTCWaD
about 8 hours ago via TweetDeck

@museodata Making an exiting and sparkling exhibition every time
again. New media make the work more easy and exciting!
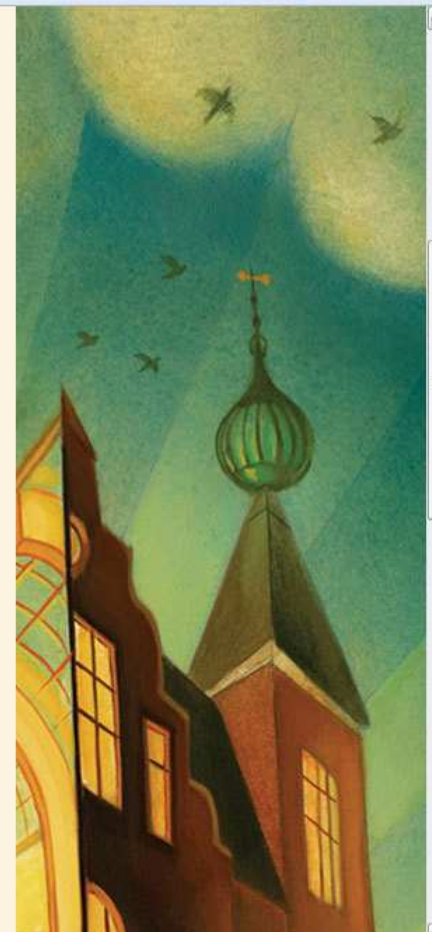about 8 hours ago via TweetDeck in reply to Museodata

@FloorKaspers Alle collectie is ook online te bekijken via

Tropenmuseum

maandag 30 augustus 2010

Heeft u de Scarlet Woman gezien?

Wij waren in het rood op de Uitmarkt in Amsterdam dit weekend.
Heeft u ons gezien? Rood is immers een sterke signaalkleur! We

Tags

Tropenmuseum
brazilië rood Bahia
Universidade do Reconcavo
tentoonstelling workshop
diversiteit Enkele reis
Holland leonard Freed Britse
soldaten Chinese communisme
Dirk van de Broek Hard Rock
Café Indonesië Kleurenleer
Meertensinstituut Musea
Nederland Newton Rood ;
tentoonstelling ; ontwerp ;
onderzoek ; teksten ; magazine
; visagist ; Anish Kapoor Tommy
Hilfiger Uitmarkt 2010; rood;
tentoonstelling; liefde; verhalen
boa morte cachoeira etnografica
festival hedendaagse kunst
moderne kunst oranje oude
kunst partijlogo projectmodel
samba de roda volkskunde
vordering

Blogarchief
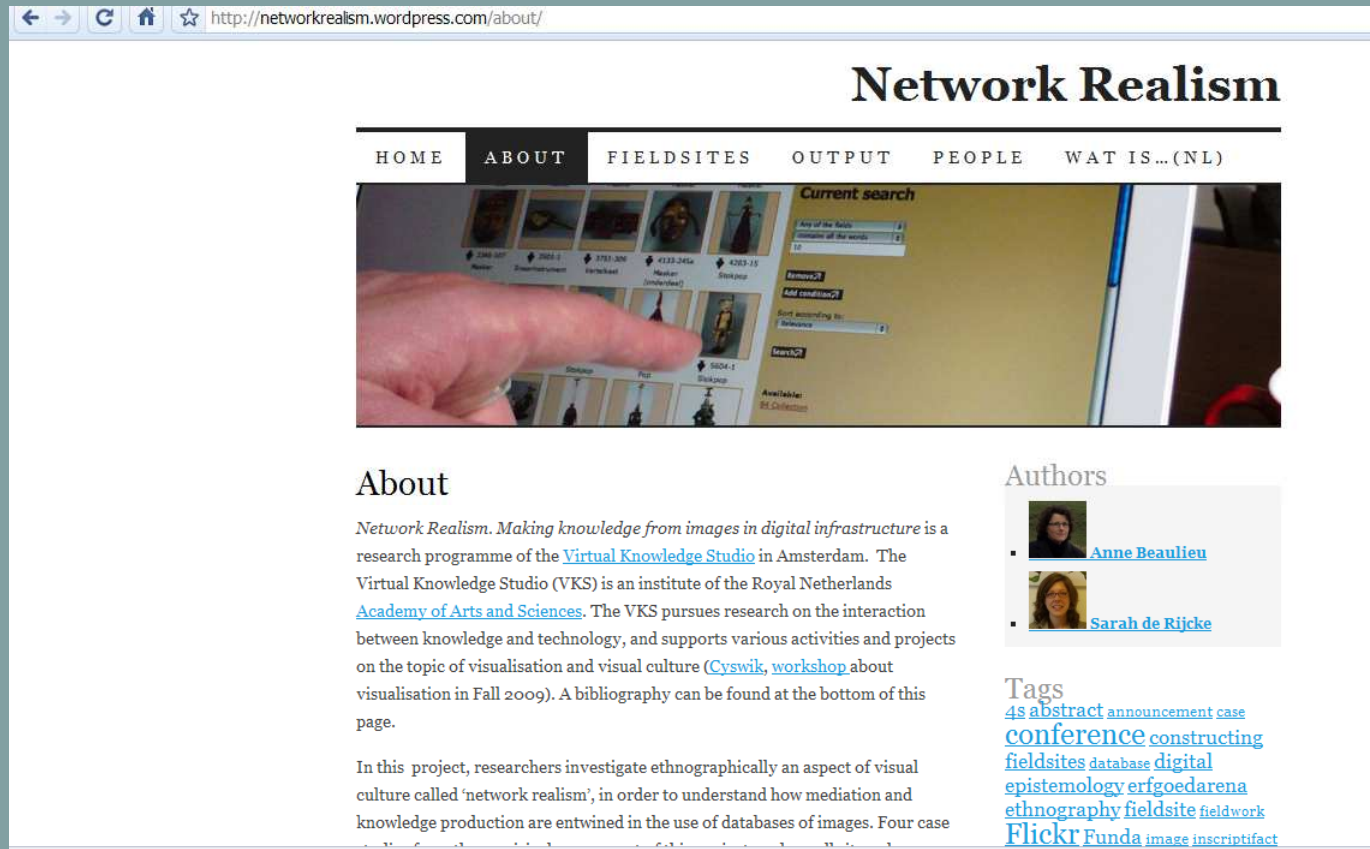
WikiLovesArt/NL
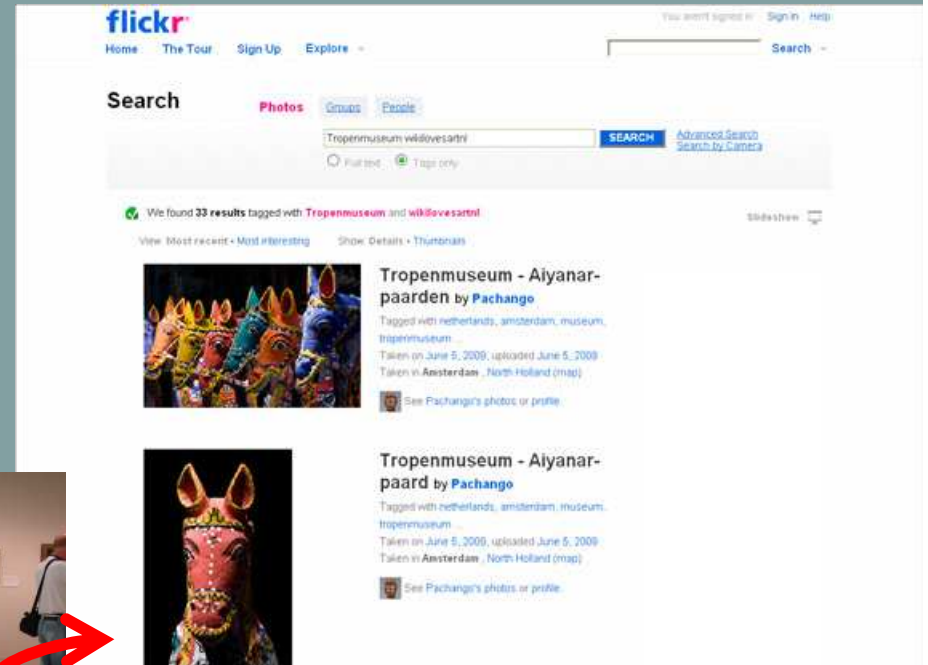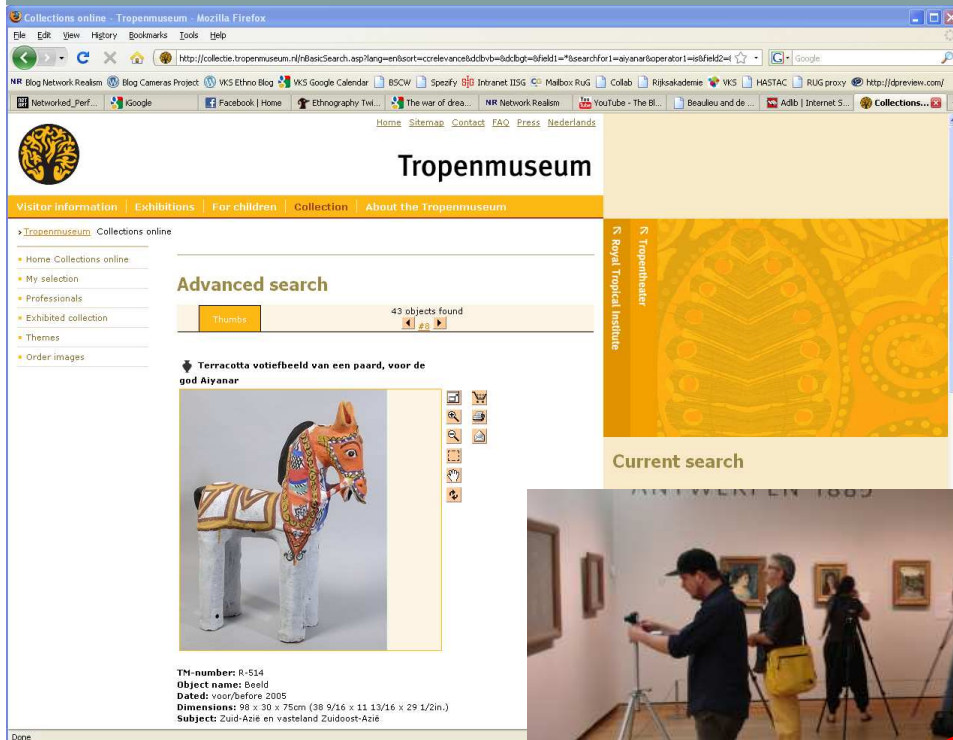
Conclusion

- The web doesn't change everything: Tension between reproduction and innovation
- False dichotomy: expert knowledge in institutions vs. folksonomies in new sites
- Possible to see some changes: importance of empirical study
- Changes are not uniform: variety of configurations

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Thank you!

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The enactment of museum collections in digital infrastructures.

Authorizing actors, configuring expertise

Sarah de Rijcke & Anne Beaulieu

Title slide

A recent trend in the museum world is that the work of knowledge production about museum collections is increasingly pursued in infrastructural settings that reach out beyond established organizations, and in new media forms.

In this presentation, we address how configurations of expertise and authority, two key aspects of knowledge production, are enacted in the development and implementation of virtual museums. I will do so on the basis of fieldwork at the Tropenmuseum, an ethnographic museum in Amterdam. For the paper today, we looked at specific encounters, such as the development of the networked image database around the museum collection, but also other kinds of networked activities of the museum, in cooperation with the Wikimedia foundation for instance. But I would specifically like to draw attention in discussing these encounters are emerging forms of epistemic authority in relation to existing institutional and infrastructural elements.

Slide Network Realism

 It is part of a larger project at the Virtual Knowledge Studio in Amsterdam called *Network Realism*, in which Anne Beaulieu and I study the various ways in which digital images in on the web are produced, treated and valued as sources of knowledge about physical objects. We focus specifically on networked databases of images, for instance those hosted by museums on the museum collection. One of the questions we are interested in relates to the specific ways in which users and producers come to know through these networked images, and also how trust in these images established, and how networked settings change the way trust, of authority and of expertise are achieved.

We're pursuing these and other issues through comparative ethnographic fieldwork, in which we zoom in on four databases of images on the web.

Slide 'Virtual Museum'

A lot has been written about user-generated content and how new media practices redefine the role of cultural producers and of cultural institutions, for instance by people like Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* and Axl Bruns in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*.

For museums, new media strategies are of course not that new—computerisation and digitisation have been on the agenda for 30 years. A wide range of metaphors have since then been used to articulate hopes from new impulses for museums as culturally and socially relevant institutions and as hotbeds of technologically savvy cultural innovation. We can think of the visual museum, of the Participatory Museum, or of the Museum 2.0, for instance.

Almost no museum in the western world can think of not having a website, and for most, web-based exhibitions and presentation of collections are also high on the agenda.

Slides Flickr and Steve museum

Interaction with visitors has also been rethought in terms of new media, but we can also think here of the use of Flickr as a site for presenting historical photographic collections, or of prominently debated platforms like Stevemuseum, with their emphasis on tagging and crowdsourcing. Stevemuseum is a collaboration of museum professionals and others who believe that social tagging may provide profound new ways to describe and access cultural heritage collections and encourage visitor engagement with collection objects.

Slide Research questions

In this paper we will focus specifically on this one aspect of the virtual museum: the changes in the kinds of infrastructures that shape museum knowledge. Participatory new media phenomena are often characterized as taking place via or in infrastructures as new sites of knowledge production, such as networked databases or the websites mentioned above designed for interaction and participation. But to call something a new site of knowledge production is also to posit a new geography of power, one that is often considered to be outside institutions, and enabled by new infrastructure. While we see that much attention has been paid to the influence of these new sites on fields such as journalism or creative industries, the ways in which they are mediated through and inflected by the often highly institutionalized contexts of museums is often left unaddressed. While these developments may indeed contribute to the blurring of boundaries between knowledge produced by cultural institutions such as museums, and 'the public', this is by no means certain, and it is a question we'd like to treat ethnographically. We think it is fruitful to analyse struggles that are taking place over *which actors* are entitled to produce and distribute museum knowledge, and how that, in turn, affects existing power relations.

The central question is:

Taking into account pre-existing institutional and infrastructural elements, can we see changes in the way knowledge is produced?

Or more specifically:

How are configurations of expertise and authority enacted in the development and implementation of virtual museums?

This is an important angle, in light of the popular claim that new technologies will radically reconfigure existing socio-technical relations and – in this case – might dramatically alter the basis for for instance the authority of people who were traditionally labeled as museum experts. We feel it is crucial to show the plurality and diversity of these configurations in our analysis. In effect, what we have found in our fieldwork, and by drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS) and new media studies, is a constitutive tension between reproduction and innovation. STS gives us the tools to understand the relationship between users, technology and knowledge, while new media studies enables us to address the particularity of digital media and visual culture.

Slide Authorizing actors

The Tropenmuseum is a useful case here for at least two reasons. First, because the museum makes extensive use of a web-based collection database of images in a system called The Museum System (TMS). We think it is interesting to interrogate how the database not only structures much of the institutional work processes within the museum, but also (re-) defines what can count as the collection, and the ways in which other users can interact with the museum collection via digital images. Second, the database is progressively linked to other kinds of information and to other kinds of activities, similar to the examples on Flickr and Steve.Museum we mentioned above. But first a little bit about the networked image database.

Slide TMS

The collection database was put into use in 2000, and carried a number of promises—of modernizing the museum, of improving management, and of enabling the museum to become a better caretaker of its collections. The museum also explicitly aimed at using the database to change user interaction with the collections, both for employees and for museum website visitors. The hope was that the database would diminish the number of times museum employees would need access to the depots, by replacing the practice of handling physical objects by that of consulting a collection database. It was also introduced with the goal of making the museum collections available for a wider audience (including communities of origin) via the web, and to help multiply the number of visitors to the website and the museum. We were able to closely investigate these existing and emergent ways of visual knowing at and around the Tropenmuseum by means of ethnographic fieldwork, which comprised systematic participant observation, qualitative interviews with museum employees and visitors, a detailed scrutiny of new web-based initiatives around the museum collection, and an analysis of official policy documents, relevant archival material and funding applications relating to digitization and information management.

Depending on the time and money invested, TMS can be used as a relatively unpretentious database with rudimentary categorizations of museum objects, or as a highly complex tool for capturing, managing, and accessing collection information. The latter is the case at the Tropenmuseum. Expectations regarding TMS at the Tropenmuseum were rather high when the museum first started working with the database around the year 2000. Although the actual integration and institutionalization of TMS was messier, TMS is now deployed with the goal of changing interactions with the collection, not only for employees. The hopes are that it will reduce the number of times the collection is physically handled, by replacing the practice of handling physical objects by that of consulting a database, and by standardizing and making transparent complete work processes around collection conservation, management, presentation, and research. TMS also changes who is interacting with the collections, and it makes these interactions visible. The hope is that TMS can help make the complete collection accessible to a wider audience, and help multiply the number of visitors to the website and the museum.

The entwinement of this infrastructure with the museum shapes many of the practices in the museum. For example, one of the results of the large-scale digitization of the work processes at the museum is a distribution of power to the computer application manager, one of the few employees to fully understand the new digital infrastructure at a technical level. He is also a key player in other digitization initiatives. The institutional hierarchy and this accompanying division of labor is inscribed in the way database is implemented. Roles of workers at the museum are also implemented in the

way the database is produced and used. For example, 'data entry' is done by registrars, while validation of this material is done by documentalists and curators. This is not simply a step of quality control - it also shapes whether this data can travel or not, since the data is progressively 'released' for circulation in the system, based on whether it has been reviewed and by whom. Once this material is also embedded in the database, its circulation is also restricted to certain actors, so that work must be coordinated around the involvement of others in the museum.

More recently, and following international trends in the museum world, the museum is investing in other new, distributed infrastructures besides the database, and several of these initiatives focus on involving new users.

Slides with different examples

One of the most recent examples is the participation in a recent AskaCurator event, in which people could ask curators from participating museums from all over the world questions via Twitter. The Tropenmuseum now also has a blog.

Slide WLANL

We will now briefly discuss one other example of an event that took place last year, around the time when the Tropenmuseum became a partner of the Wikimedia Foundation, the organization behind Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons. This cooperation developed around a project called Wiki loves art/NL (WLANL). The initiative sought to stimulate amateur photography in museums, with the goal of getting more photographs of cultural heritage on Wikipedia pages under a Creative Commons license. In June of 2009, a group of 46 museums in the Netherlands opened their doors to the public for special sessions, and allowed participants to make photographs of designated objects from their collection. Participants uploaded their images on Flickr, and a jury, consisting of the organizers and a number of museum employees, decided which photos would subsequently be used on the Wikipedia pages and who would receive an award for 'best photo'.

In a blog post on the Wiki loves art project, US-based museum exhibit designer Nina Simon noted that participating museums were especially interested in making their content digitally accessible, without breaking any copyright laws, while the Wikimedia foundation was primarily involved to obtain useful data. And as one of the Dutch participants noted in reaction to Simon's post, many photographers were more concerned with "freely making pictures for their own use (or their portfolio)" and "quite a few came to do their own thing."

So, multiple interests and motivations were served by this event. What is relevant for us is that the circulation of images via these platforms makes possible multiple uses and appropriations—without causing them. Flickr serves as a pipeline, from amateur photographers to Wikipedia, while institutional actors (from Wikimedia to the Tropenmuseum) maintained a gatekeeper function. Not only do we see a shift towards the digital in the material structures that support storage and display of photographs, but in this case, both personal and institutional visual resources take the shape of networked databases. There are of course differences in the way various databases (TMS versus Flickr) are set up, and in the possibilities for interaction—but we do see an alignment of the way visitors and institutions organize their visual knowledge about the museum.

Furthermore, the intersection of multiple agendas of museums and of visitors via Flickr and Wikipedia points to new ways of negotiating what it means for a digital image of a museum object to be, or to become public. A photograph in this initiative was therefore treated as a creation to share with other viewers; an opportunity to document the collection; the production of copyright free data. The WLAN activity reconfigures the public/private dynamics in interesting ways: the museum opens its doors for a 'private' session for amateur photographers; amateur photographers make their personal snapshots public; and there are complex shifts in ownership, copyright and right to publicize, as the images are produced, uploaded, selected and further circulated. The ways of working of different groups become aligned in this project; the skills of amateur photographers for producing visual knowledge about the collection is linked to the aspirations of the museum and of Wikimedia for greater production of copyright free images, while the photographer's work is arguably enhanced through the visibility it gains in the course of this interaction. Different parties use each other to leverage a greater impact of their own skills.

Slide Conclusion

In the examples we have discussed, about the networked collection database and the Wiki Loves art project, configurations of expertise and authority were (re-)shaped in interaction with existing and emergent institutional and infrastructural elements. We see these practices as achievements, resulting from the ongoing process of ordering infrastructural and institutional elements. The way these two elements interact can have far-reaching effects on the very values that denote museum knowledge, and lead to new articulations of expertise and authority.

To see expert knowledge (representing unified knowledge, consistent interpretation, based on authority) as necessarily located in traditional institutional sites and folksonomies as new sites of knowledge production standing outside expertise (and leading to knowledge that is multiple, open to alternatives, deliberative) is to set up a false dichotomy.

Arguing that it is important to look at existing infrastructural and institutional elements goes against the popular claim that new technologies will radically reconfigure existing socio-technical relations. While in effect, what we show is the constitutive tension between reproduction and innovation. There is no reconfiguration of the museum into a single mode.

It is important to look at existing infrastructural and institutional elements. This goes against the popular claim that new technologies will radically reconfigure existing socio-technical relations. In effect, what we show is the constitutive tension between reproduction and innovation. As becomes visible in all of the papers in the panel, there is no reconfiguration of the museum into a single mode.

References

De Rijcke, S. & Beaulieu, A. (2011). Image as interface: consequences for users of museum knowledge. *Library Trends, 59* (3).

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Abstract paper *Reimagining the Archive. Remapping and Remixing Traditional Models in the Digital Era*, Symposium organized by the UCLA Film & Television Archive, The UCLA MA Program in Moving Image Archive Studies, and INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel), and Ina SUP European Centre for research, training and education on Digital Media.

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Title: The enactment of museum collections in digital infrastructures. Authorizing actors, configuring expertise

A recent trend in the museum world is that the work of knowledge production about museum collections is increasingly pursued in infrastructural settings that reach out beyond established organizations, and in new media forms. In this paper, we address how configurations of expertise and authority, two key aspects of knowledge production, are enacted in the development and implementation of virtual museums. We do so on the basis of fieldwork pursued at the Tropenmuseum, an ethnographic museum in Amsterdam. By looking at specific encounters, such as the development of a digital search engine, we are able to draw attention to emerging forms of epistemic authority in relation to pre-existent institutional and infrastructural elements. This is an important angle, in light of the popular claim that new technologies will radically reconfigure existing socio-technical relations and dramatically alter the basis for scientific and scholarly authority. In order to do so, we draw on two fields: Science and Technology Studies and new media studies. The first body of work gives us the analytical tools to understand the relationship between users, technology and knowledge, while work from new media studies enables us to address the particularity of digital media and visual culture. By examining changes in expertise and authority along these lines, we raise critical questions about power and knowledge in relation to the forms of knowledge production that arise in the coming into being of virtual museums.