Terminology and Public Access: Developing a thesaurus of telecommunication object names

Background to the Connected Earth Project:

Thinking of the two themes for this year’s CECOMM conference, I hope to combine elements of both collaboration and collecting since we last met.

Two years ago, I gave you an update on how the Connected Earth project was trying to make the dispersed collections more accessible, both for researchers in museums and the more general visitors. We were trying to achieve this by providing access to a database of objects on the Connected Earth website. Today I would like to update you on how this project is evolving, finishing with reference to the modern telecommunications equipment I am currently collecting to represent the development of this specialist industry in Scotland.

First, a quick recap:

BT has obligations to preserve its pre privatisation archive under Act of Parliament, but no such obligation exists in relation to its object collections, in the way for example that exists for the UK railway industry where the care of objects is under the supervision of the government appointed Railway Preservation Trust. Despite the lack of government requirement, as a company, BT has accepted an obligation to preserve its material culture, most recently manifested in its publication of a Heritage Policy in 2004.
The Connected Earth Project became the favoured solution for the company’s decision to provide greater access to its collections no longer accessible since the closure of the BT Museum in central London in 1997, as well as greater access to a range of much smaller collections which had grown up over the years through the enthusiasm of engineers and stored unofficially in telephone exchanges across the country.

Given the large scale of the collections, the company accepted that a single museum was not an option. Given, equally that by 2001 their business focus was more towards new media and broadband, a museum on the internet seemed a good solution in keeping with the company ethos. This virtual museum would be supported by a network of partner museums which would hold and give access to the physical collections which make up the BT dispersed collection.

The Connected Earth project and website were launched in June 2002 by the then Minister for Culture Media and Sport, when she said “I particularly welcome Connected Earth’s innovative Museum on the Internet, which will enable the public to gain access to the magnificent collection of artefacts.”

**Thesaurus development**

The question we have been exploring is how far the website has gone in meeting that aim and what steps the Connected Earth project can take to provide greater access to these dispersed collections. One means of achieving this is the development of a telecommunications object name thesaurus to enhance access to collections for museum staff and therefore ultimately enhance both physical and intellectual access for all users.
To this end, we are commissioning a thesaurus specialist to work alongside a subject specialist to develop a thesaurus of object names to provide consistent naming of objects across various museum collections. This thesaurus will be developed as a stand alone operation using software importable into different museums' cataloguing software.

This is still in the early stages of development. We interviewed and appointed both specialists earlier this summer and they started the project in September. They aim to complete a framework by March 2009, which could be expanded as necessary to accommodate other subjects, both historical and modern. The primary function of the thesaurus is as a cataloguing tool for museums. They will compile a list of terms from sources supplied by the Connected Earth partners and the Subject Specialist, to build a hierarchical structure and determine preferred (and non-preferred) terms. The major part of the work will be providing the definitions of each term used within the context of the thesaurus. Many of the terms will be straightforward, but there are also many specialist terms which will require very careful definitions to allow the non-specialist, which will include the majority of curators using the thesaurus, to accurately apply a term.

There are around 5500 objects across the Connected Earth dispersed collections, held by over 60 different institutions. The large majority of the material though is held by the 8 partner museums. Initial analysis of the lists of objects shows about 400 distinct names so far, but with a lot of duplication of terms. Once these terms are more accurately defined, the specialists estimate the initial thesaurus will contain around 1000 to 1500 terms. The aim would be to provide a framework which could be expanded to accommodate other objects, both historical and modern, to allow for future collecting.

The prototype thesaurus is due to be completed by March 2009 and will then be tested and reviewed by the Connected Earth Partners until July when the Specialists will make any changes to the terms or the framework which have been identified as needed during the review.
We hope in time to use it as a search tool to make the website accessible and understandable to a general audience and we will therefore be incorporating non-preferred names for database searches (telephone box for kiosk etc.), though there is also a need to cater for the specialist researcher and we will need to incorporate specialist terms too.

We hope that the development of a thesaurus of telecommunication object names will eventually relate to other thesauri with overlapping subject matter. The thesaurus consultant has already been involved in the development of the Railway Object Name thesaurus, for example, where there are clear areas of overlap, as there are with the work of the British Postal Museum and Archive. The Computer Historical Society might be another such group and more general terms for objects such as office equipment could tie in to existing Getty or British Museum thesauri.

We also need to be clear about the parameters of this project in terms of date range and subject. At present, the prototype will cover a period from around 1830 to the present, to encompass the range of telegraphy and telephony material already in the Connected Earth collections. We realise that any form of terminology control will be an ongoing, long term project as the collections grow and the subject parameters expand. This will be evident in relation to contemporary collecting in areas such as the internet and broadband, or in the illustration here, the applications of microelectronics in telecommunications.

Contemporary collecting at National Museums Scotland

A new permanent gallery opened at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh in July. Called Scotland: A Changing Nation, it covers a period from 1914 to the present day. As well as exploring continuity and change in Scottish social and political life, it examines the decline, adaptation and evolution of Scottish industries across the 20th century and into the 21st. One
of the more recent industries to emerge is microelectronics and the manufacture of semiconductors. Wolfson Microelectronics are an Edinburgh based company and one of the world leaders in the development of audio chips. A printout of a plot diagram of a Wolfson Microelectronics audio chip, shows the computer designed circuitry for the chip, including their logo with a map of Scotland. This is then miniaturised through a series of stages, and finally photo-etched onto a silicon wafer to create the final microchips. There are Wolfson chips with microscopic maps of Scotland in mobile phones, digital cameras, DVD players, TVs and iPods - pretty much anything which makes or receives a sound. The new Apple iPhone has Wolfson audio chips in it. These objects form part of the Communications collections and are displayed in the new exhibition alongside imager chips developed in Scotland from the mid 1990s, which form the basis of the digital cameras integral to mobile phones.

Conclusion

This is just one example of contemporary collecting, to illustrate the sort of material which the thesaurus will have to accommodate, alongside cable samples or telegraph and telephone receivers, to accurately reflect the development of the Connected Earth dispersed collections. We are aware that the development of the thesaurus prototype and initial definition of the terms to populate it is only the start. The main body of the work will be in the evaluation, maintenance and development of the thesaurus. We will see over the next year how far we get in taking this project forward and how successfully it meets all its users’ needs.