

## Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Smithsonian 1.1 And 2.9

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I was lucky enough to be invited to the Smithsonian 2.0 meeting this past weekend as one of the “[digerati](#)<sup>[1]</sup>” who were there to prod the institution out of its analog complacency into the digital future. Long-time readers of this blog will probably sense my amusement at the “digerati” designation; not only am I a history professor, which seems like an instant disqualification for any noun that ends in -ati, but I’ve always tempered the Vision Thing with the Pragmatic Thing. Having done a lot of big digital projects, my feeling is that using [mod\\_rewrite](#)<sup>[2]</sup> well is as important to success as modifying ideals. Edison’s dictum about “1% inspiration and 99% perspiration” remains true for the digital realm.

Anyway, the real digerati showed up at Smithsonian 2.0 too, and they did indeed provide inspiration: hip representatives of [Facebook](#)<sup>[3]</sup> and [MySpace](#)<sup>[4]</sup>, people with “seriously, that’s your title?” titles like Chief Gaming Officer, and bestselling authors like [Chris Anderson](#)<sup>[5]</sup>, editor of [Wired](#)<sup>[6]</sup> magazine and [Long Tail](#)<sup>[7]</sup> theorist, and [Clay Shirky](#)<sup>[8]</sup> of [Here Comes Everybody](#)<sup>[9]</sup> fame. (Long-time readers of this blog will probably sense my envy at not having a cool, bestselling book like these ones.) It was an incredibly well-run meeting; several of the attendees joked that the Smithsonian could get to 2.0 just by placing the people who deftly managed the coat racks in charge of the web servers.

If you really want to get a full feeling for the meeting, the best way to do it (in true 2.0 style) is to read in chronological order [the Twitter stream of it](#)<sup>[10]</sup>. I jotted a lot of notes and ideas there, as did many other attendees. (You can follow me on Twitter [@dancohen](#)<sup>[11]</sup>.) In addition, via the power of Twitter, we captured many excellent points and responses from people around the globe. You should also be sure to read the

discussion page<sup>[12]</sup> on the main Smithsonian 2.0 site<sup>[13]</sup>, and initial crowdsourced recommendations<sup>[14]</sup> I gathered before the meeting.

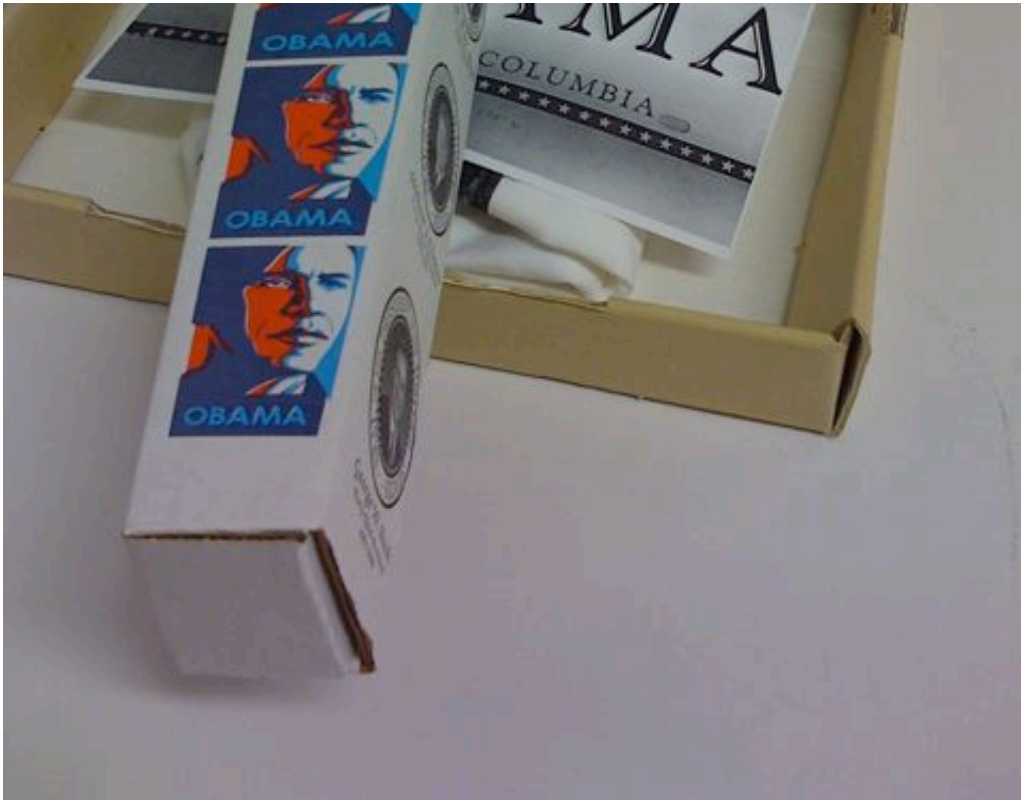
Let me summarize my post-meeting sense of where the Smithsonian should go for those who don't have time to read a hundred tweets. Given my background in mathematics, I began to think of Smithsonian 2.0 as existing between Smithsonian 1.1 and Smithsonian 2.9. That is, implicit in "Smithsonian 2.0" were some incremental moves forward that could be done cheaply and quickly—Smithsonian 1.1—and a very large, expensive, complex project that would lead Smithsonian into Web 2.0 and beyond—Smithsonian 2.9. I believe both of these models can be instructive to institutions beyond the Smithsonian, whether large or small.

Smithsonian 1.1 would involve a much more aggressive use of social media and technology that's already out there, to begin to take many small steps and make many small experiments using what is currently available. The Smithsonian has already done some of this, of course: the National Museum of American History has a blog<sup>[15]</sup>, SI has a small presence on Flickr Commons<sup>[16]</sup>, and museums have begun to tweet<sup>[17]</sup>.

But these are relatively scattered, uncoordinated attempts, frequently done by younger, tech-savvy SI staffers in their spare time. The Smithsonian should be doing much, much more of this. For instance, given their expertise and excitement about SI's holdings, it seemed clear to the digerati that every curator should have a blog, even if infrequently used, to recount tales of objects. While visiting the Museum of American History's vaults, it was clear that a huge audience would subscribe to a weekly or daily video podcast that covered incredible treasures that rarely see the light of day, such as Abraham Lincoln's handball, or what the Smithsonian just collected and is preserving from the inauguration of Barack Obama.







Undoubtedly there will be resistance among some curators to doing Web 2.0-y things like podcasts or crowdsourced tagging of their items. These curators believe that such efforts belittle (or “anti-intellectualize,” as one put it) the holdings of the Smithsonian. (As Chris Anderson [tweeted](#)<sup>[18]</sup>: “Response from curators to my Smithsonian 2.0 talk suggesting radical things like adding comments to stamp website: we’ll be out of a job!”) Moreover, it’s still harder than it should be for SI staffers to engage in common, modern digital activities. This institutional friction was embodied in the tale of Sarah Taylor, a [National Zoo](#)<sup>[19]</sup> public affairs staffer, who couldn’t get the equipment or accounts she needed to upload video of the zoo’s famous pandas to sharing sites that reach millions.

If Smithsonian 1.1 requires overcoming institutional conservatism, Smithsonian 2.9 will require a moon shot mentality. Digitizing 137 million objects will be enormously expensive, and that’s just the beginning. Service layers will have to be added on top of that digital collection. The young, brilliant [David Recordon](#)<sup>[20]</sup> of [Six Apart](#)<sup>[21]</sup> summarized what the 2.9 project should result in (I’m paraphrasing here from memory):

Before I visit Washington, I want to be able to go to the web and select items I'm really interested in from the entire Smithsonian collection. When I wake up the next morning, I want in my inbox a PDF of my personalized tour to see these objects. When I'm standing in front of an object in a museum, I want to see or hear more information about it on my cell phone. When an event happens related to an object I'm interested in, I want a text message about it. I want to know when it's feeding time for the pandas, or when Lincoln's handball will be on public display. And I want to easily share this information with my classmates, my friends, my family.

This is the Smithsonian not as a network of museums but *as a platform for lifelong learning and cultural engagement*. A tall order, to be sure. But everything in that vision is possible right now, with existing technology. It's just going to take tremendous will, and the funds to get there. Everyone felt that the new Secretary of the Smithsonian, G. Wayne Clough, was going to put a lot of energy and resources into the 2.0 initiative, and I suspect much will come of this meeting. The Smithsonian might not get to 2.9 for a while, but as I was writing this blog post, Sarah Taylor emailed me to say that she was able to get her video online<sup>[22]</sup>.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, January 27th, 2009 at 10:17 pm and is filed under Conferences and Workshops<sup>[23]</sup>, Museums<sup>[24]</sup>. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0<sup>[25]</sup> feed. You can leave a response<sup>[26]</sup>, or trackback<sup>[27]</sup> from your own site.

## References

1. ^ digerati (smithsonian20.si.edu)
2. ^ mod\_rewrite (httpd.apache.org)
3. ^ Facebook (facebook.com)

4. ^ [MySpace](#) (myspace.com)
5. ^ [Chris Anderson](#) (en.wikipedia.org)
6. ^ [Wired](#) (wired.com)
7. ^ [Long Tail](#) (www.thelongtail.com)
8. ^ [Clay Shirky](#) (www.shirky.com)
9. ^ [Here Comes Everybody](#) (www.herecomeseverybody.org)
10. ^ [the Twitter stream of it](#) (search.twitter.com)
11. ^ [@dancohen](#) (twitter.com)
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16. ^ [small presence on Flickr Commons](#) (www.flickr.com)
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18. ^ [tweeted](#) (twitter.com)
19. ^ [National Zoo](#) (nationalzoo.si.edu)
20. ^ [David Recordon](#) (www.davidrecordon.com)
21. ^ [Six Apart](#) (www.sixapart.com)
22. ^ [her video online](#) (www.flickr.com)
23. ^ [View all posts in Conferences and Workshops](#) (www.dancohen.org)
24. ^ [View all posts in Museums](#) (www.dancohen.org)
25. ^ [RSS 2.0](#) (www.dancohen.org)
26. ^ [leave a response](#) (www.dancohen.org)
27. ^ [trackback](#) (www.dancohen.org)

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<http://www.dancohen.org/2009/01/27/smithsonian-11-and-29/>

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