The Changing Role of Information Professionals in Museums

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Introduction

This paper presents evidence of changes in the role of information professionals in museums during the last three decades and expectations for changes in the next decade, based on experience in the UK. The evidence is presented as a series of bullet points.

The paper focuses on three themes across four decades, 1971-2010:

* Influences on museums: the external influences that have directly or indirectly affected the way museums work (commercial, government and social pressures), plus internal organisational and professional influences within museums (museum community pressures).
* The development of national co-ordination and the involvement of UK participants in international organisations and initiatives.
* Museum responses and trends: the ways in which museums have changed their priorities, organisational structures, documentation staffing and procedures.

1970s

Influences

* Strong pressures for museums to demonstrate accountability for the collections in their care, from internal and external auditors, such as the National Audit Office.
* Early availability of large-scale external IT systems, including those in universities and local authorities.
* Trend towards organisational change and role specialisation in the public sector.

National co-ordination and international involvement IRGMA and the MDA, 1967-

* Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA), active from 1967-77.
* IRGMA supported by a research project based at the Sedgwick Museum, Cambridge, 1974-77, funded by the British Library.
* Developments pursued by the Museum Documentation Association (MDA), established in 1977, with UK-wide support from the national museums and the Area Museum Councils, initially staffed by the research staff from the Sedgwick Museum project, based at the Imperial War Museum branch at Duxford Airfield.
* These three initiatives result in active national collaboration, including:
  - Development of the IRGMA/MDA museum cataloguing standard.
  - System development based on the standard (a range of manual catalogue cards and computer software (GOS).
  - Central advice and training support from the IRGMA team then the MDA specialists.
* Publications about museum documentation principles, the standard and manual systems.

CIDOC, 1963-

* ICOM's International Committee for Documentation (ICOM-CIDOC) on a small scale until late 1970s (20-30 participants acting as national representatives, 2 or 3 from the UK).
* Initial UK involvement by IRGMA then the MDA.
* Active role in management (Geoffrey Lewis, CIDOC Chair).
* Focus on international standards work, based on national initiatives.

Museum responses and trends

* Museum priority on cataloguing and basic procedural control, but with growing pressures for accountability.
* Main emphasis on the use of manual cataloguing systems.
* Development and small scale use of the first computer systems for information management, typically in university museums.
* Introduction and take up of IRGMA/MDA systems and standard: 400 museums are active users within a year of the release of the manual cards.
* The staff responsible for documentation are mainly curators, as part of their general role.
* Very few specialist documentation staff, apart from temporary posts funded by government employment schemes.
* A few information specialists moving from libraries or information science backgrounds.
* Local input by individual staff into IRGMA/MDA developments.

1980s

Influences

* Following the election of the Conservative government, a strong emphasis on managerialism (structural, organisational and managerial changes which focus on the application of private sector systems and techniques into the public sector).

- Need for public bodies to demonstrate effectiveness.
- Early availability of in-house IT systems, including the first microcomputers.
- Acceleration of role specialisation.

National co-ordination and international involvement

MDA

- MDA develops a range of services and resources, with a team of specialists, moving from Duxford Airfield into Cambridge.
- National advisory service, with staff providing support in specific geographic areas.
- Continued development of the MDA standard.
- Wider range of systems (catalogue cards, new procedural controls, computer software (MODES)).
- Publications, including Planning the Documentation of Museum Collections.
- Conferences and conference proceedings, starting with Collections Management in Museums, 1987.

CIDOC

- Active involvement by the MDA staff plus growing membership by other individuals.
- Active UK role in management (Andrew Roberts, Chair, and Leonard Will, Treasurer from 1989, WG Chairs, etc.).
- Input into standards work and publications.
- Input into annual meetings and conferences, including two held in the UK (1983 in London, as part of the ICOM Triennial Conference, and 1987 in Cambridge, adjacent to the first MDA conference).

Museum Computer Network (MCN)

- Active participation by MDA staff, including Board membership.

Museum responses and trends

- Emphasis on inventory control and accountability.
- More active collections management.
- Growing use of external computer services for cataloguing support.
- Tentative use of in-house microcomputers.
- Gradual appointment of more documentation and registration specialists, usually from a curatorial background.
- Some movement of specialists between museums and to and from the MDA.
- Wider and more active involvement with MDA standards work, such as the design of procedural controls.
- Increased opportunity to take part in conferences (MDA, CIDOC, MCN, CHIN, etc.).
- Growth of the UK Registrars Group.

1990s

Influences

- Government and public perception of the importance of an information society.
- Newly elected Labour government (1997) with an emphasis on education and access.
- Changes in visitor expectations: high quality services.
- Focus on a series of standards-setting and monitoring initiatives across museums: Registration, Designation, strategic planning, collections management standards (Museums & Galleries Commission, MGC) and training standards (Museum Training Institute, MTI (now the Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation, CHNTO).
- Widespread availability of IT systems within organisations and development of external networks.
- Emphasis on the interplay between museums, libraries and archives (Museums & Galleries Commission to be succeeded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission,

MLAC).
- Investment in lottery-supported heritage projects, including the development of content and access (Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network, SCRAN, etc.).

National co-ordination and international involvement

MDA

- MDA/**mda** moves within Cambridge, and undergoes staff changes, including losing its original staff and outsourcing some functions.
- National advisory and training service covering wider remit, including IT.
- Renewed emphasis on standards, particularly SPECTRUM (the UK Museum Documentation Standard) and terminology work.
- Systems (procedural controls, computer software (MODES), now supported by a separate company).
- Publications.
- Conferences and conference proceedings.

MGC

- New responsibility for IT strategy.

CIDOC

- Active involvement by the **mda** and UK individuals.
- Active role in management (Andrew Roberts, Chair, and Leonard Will, Treasurer to 1995, then Alice Grant, Treasurer, from 1995, WG Chairs, etc.).
- Standards work and publications, including CIDOC Guidelines.
- Input into annual meetings and conferences, including 1 held in the UK (1999 London).

MCN

- Continued active participation by **mda** staff, including Board membership.

Computer Interchange of Museum Information (CIMI) project

- Active support and involvement.

European initiatives

- Development of Memorandum of Understanding.
- Launch of European Museums' Information Institute (EMII).

Museum responses and trends

- Continued stress on inventory control, matched in later years by a growing concern to support public and research access.
- Significant increase in the emphasis on effective collections management and the use of standards.
- Significant increase in the use of computer systems, with improved performance, functionality and usability, including the first stages of exploiting external networks.
- Increased availability of standards and information systems.
- Changes in expectations, procedures and systems leading to greater demands on staff expertise.
- Development of documentation departments in larger museums and a continued focus on the appointment of junior and senior documentation and registration specialists.
- Job mobility and career progression within the information profession.
- Increased movement of specialists between museums and the **mda.**
- Limited movement between museums and libraries and archives.
- Wider and more active involvement with **mda** standards work, leading up to the publication of *SPECTRUM* and its subsequent widespread adoption.
- Continued opportunities for taking part in conferences, training and professional development within and beyond the sector.

2000s

Influences

- Pervasive use of computer systems and networks.
- Government policy in support of access.
- Public expectations for access to information.
- Convergence of museum, library and archive interests.
- Collaboration between museum-based and academic-based initiatives.

National co-ordination and international involvement mda and MLAC

- MLAC likely to focus on convergence and IT strategic planning and to re-assess the role of the **mda** alongside that of similar library and archive agencies.
- Integration of museum, library and archive standards as part of a national and international development process.
- Re-focusing of advisory services.
- Development of national resources (SCRAN, common knowledge authorities, etc.).

Re-focusing of ICOM

- Role of ICOM and the International Committees under review.

Museum responses and trends

- Greater and on-going investment in systems.
- Move from inventory focus to information focus.
- Development and delivery of access resources.
- Significant increase in the use of content and syntax standards.
- Collaborative work across museums, across the museum, library and archive sectors and the museum and academic sectors.

- Organisational change from inventory and documentation work to active information management and access.
- Emphasis on supporting the use of networks and information by staff and users.
- Additional information specialists needed to support greater level and complexity of work.
- Greater emphasis on in-house training.
- Greater job mobility within museums and across the sectors.