

Address to AAM Media and Technology Committee Breakfast - 15 May 2007

Alex Morrison, Managing Director of Cogapp

Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

It's a pleasure, on behalf of Cogapp, to be with you at this breakfast.

For those of you who don't know us we are consultants and producers in the field of online and interactive communications. And it is our privilege and pleasure to work with many fine museums - nine national museums and many others at last count.

Thinking what to say on this occasion two quotations sprang to mind.

One comes from Mark Thompson, the director general of the BBC.

Speaking in April 2007 to a gathering of TV executives Mark Thompson said:

What we are seeing is a distinct second wave in digital.

I believe that this second wave will turn out to be far more disruptive than the first.

The foundation on which much of traditional media is built may be swept away entirely.

But it is also a wave that brings astonishing creative opportunities.

Are museums part of the media? Most definitely. Will this distinct second wave of digital be disruptive? I think Mark Thompson knows what he is talking about. Will it sweep museums away completely, most definitely not. Will it transform them, quite possibly. And the key question is how to grasp the astonishing creative opportunities.

Cogapp has been working in this field since the early days of products like HyperCard and ToolBox - long before the web began.

And we have seen many things come and go, but we have never seen such opportunities as we see now.

Which brings me to my second quotation.

It turns out to be an appropriate one for this meeting.

I didn't know this when I started, but it comes from an architect called Daniel Burnham who is closely connected with the city of Chicago.

Burnham was responsible amongst many other things for helping to plan its development, producing in the process the first comprehensive plan for the growth of an American city.

Perhaps you all know about Burnham, I certainly did not. In any case, he is worth finding out about. He was a magnificent, inspirational, flawed character responsible for skyscrapers, worlds fairs, cities, parks and railway stations.

And Burnham said, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized."

Apart from its connection with Chicago this quote is apposite for two further reasons.

Firstly because I had it first from one of your committee members - Holly Witchey who herself has been an inspiration to me, and a colleague and patron of our work for many years.

Thank you Holly, for this and for so many other things.

Secondly I wanted, before I gave it to you, to check it. Needless to say my memory turned out to be partial and inaccurate. But the internet came to my assistance in the form of Google (founded September 1998) and Wikipedia (founded January 2001).

In 1993 or thereabouts Microsoft (founded 1975) effectively destroyed the business of Encyclopedia Britannica (founded 1768) and the other encyclopedia publishers by reducing the price of their Encarta CD-ROM to less than \$300.

I suppose if you had been very prescient you would at that time have been able to extrapolate from these events to the advent of Wikipedia. But no-one so far as I know did. And if you had made such a prediction at the time, I believe you would have been laughed at.

Imagine explaining to a publishing executive at any time before about 2003 that the most used and most useful work of general reference in any medium would be an online publication comprised of unpaid contributions, completely free without advertising. It simply would not have made any sense. But it does and the result is a cultural treasure.

Wikipedia has been more popular than Britannica.com since June 2003. Since January 2006 Britannica's average daily pageviews score has been less than 1% of Wikipedia's.

What is the inspiration behind Wikipedia ?

Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, has given the following answer "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing."

No one can accuse the creators of Wikipedia of having a little plan.

What is the equivalent of Wikipedia for your organisation ? What is the equivalent of Wikipedia for museums as a whole ?

I am not claiming to know the answer but I'm sure that these are reasonable questions. And I'm sure that between us we could come up with some interesting answers and that now is the time to be having the discussion.

So make no little plans. The next few years will be interesting. Enjoy the ride. And your breakfast. And let the spirit of Daniel Burnham inspire your conversations.