Introduction

Before you can begin to understand how to move your web presence forward, it is important that you understand what you have now. This not only means having a full knowledge of your current website(s) – their size, scope, number of authors, amount of content and so on – but also having a clear view of the current landscape within which your heritage organization operates, both online and offline.

The role of institutions on the web changes constantly, and has been changing since they first started being online. Initially, organizations often find themselves online almost by accident, usually as a result of an enthusiastic staff member spending some of their spare time uploading basic web pages to a server somewhere. Very often, the growth of a site follows an organic path, particularly in its early days: as enthusiastic and web-literate staff members arrive at the organization, interest and competency grows; then as they leave, the site stultifies.

Typically, sites move from this early phase into one where organizational perspectives about the web shift from niche activity into something else – if not core, at least more core to the day-to-day activities of the institution. As organizations began to understand the potential the web offered to widen reach and access to their assets, so the activity of ‘doing the web’ became more central, too. The stakeholders in these institutions now mostly (although not always – we’ll come to that later. . .) see a strong web presence as being an integral part of the other activities they carry out day to day.

Evaluating what you have now
To make things more complicated, the ‘new organization’ online isn’t any longer an X-paged walled-garden entity which has boundaries and well understood rules. Instead, with the advent of Web 2.0 and other third-party services, museums and heritage organizations are moving towards a much looser aggregate of pieces of content and functionality. Even if you don’t actively engage in setting up these third-party sites, you’ll probably find that someone else has – and here is one of the biggest challenges that the social web brings. Getting a handle on ‘external’ content like this is an increasingly important part of any web manager’s role. Again, we’ll look at this in more depth in Chapter 7 ‘The social web (Web 2.0)’.

Often as a website manager coming into a new organization, you’ll find yourself in a position where you inherit a presence with this kind of history. In this or any environment, there are two things which will help you immensely when considering your web presence: first, finding ways of enumerating the physical, content and social assets of your online presence, and second, understanding how your particular context fits into the wider picture: the ‘landscape’ in which your content and assets exist. This latter consideration is one of the main areas where many sites (not just cultural heritage ones) often fail. It is all very well having a fantastic website, but if the audience – your audience – don’t want it, or if it doesn’t fit with their daily lives, you will almost definitely fail in your aspirations.

**The web today**

Before you can really begin to understand how your web presence can impact on, or play a part in, people’s lives it is important to look at how your organization fits into a much bigger picture online.

Multiple analogies can be brought to bear on why this is important, but for now let’s consider a newly opened shop, filled with wonderful and inspiring items. Never before have such items been seen: they are beautiful and engaging, and everyone who sees them is astounded at the quality and richness that they have discovered. There is a problem, however: the owner of the shop only has the money to open it twice a week. It is also situated in a quiet alley downtown: passing traffic is
minimal. The owner does what he can, but the small quantity of trade is barely enough to maintain him. Up the road, on the busy and high-rent high street, a global chain of supermarkets has opened a branch. It is full of low quality, low cost goods. Some things are even free. The supermarket is full of wide-eyed customers, dashing from aisle to aisle and filling their baskets with endless consumables.

This example, although hackneyed and rather obvious in the points that it makes, is actually rather useful at highlighting some of the issues that face us when trying to make an impact with our limited staff resources, time and budgets. Actually, in the real world, things are rather more extreme; it is – as we probably all know – incredibly cheap (often free) to create a website: we don’t even have to find the minimal rent that the owner in our story has to find. We – as cultural heritage institutions – have wonderful and engaging objects. We have stories to tell that we think people will want to hear. But we’re not the supermarket chain: we don’t have anywhere near the budget, marketing power or brand that they have.

The point of this story isn’t that the supermarket will ‘win’, or that the shop owner is destined to fail. Nor is it that you’ll only find quality away from the rush and dash of the big brands. The point is that the web is mind-blowingly big: sprawling, changing, anarchic. Douglas Adams famously described Space like this: ‘Space is big. You just won’t believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it’s a long way down the road to the chemist’s, but that’s just peanuts to space.’¹ This is an equally apt description of the size and scope of the web today.

Not only that, but the people who use the web use it in many, many different ways for a huge number of different things. More importantly – as we shall see as we go along – they will often use content in ways that surprise, too.

Let’s have a look at some facts and figures in order to put all this into some kind of context. In June 2009, Microsoft launched a search engine called Bing² and in their accompanying launch blog post they said this:

In 1997 there were around 26M pages (URLs [Uniform Resource Locators]) on the Web. Today we estimate there are more than 1 trillion pages of content. In 1997 the Web was
mostly text. Today it combines video, images, music, with new data formats emerging every day. The amount of available data has grown exponentially. An average person would need six hundred thousand decades of nonstop reading to read through the information.\(^3\)

In terms of audiences, Internet World Stats\(^4\) suggests that, as of the time of writing, around 1.7 billion people are ‘internet users’ (anyone over two years of age who has been online in the last 30 days). Granted, this is only 25% of the world’s population, but the growth is exponential, with mobile usage expected to have even more of an impact on these figures in the future. By the time you read this, of course, the figures will have changed dramatically – but it is easy for us to predict that both the amount of content available and the number of readers will have increased rather than decreased.

One of the major challenges facing organizations online – and one of the main driving forces behind taking a more strategic approach to the web – is that this environment becomes increasingly competitive as time goes on. Finding ways to ensure that cultural heritage is represented and promoted online is our job; a job that begins with understanding what we have and how we might fit with the daily lives of our web users.

**Content and technology trends**

Content on the internet is changing in profound and radical ways almost every day. This makes it an exciting and dynamic place to work, but also a frustrating one. Getting a handle on which trends are merely fads and which ones are important or even groundbreaking is at first examination a thankless task.

Technology company Gartner coined the phrase ‘Hype Cycle’ to describe the analysis of emerging trends. Figure 1.1 shows how this cycle looks.

The curve is interesting because it suggests how people often respond to new technologies: first, there is a trigger as a new technology enters the market; second, there is a peak of interest as the hype takes hold, a peak that over-inflates the potential of the technology; then there is a trough as most people decide that the technology doesn’t live up to the
hype. If the technology is accepted, it then climbs the *Slope of Enlightenment* before finally settling into a gentle *Plateau of Productivity* when it becomes accepted, a part of the fabric - or, fades away into obscurity.

What does this mean to cultural heritage?

Strangely, one of the downsides of working in cultural heritage is also one of the upsides in this respect: as we are often cash-strapped or resource poor, our organizations rarely (there are exceptions) sit at the bleeding edge of new technologies. We have the frustration but also the luxury of being able to watch technologies emerging, blooming, sometimes fading or sometimes settling before we are in a position where we can use them ourselves.

Consider this with a time lag of anything from six months to two years, and you probably have a fair assessment of where cultural heritage organizations are. See Figure 1.2 for a depiction of the ‘lagged’ Gartner Hype Curve.

This lag allows us to assess incoming content trends, watch how other sectors and audiences are responding to them and then react accordingly.
The internet as a ubiquitous medium

One of the important facets of the Gartner Hype Curve is the final settling of the curve to near-horizontal. At this point in time, the actual hype itself has settled, ‘damped’ if you will. The technology at this stage has become mature.

Tom Standage, author of a number of books looking at the sociology of the web, uses the phrase ‘invisible technology’. In his 1998 book *The Victorian Internet* he says ‘[invisible] technology has matured to become so embedded in, or integrated to, our everyday lives that we don’t really notice it any more’.

He uses the telephone as his example. We no longer think about the underlying technology of the telephone, or compare models (at least not for landlines); what we are interested in is the facility that this technology gives us - not the technology itself. We use the telephone without even thinking: it has become invisible to us.

The web is starting to become ubiquitous. We aren’t yet at a stage where it is invisible, but here in the Western world it is likely that we are minutes from a Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi) hotspot or a General Packet Radio Service
(GPRS), equally (and increasingly) likely that we are carrying a device with which we can access the internet (more on this in Chapter 9 ‘Away from the browser’), and – importantly – have the wherewithal to use the device and services that we can access.

The ubiquity of the internet hasn’t yet translated – at least not now, in the early 2010s – into ‘comfort’. We still for the most part ‘sit forward’ to browse. We aren’t – yet – like Tom Cruise in the film Minority Report, pushing bits and bytes past us with the wave of a hand. At the same time, however, we aren’t a million miles away: touch-screen devices are rising in prominence; the promise of voice and gesture control sits just around the corner; and mobile access is an increasingly important part of our lives.

**Who is online and what do they do?**

With this invisibility – and the changing context of technology in our lives – come changing requirements on us as content providers. Before we think about this, however, let’s consider what people are doing online: who they are, where they’re going and what they’re doing.

Figure 1.3 shows the figures published by Pew Internet from their May 2010 survey:

![Figure 1.3 Percentage of various age groups online](image)

**Figure 1.3 Percentage of various age groups online**
Although Pew is US-centric, other surveys report similar findings; in the UK, for example, the annual OxIS survey reported that, in 2009, 70% of respondents were current users of the internet.  

Again, with both surveys there are similar trends when it comes to educational attainment and internet access. Figure 1.4 gives the figures published by Pew Internet on who is online by level of education:

![Internet use by educational attainment](image)

There have been many surveys carried out on how people use the internet in their daily lives. Figure 1.5 is from Pew Internet again, and shows the percentage of American adults (including both internet users and non-users) who carry out the activities listed on a typical day.

One of the main things to take from this graph is that many of the activities are utilitarian in nature: finding out about the weather, checking e-mail, banking. Pew have been conducting this same survey for nearly ten years. Online they provide this trend data – it is interesting to see how social media activity is increasing over time. We’ll look much more closely at social media in Chapter 7 ‘The social web (Web 2.0)’. 
How does cultural heritage fit?

In November 2010, Arts Council England, in partnership with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), published a report looking at online engagement with arts and culture in England. Obviously, this is UK-centric but it gives some fascinating insight into how users are engaging with arts and cultural organizations online.

Some of the key findings are as follows:

- Over half of the (approximately 2000) people surveyed had used the internet to engage with the arts and cultural sector in the previous 12 months. This activity most commonly centred on events or fact-finding.
- People use digital media as a complement to a live experience rather than as a replacement for it.
- Social media has become a driving force for discovering and sharing information about arts and culture.
- Trust plays a large part for users: recognition of ‘brands’ (in this instance, known and trusted organizations) is important for many.
Statistics and surveys clearly mark opinions at a point in time - but although these kinds of results are always changing, our job stays the same: we need to try to understand where cultural heritage institutions fit into this picture. By doing this - by putting the user right at the centre of the equation - we will be in a much stronger position to build content experiences which mesh with the lives of real people. This is a recurring theme we’ll come back to time and time again.

**Cultural heritage and The Long Tail**

During the mid-1990s, a theory called ‘The Long Tail’\(^\text{13}\) came into vogue. The basic idea was this: the sum total of people consuming content (as it will be for our purposes; it could also be sales or any other number of metrics) at the top, the most popular end of the spectrum, is ultimately eclipsed by the sum total of people consuming content down the ‘tail’ of the spectrum. Figure 1.6 shows how this concept is illustrated graphically:

![Figure 1.6](image)

For people with an understanding of Power Laws, this is relatively unsurprising, but the articulation of the concept has profound implications for niche content providers. It challenges the notion - long held - that volume of traffic to the most popular is the key to success.
Instead, it suggests that the niche content and interests represented by the ‘tail’ is actually more important than anything else.

Cultural heritage organizations are uniquely positioned to understand the niche opportunities of the long tail. We have content that appeals on many levels: museums, galleries and other cultural heritage organizations have the potential to build passionate followers whose level of engagement far outstrips the ‘pile them high, sell them cheap’ metaphor which exists around other online destinations. A single person who believes in your content and who goes out into the marketplace being passionate about what they’ve seen, is far more valuable than scores of people who are ambivalent about what you do. We’ll see this factor coming into play later on as we consider the power of the social web in Chapter 7 ‘The social web (Web 2.0)’.

For some institutions – the lucky few national museums, for example – reach is not a problem, and they are therefore in a place where they can lever a rich mix of niche passion and global audience. For smaller organizations, the leveraging of the niche is a key asset: finding the places, the experiences and the people to make this happen is vital. Later on, we’ll look in much more detail at how best to leverage both user feedback and the social web in order to maximize the impact of specialized areas in our own organizations.

**The internal context**

Having spent a bit of time looking at the wider context of how people use the web, let’s now turn inward to our organization by carrying out a simple audit.

What we’re going to do in this section is to put some shape around your web presence by enumerating some key known facts and figures. There will probably also be unknowns, and we’ll make sure that we determine ways to follow up on these later. By the end of this section you’ll have a 1–2 page top level overview of your current internal operating environment which we’ll use as the basis for – among other things – our strategy-writing. You might want to grab a piece of paper and begin to sketch out a mind-map or similar: even if you’re in a small organization with very few staff and resources, you’ll find that a visual aid will be very helpful.
On the website at http://heritageweb.co.uk/book/ch1/context-audit you’ll find a simple template which you can print out and use to help you gather all this information.

Although this chapter might appear slightly formulaic, you should find it helpful to have a top level understanding of how you work sketched out in a simple form. As well as being a useful crib-sheet for you and your team, you’ll probably also find it helpful to be able to get at these facts easily when stakeholders, trustees or funders ask for them.

Finally, before you start, don’t be constrained at all by the template or the questions that are being asked. Make sure you get down any of the other particulars you think of as you go: make notes if there are subtle details which you think will be important later on.

**Organization**

Let’s begin by looking at the organization you’re working in. In this section, focus not on the web presence but on the physical. Try to answer the following kinds of questions (there well may be more which are specific to your sector or type of organization; don’t let the following list be in any way restrictive):

- How big is your organization (staff numbers, buildings, sites, etc.)?
- How big is your actual audience (for instance, your public footfall each year)?
- Is there a mission statement or similar which succinctly describes what the organization is trying to do?
- Who are the key audiences?
- What would ‘success’ look like for your organization?
- Which kinds of financial environment are you working in? Are you wholly not-for-profit for instance? Are there areas that make money, others that lose money, or which require government funding?
- What are the levels of budget available, to you and your web team (more on this below) but also to the organization as a whole?

While you’re answering these questions, you’ll find it useful to gather together any documents such as organizational strategy, budgets and
mission statements. Put them all into a folder on your computer which you can get to easily.

**Web team**

Next up, let’s consider the web team. This is sometimes much harder than it looks – cultural heritage web teams, because of the organic growth mentioned above, are very often spread around an organization rather than focused in a single, easily definable ‘team’ as such. If this is the case for you, don’t worry – what we’re looking to understand is the sum total of the people-resource the web team has available to it. If you work in a small organization and the ‘team’ is just you, then it is still worth highlighting where your skills and competencies lie, and also where you feel there are gaps. Here are the kinds of questions to consider:

- How many people (full-time employees) are in the web team? How many part-time?
- What are their competencies? Are they writers, developers, designers…?
- What is the total budget allocated to paying for the web team?
- If the team is spread around your organization, where exactly are they located? If they are allocated to working with you on the web on a part-time basis, what other pressures are they under?
- What, if anything, do you outsource? Design, technical, editorial, content . . . ?

While you are doing this, you might also want to consider any of the sensitivities that might exist: If your team members provide content or work for you part-time and for someone else in the organization for the rest of their time, what political issues might this cause? Do you struggle to get the time from some of your staff? Where are the weaknesses in your team,
skills-wise? Where are the strengths? Are there any individuals who are indispensable? Are there any who who could be considered the opposite?

**Stakeholders**

Let’s have a look at the people in the wider organization and beyond to try to get a handle on what effect they may have on how you work.

Much of the actual structure talked about here depends on how your particular organization is put together. If you’re lucky, you’ll work in a fairly flat structure where the hierarchy is less important, but for many institutions there is still a pyramid-shaped management structure. Even if your organization is nearly flat in these terms, the normal political workplace tensions can make a big difference to your working environment.

For some reason, whether it is the fact that the web has a visible presence which people can interact with or because everyone wants a part of it, it is often the case that stakeholders want to become involved – perhaps ‘too’ involved – in the running of websites. Sometimes, this kind of support is appreciated (and in many organizations, it is a breath of fresh air to find that the board or executive actually want to contribute), but sometimes it can be irritating, too. Either way, understanding who in the organization is a stakeholder, what the political pressures are on them, and how you might be able to work with them successfully, is an important part of running a cultural heritage web presence smoothly.

Start by making a list of all the senior stakeholders you can think of. This might include:

- the executive board
- heads of department, in particular Curatorial, Education, IT (Information Technology) and Marketing
- budget holders
- funders, both internal and external
- trustees.

Although it sounds over-political, it is well worth you taking some time getting to know your stakeholders. Get into as many meetings with them
as you can – make your presence known and begin to build the web and the web team into their consciousness as much as possible. For senior stakeholders it is often worth taking time to produce very short, very succinct descriptions and graphical representations of what you and your team does: trustees and funders are often much more concerned with budgetary implications and return on investment than anything else!

If you are in the position where you know your stakeholders already, sketch out their various motivations next to their names on your list. If you don’t know them, find people who do and do the same as best as you can. If you’re lucky enough to have well known trustees at the top of your organization, try doing some Googling – you’ll be surprised as to what you can find out about their backgrounds, prejudices and motivations!

Later on, we’ll find ways in which you can mesh your stakeholder motivations with the strategic direction that we’ll define for your web presence. You’ll find that the combination of a rock-solid strategy and background knowledge of your stakeholders will put you in a very strong position to push the web agenda.

Content

Next, let’s have a look at the all-important issue of content. We’ll come back to this in Chapter 2 ‘Building a strategic approach’ and beyond, but our aim right now is to get a top level view of where you currently are.

Finding answers to the following questions will be useful to you as we move into the later sections of this book. You may already have done some kind of content audit, in which case use this to help inform the answers you provide here.

- Who authors the content on your site? Is writing done internally, externally, or is it a case of a combination of both? If at least some of the writing is done internally, how is the effort spread around your organization?
- If you commission content externally, how and when does this happen? In other words, do you regularly pay someone to write for
you, or do you commission content purely for specific exhibitions, openings and so forth?

- What kind of content workflow do you have? Do you, for instance, commission people to write and then filter what they have written through some kind of editorial process? If you have such a process, sketch it out.
- Do you have a style guide? If so, put a copy in your resources folder.
- What is the size of the content you have available to you? This is often difficult to quantify, but try to get a handle on things like the number of web pages, number of images and number of items in a digital collection.

As well as these, spend a bit of time asking some more general questions: How good is your content? Do you think it is popular, well received by your online audience and generally engaging? How could it be better?

**Metrics**

We’ll look at metrics in much more depth in Chapter 6 ‘Traffic and metrics’ – what should be measured, how to measure it, and how to improve both the quantity and quality of your traffic. For now, let’s just make sure you’ve got the very top line figures available to you. We should also note here that web analytics is a bit of a black art – there is no easily attainable ‘one size fits all’ means of measuring success – but it is also true to say that some figures are always being asked for by funders, stakeholders and other interested people. Sometimes these figures are completely meaningless (the classic example – luckily, mostly an example which has disappeared into the mists of time – is ‘hits’, which mean precisely nothing. . .) – but are still asked for. Having them to hand can therefore be useful!

As before, get hold of your analytics source (or ask someone who can get these figures for you) and note down the following:

- month-on-month visits
- month-on-month repeat visits
• month-on-month page views (also called ‘page impressions’).

If possible, do this historically over the longest ‘meaningful period’ you can: if, for example, you had a large-scale redesign two years ago, then choose two years ago as your cut-off point. You can use your discretion here: use figures that will be useful to you as well as to those who might ask.

Do this for each ‘web estate’ you have figures for, taking care where possible that you don’t overlap or double count. For many institutions, you’ll have a single site, in which case use this. For bigger institutions or those with multiple web presences, it is worth dividing up the data for each one into spreadsheet tabs, and then aggregating totals into a master spreadsheet.

Use the spreadsheet template at http://heritageweb.co.uk/book/ch1/stats-template to set this data out. You’ll find it useful to work out averages and totals for each year. Adjust the year to match whatever your institution does: some work to a financial April to March cycle; others work to the calendar year.

Technology

We’ll finish up with a simple technology audit. If you’re non-technical, you may need to go and talk to your Head of IT or similar in order to get answers to these questions. Again, as per the areas above, don’t be constrained if you feel there are important details unlikely to be thrown up by these questions but which should be noted.

• Do you have a CMS?
• If so, what is it (name of system) and what operating environment (Windows, Linux, or other? Databased, file-based, etc?) does it work in?
• What is the general feeling about the CMS? Are staff (and you!) happy working with it? If not, why not?
• If you don’t have a CMS, how are you currently making changes to your content online? (Common answers include things like Dreamweaver, manual edit and file transfer protocol [FTP], sourced to an external company.)
• What technical issues do you currently have and/or do you foresee having in the next year or so? Are there issues with scaling your site? Are any hosting contracts coming to an end?

**Summary**

We’ve thought about two main things in this chapter: first, we took a look at the wider context of the web, and considered some important factors about this context; second, we turned inwards and did a top level audit of the internal operating environment in which you find yourself today.

You should hopefully find that this approach helps you in a couple of ways:

First, the audit should help you to understand exactly where your current web presence has got to, allow you to articulate what assets you have and how these might be used most effectively.

Second, it should help remind you that your organization operates in a wider context where people are spending most of their time online checking e-mail, sharing images, commenting and so on. Although this sounds obvious, a common criticism of many institutions on the web is that their approaches are organization-focused rather than user-focused.

Finally, this thinking begins to set the scene for thinking about what we do in a wider and more strategic framework: one which is less about reactive thinking and more about being proactive and measured. It is to this subject which we shall turn in Chapter 2.

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