

# Use and Embedding of Interactive Media in a Museum of Contemporary History

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Not much more than 50 months, 1500 days, until the turn of our millenium: the 20th century brought revolutionary changes in communication and we are by no means at the end of the communication-revolution. Let me therefore start with a scenario for the not too distant future:

At many public places, at train stations, airports and highway interchanges we will find culture-stations. Short trailers about points of interest will be shown on video-screens. Dialogue-systems will find out about individual likes and dislikes. A personalized culture-ticket will be printed for a nominal fee. Public transportation and private vehicles will be equipped with a decoder, which is able to read your personalized culture-ticket. Traffic is guided by a satellite supported navigation system. It will direct you to your requested destination. At museums the visitor will be greeted by a computer. The terminal will - via dialogue - further specify your individual interests. All relevant data will be stored on to your culture ticket.

The visitor will be guided through the exhibition by laser system, which selectively targets your pre-specified points of interest. Each exhibited object will be linked up to a voice-control computer, which will answer any questions, collect all ideas or recommendations. A multi-media installation is to be found in every hall. Holographics and computer enhanced imagery will create three-dimensional views.

In a quiet zone you will find small work-stations, which will offer the possibility to enhance and deepen your knowledge about the exhibition. The visitor will, with the help of his personalized culture-ticket, participate in museum-oriented computer games and competitions: The computer will guide the visitor through the exhibit. It will ask questions about different objects. The answers will be entered by keyboard, voice-control or touch screen. Specialized learning-programs will be available for school classes. At the end of your "cultural paper chase" a bonus system will reward you for all correct answers. You will have the choice between the reimbursement of your entrance fee, a poster from the museum's shop or a cool drink from the cafeteria.

Naturally, your bonus account will be transferable to all culture-stations in the country. By this measure the visitor will be able to decide individually and free of any

constraints whether he or she wants to continue the same day, where to stop or where to start the next weekend.

So far my vision for the future. This scenario might sound far-fetched to you in some aspects, but taken as a whole it seems not too far out of reach. But let me come to the reality of my museum.

The "Haus der Geschichte" - the Museum of History of the Federal Republic of Germany - opened its gates on June 14, 1994. Since then, we welcomed more than one million visitors. The origins date back to the first statement of government policy of Helmut Kohl in the autumn of 1982. The newly elected chancellor - who by the way holds a doctorate in history- declared the creation of a museum which is devoted to both "the history of our state and to our divided nation" as one of his basic goals. Accordingly, the "Haus der Geschichte" - an independent federal foundation - covers German history since the end of the second world war. The fall of the wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990 represented challenges and chances at the same time. No one foresaw these radical changes but our initial concept proved valid. Even before the reunification the history of the GDR was taken into account. Today more than 40 percent of our exhibition are devoted to the history of East-Germany.

Our museum of contemporary history for which there was no national or international model to fall back on offers a new view of the past. The basic concept follows a structural understanding of history. It focuses on long-term developments which manifest themselves throughout the last 50 years. Cultural aspects, economic trends and changes in society are the main themes. Political history functions as the red thread. Federal elections which are held every four years offer a chronological orientation.

Three basic decisions best describe our fundamental philosophy for the exhibition of the "Haus der Geschichte": First, we tried to find a new audience for the museum. Second, visitor-orientation and easy access are guiding principles. And third, original footage and tapes are regarded as historical sources and find their way into the exhibition as historical objects.

1. We planned and designed our exhibition for the "everyday-person" who up to this point shied away from museums and cultural activities in general. Museums are no longer isolated outposts for an intellectual elite. They are and must be part of society. Today and even more so in the future, museums have to define their positions in clear competition to the evergrowing entertainment and leisure-time industries. Especially a museum of contemporary history has to address the general public. In the last analysis it is everybody's history which is exhibited in the "Haus der Geschichte".
2. This orientation toward a new audience affects a lot of other factors in a most important way. Our planning focused on avoiding thresholds - literally and in a figurative sense. On one hand the architecture of the newly built "Haus der Geschichte" interacts with our basic understanding of history. The building opens itself to the street. By-passers are welcomed to step inside. The

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use of day-light and the translucent construction symbolize democratic transparency. On the other hand we concentrate our work on the communication process. The use of readily understandable texts, the avoidance of terminology, and easy access to the media-terminals are cornerstones of this concept. Objects which come in all shapes and sizes - from Adenauer's first official car to tiny buttons - are put in a larger historical context. Several objects are arranged into an ensemble. This form of presentation highlights the connection to real life experiences. The objects start to "talk" to the beholders.

3. The use of original footage and historical tape recordings further the development of a communicational environment. Newsreels and radio newscasts cover history after the second world war in its entirety. This creates a special chance for our exhibition. We are able to work with media documentations as true historical sources. The communication-capabilities of object-ensembles are enhanced by the use of integrated media-stations which offer new vistas. The combination of different objects - of films, audio-tapes, three-dimensional pieces, and historical posters, just to name a few - contribute to the lively atmosphere in the "Haus der Geschichte".

On the 36,000 square feet of the permanent exhibition we display approximately 7,000 objects. All things considered, the "Haus der Geschichte" employs a total of 100 media-stations with more than 27 hours of audio-visual material. The basic media lay out of the exhibition is structured into three levels. Continuous programmes - like endless videos - form the first layer of impression. They offer general informations. The visitors have the chance to get an overview of a certain era. On the second level media-stations offer additional facts about specific objects or certain scenic arrangements. Touch screens are employed to guide the visitors through the immense wealth of background information. Interactive systems represent the third level. By these means the museum becomes more "hands-on" than any other history museum that I have seen so far. Let me now describe various examples, where and to what purpose media are employed in the museum. (The conference presentation will be supported by a showing of a film, which specifies details of the media-use in a vivid way.):

- The extensive media-use of the "Haus der Geschichte" starts in the foyer. The visitors are greeted by an electronic directory which offers informations about the basic lay out of the exhibition, about museum related events, about the history of our museum, and finally about service areas such as the cafeteria and the museum's shop. The computer is controlled via touch screen. The visitors are able to plan their way through the exhibit individually and to set priorities. (photos # 1, # 2, # 3)
- As an introduction to our exhibition we created a multivision-show which combines many media. A slide-show, multi-projector films and amazing sound effects are put together to generate an intimate experience for the viewers. Under the title "A Day in Germany" two different time-levels are combined: the 24 hours of a normal actual work-day and 50 years of German post war history. New perspectives and feelings of active participation are the result of this media-fireworks which

operates with fast montage editing. Furthermore, the multivision-display stimulates a lot of different questions which the visitors keep in mind while they visit our permanent exhibit.

- The federal elections form an important point of orientation for our visitors. Starting in 1949, they are a recurring theme in our exhibit. Simultaneous with three-dimensional displays of the election results visitors are encouraged to use computer terminals which offer background informations. They show not only short biographical sketches of the leading politicians but also the exact returns in each German electoral district. This offers new insights into the connecting lines of politics. Everyday life becomes entwined with state affairs. (photos # 4, # 5, # 6)
- A lot of older visitors relive parts of their adolescence in our movie-theater of the 1950s. In the days before the wide spread use of television, cinemas held a special place in the hearts of many. We offer a condensed night at the movies in an authentic environment. The show starts with contemporary commercials. They are followed by a newsreel from the 50s. The feature presentation is an abridged version of blockbusters of that time. Our cinema is equipped with five different sets. Next to the pure entertainment value, the kind of movies produced in that era are strong indicators for everyday life and popular culture. Life was shown in its most ideal way. Naturally, these were direct reactions to the devastation of the war and the moral guilt which many people had to bear.
- Special receivers at various points add to the experience-oriented design of our exhibition. Here, visitors are able to listen in on radio newscasts or original tapes of historical importance. A collection of the national anthems of the two German states and a tape-record of the momentous party-congress of the Social-Democrats in 1959 in which they reoriented their entire foreign policy agenda are two of the most popular listening stations.
- Interactive media are employed to highlight specific themes which merit special attention such as the uprising in East-Germany in 1953, the origins of West-German reparations for Israel, the role of foreign workers in both the German economy and society, and the problem of unemployment. The specific subject is broken down into several parts. The visitors are able to actively select their starting point. For example, the uprising in East-Germany is described in two basic layers. First, there is the historical analysis which is supported by original footage. On the second level oral history interviews of participants are used to emphasize the human factor of history. We questioned not only demonstrators of the uprising but also 'communist' officials, a journalist, and even an officer of the KGB. We deliberately chose to accentuate the contrasting stand-points and views. Even dogmatic statements of 'communist' functionaries contain important insights for posthumous generations. The visitors are able to examine the subject more closely from different angles. Their direct inquiries document a special attention.

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- At the end of the visitors' tour through 50 years of German history, at the end of the permanent exhibition we deliberately placed three media-stations which enable the visitors to remind themselves of most recent events. To this end we employ original footage from a variety of German newscasts. 1994 and 1995 are each covered month by month. A sample of the last four weeks is on display at the third screen of the unit. At the very end, an additional computer terminal which is hooked up to the leading German news-agency symbolizes the last step into the presence. The visitors are able to follow world-wide events just as they unfold. Day in and day out more than 1500 news items are shown. By the means of these media-stations our visitors are gently brought back into the presence. They realize that they are now again in the sphere of actual life with all its joys and problems. (photos # 7, # 8)
- A giant panoramic screen composed of 96 video cubes concludes the "journey of impressions" through the "Haus der Geschichte". At this point a lot of visitors who spent several hours with their past are extremely anxious to look ahead. What will the future hold for them personally and for Germany and Europe in general? Under the title of "Future in our Hands!", we created a film which focuses on relevant questions for the future such as economic and ecological trends, changes in society and the development of democracy in general. The individual responsibility of every citizen, the importance of his or her participation in and contribution to the democratic process are emphasized. (photo # 9)

After this short list of examples let me return to the question of interactivity. The future of museums will in part depend on the successful use of interactive media. They enable a "democratic dialogue" between the visitors and our exhibition. This factor is momentous for a museum of contemporary history. The citizens who have to actively participate in a democratic society are encouraged to individually pursue their own interests. Interactivity deepens the personal commitment to a certain subject and beyond that to history in general.

The classic use of media in museums often fails to "activate" the visitors. When I talk of the ever increasing role of communication for museums, it is clear to my mind, that our institutions have to offer more possibilities for participation. Most information-systems operate only as a one-way street. But visitors have a lot of different expectations. They come to museums with a great variety of motivations and desires. Fulfilling these different needs, museums have to get the visitors out of their passive-receptive mode. Interactive media are best suited to put the visitor in the driving-seat of his or her wants. Beyond the use of simple push-button controls, the visitors will get the chance to communicate in question-and answer-style.

What about the visitors? Do they feel threatened by the use of interactive media?. Empiric studies show that the use of computers is still determined by a generational gap. Older visitors who never experienced computers at school or at their work place are continually insecure. In contrast, members of younger generations feel right at home with the use of modern media.

For that reason, user friendliness and easy access are top priorities for the selection of hard and software. Dialogue systems should be able to function without much prior knowledge. The whole communication system should be easily and readily understood. The design of the menus and interfaces should allow for spontaneity. Software with dull and repetitious sequences instantly kill all further interest.

For the near future, I expect an explosion of interactive media use in museums. In a few years, most exhibitions without modern media will be looked upon as dinosaurs. The new technologies in combination with the fascination which the computer holds especially for young people offer a lot of new chances. I think, they are able to widen the appeal of museums. At the same time, they enhance the didactic efforts of our institutions.

Fears of the overpowering presence of modern media which threatens to veil the objects are for the most part not justified. During our six workshop-exhibitions - all organized in the years before the opening in order to generate as much experience as possible - the "Haus der Geschichte" discovered that for the overall majority of the visitors electronic media represent an additional but substantial offer. Other empiric studies confirm our data: Most visitors are not diverted by the use of interactive media. As part of our extensive evaluations program in which we cooperate with leading American scholars in the field of visitors studies such Prof. Ross Loomis of the Colorado State University we asked of the reactions to the interactive media. 70 percent of the polled found them "easy to use and informative". Additionally, the average time spent in the museum is not aversely affected. On the contrary, 40 percent of the polled visitors maintained that they stayed 2 to 3 hours in our exhibit. Amazing 13 percent allegedly lingered 3 to 4 hours. These findings are encouraging. They prove that interactive media can be used and embedded into museums in a most constructive way.

Where will technological progress lead us. Just as interactive media are coming off age "virtual reality" appears to be the talk of the town. The "virtual museum" offers a whole new set of experiences which will be connected to reality only by the barest of threads. Advocates of this "brave new world" sometimes trumpet the disadvantages of real museums. They claim that the costs for exhibitions are out of every proportion to the shown objects, that safety regulations and conservational considerations inhibit the intimate dialogue with the objects. Most objects, they say, are stored away in dark cellars and never exposed to the public. All things considered, they generally question the effectiveness and usefulness of museums. Instead, they want to electronically simulate the world. The users of "virtual reality"-technology will immerse themselves into a synthesized reality. This kind of escapism might appeal to lot of people and might even offer some new insights and vistas. But it has nothing to do with the way museums work.

The original objects, three and two dimensional ones, still hold center stage for most museums. Even a perfect medium cannot capture its authentic aura. Museums are at a loss when objects are regarded

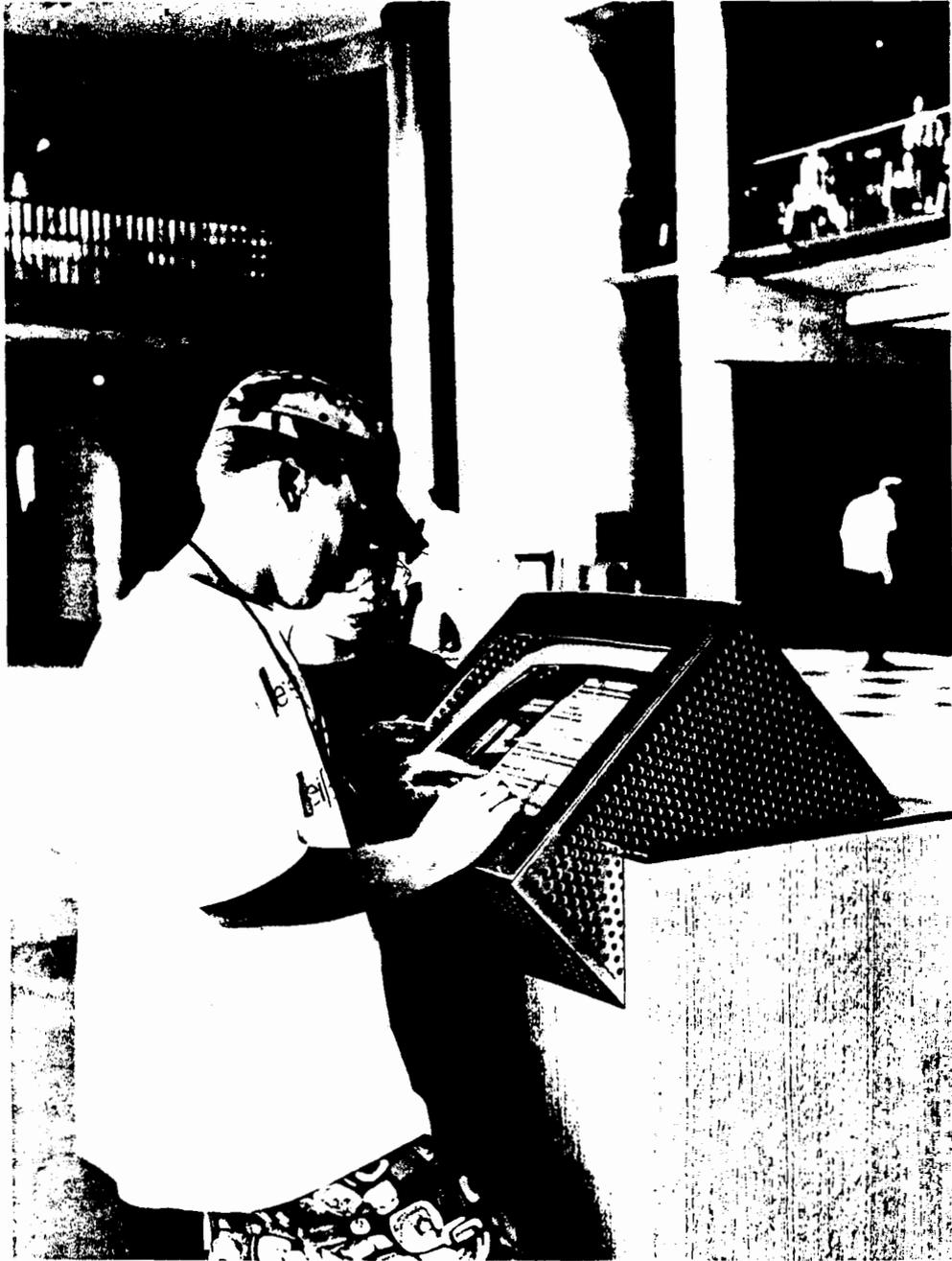
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as mere disturbances. To be honest with you, I do not think that "virtual reality" holds a promising future for museums. Most visitors want to feel the fascination which radiates from original objects.

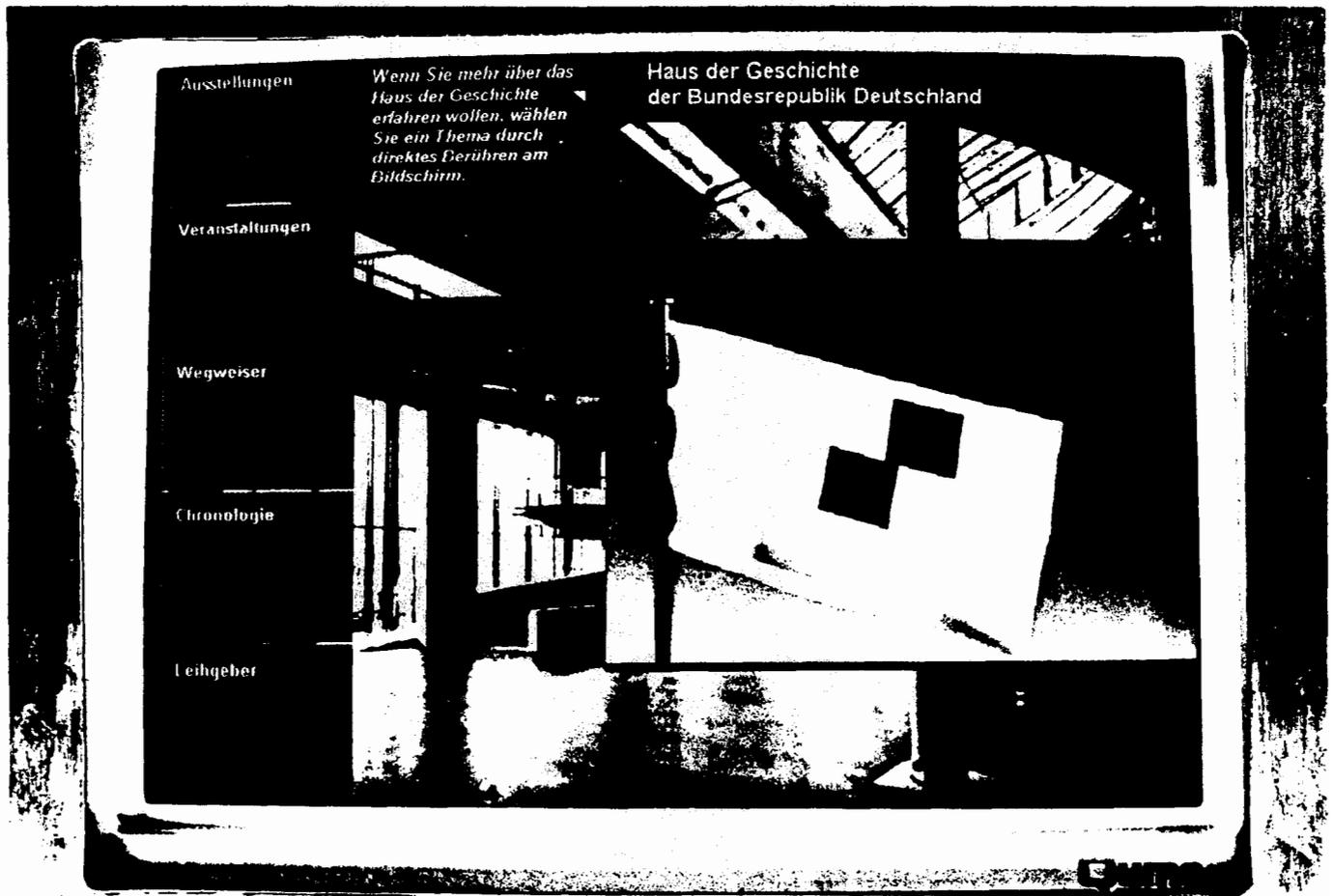
But I do not want to imply that our understanding of reality will not change in the long run. Video-art and holographics prove that media are not only transmitters of information but additionally objects of interest. The same is true for historical films which are more and more recognized as genuine historical sources.

I tried to lay out my thoughts on the use and embedding of interactive media in museums. The basic questions are not so much whether we use any new technology or how to put as many high tech gadgets in our exhibitions as possible, rather than how to find the proper balance between new forms of communication and media-enhanced projection of reality on one hand, and the authentic experience of original objects on the other hand.

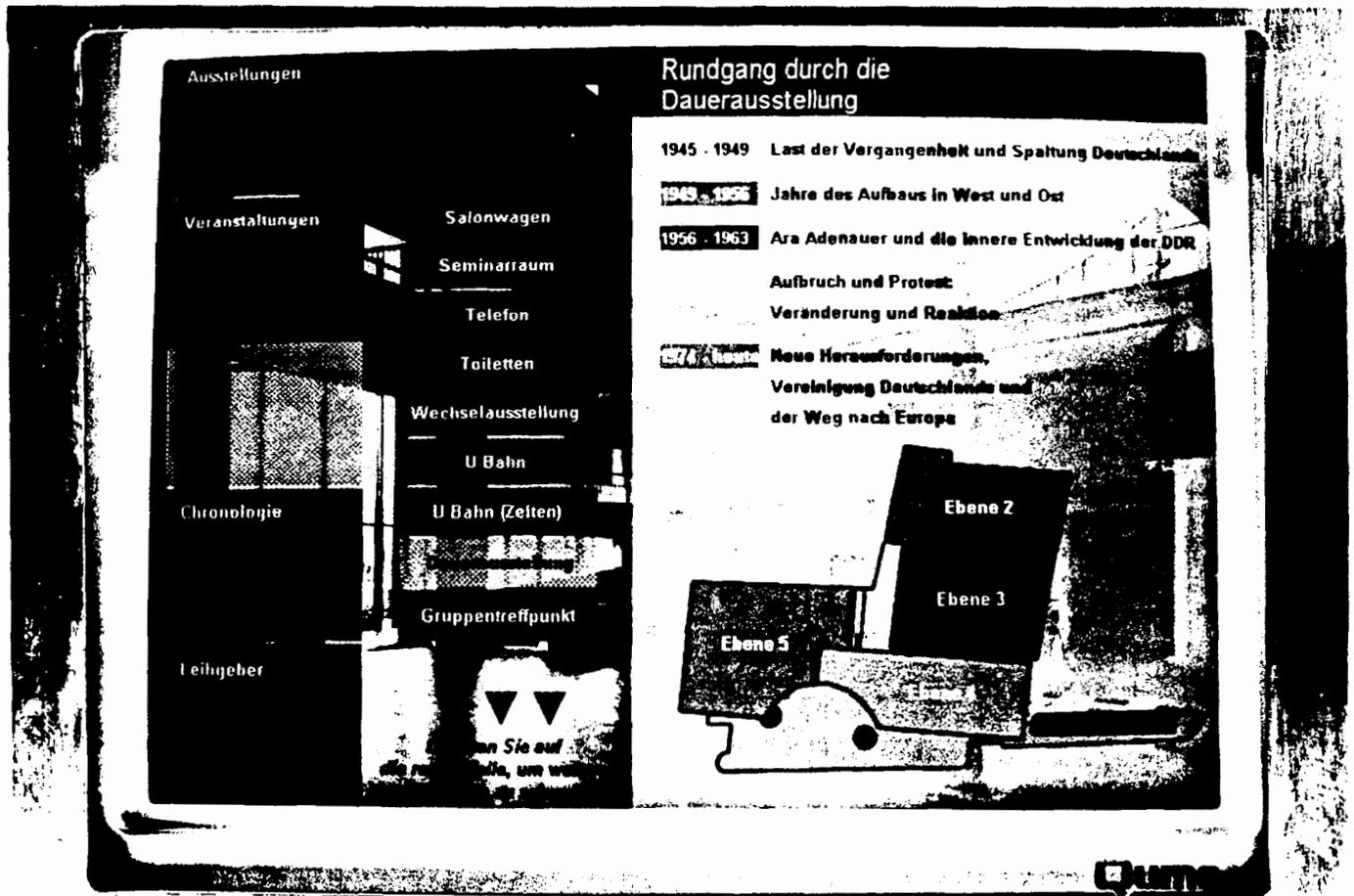
It would be a tragic mistake for museums generally to abstain from new technologies. However, we must keep alive the awareness that it is not the screen which is the original scene of action. Every time we use modern media in our museums we have to emphasize the real background of these projections. But these tasks are not confined to museums alone. The question of technological impact on mankind and especially the increasingly blurred line between reality and fiction are at the moment hotly debated. Vigilance and open-mindedness are important factors for our journey into the future. In this regard, we all should care to be well prepared for the twentyfirst century and its coming communication revolution.



Adolescents find their way through the exhibition.



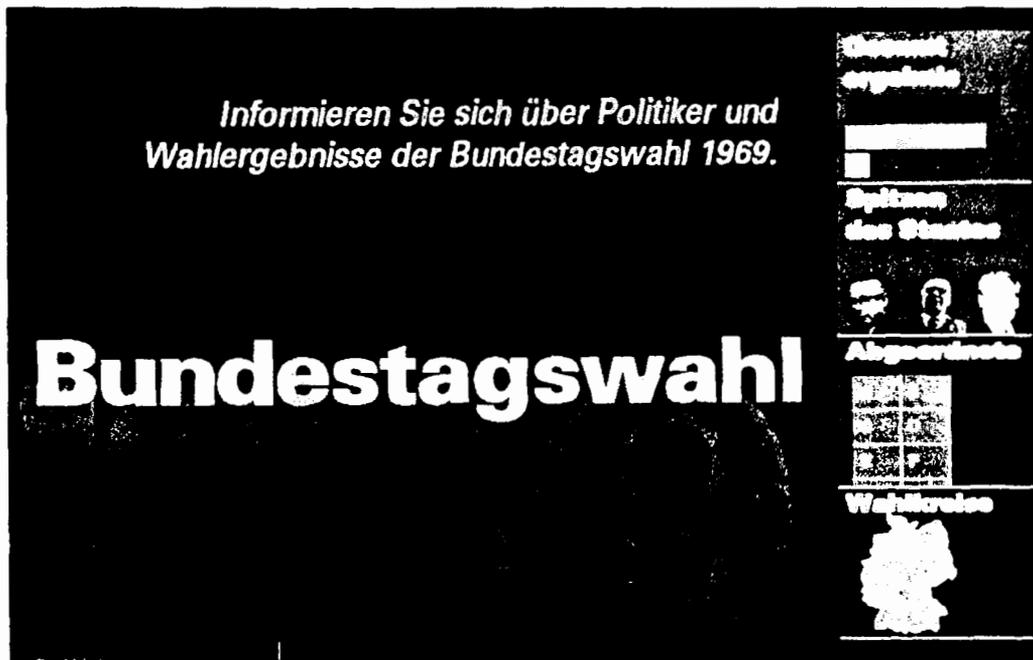
The electronic directory offers a multitude of information. It ranges from a detailed map of the museum, over a short history of the museum and a list of donors, to a calendar of events.



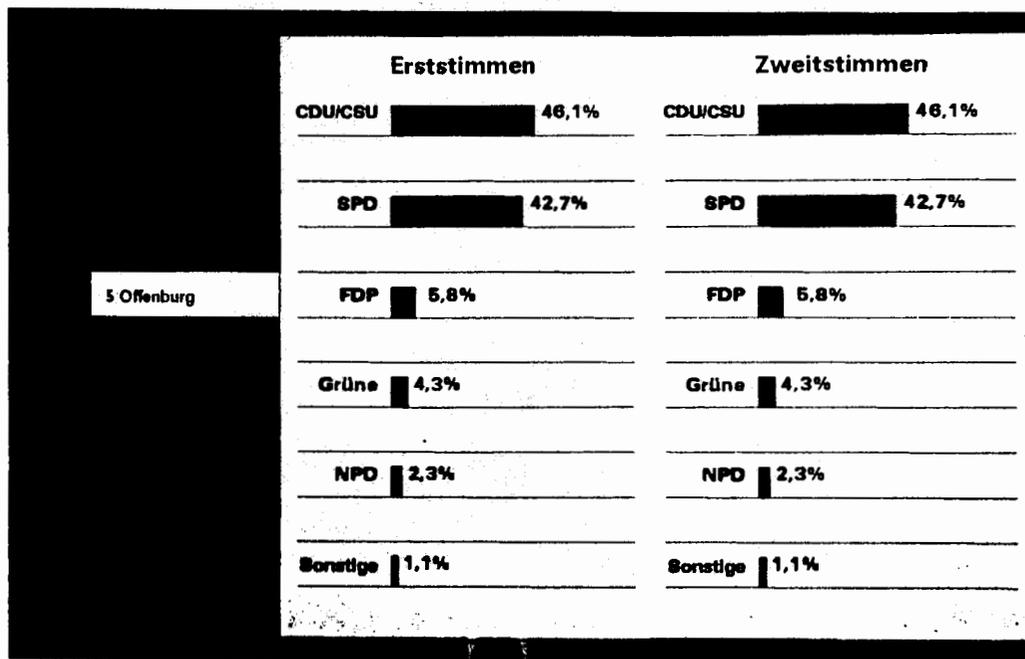
On the screen the visitors are guided to their pre-specified points of interest by a blinking dot.



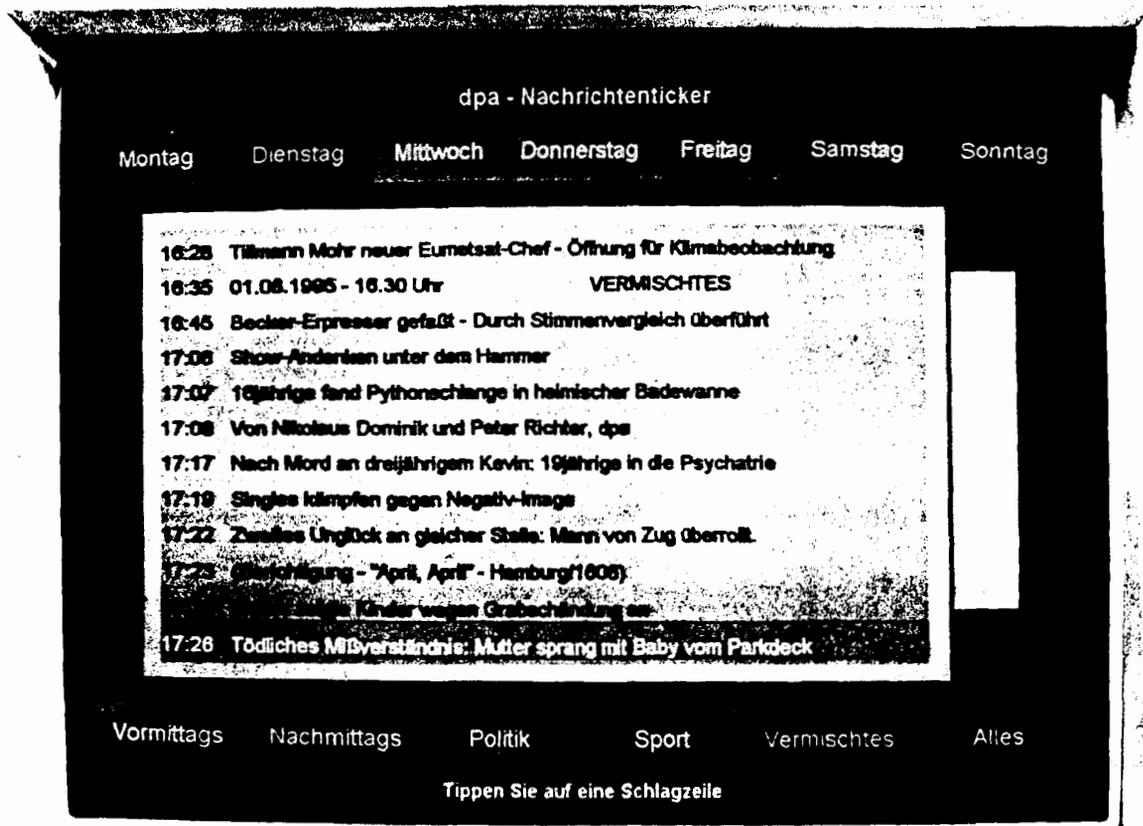
Federal elections form a red thread of the exhibit. An arrangement of campaign posters, a display of the election results, a photo of the cabinet, and a computer terminal form the basic design for each election year.



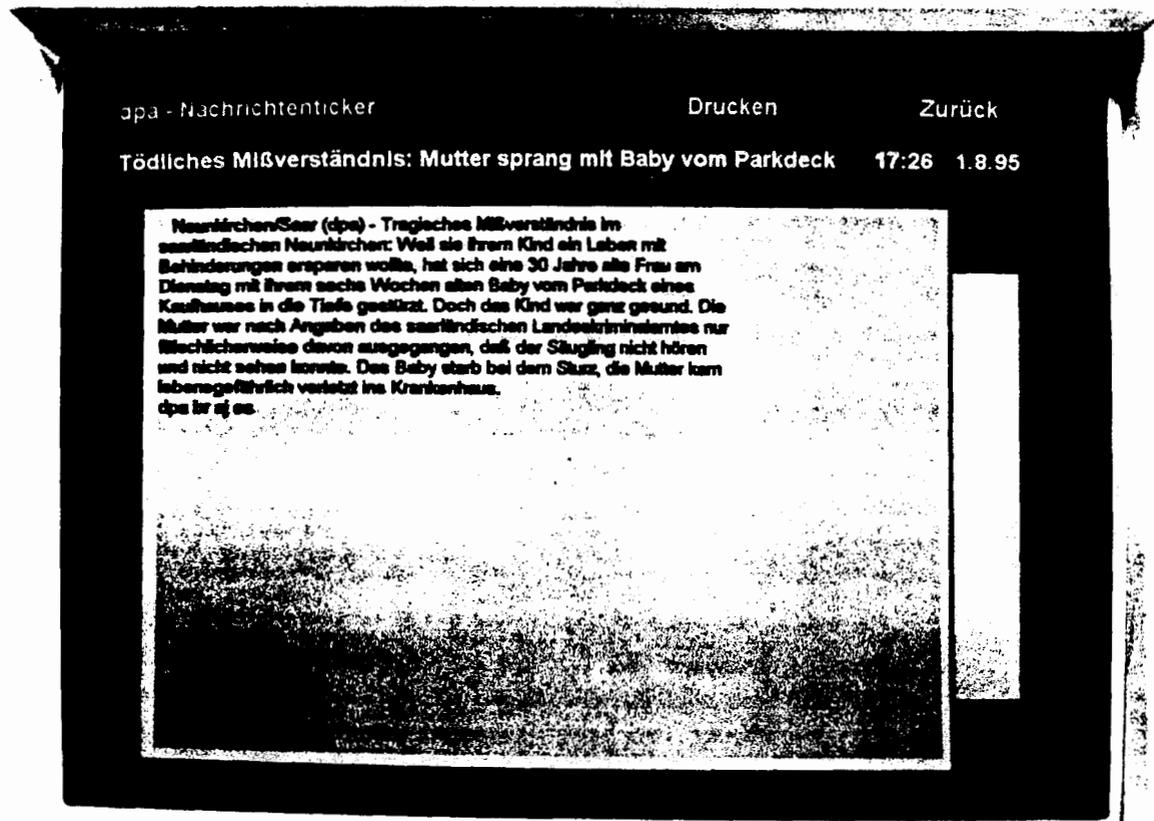
The computer offers information about various aspects of federal elections: overall results, short biographical sketches of leading politicians, background information about all members of parliament, and the exact results for each district.



The specific results of one district broken down party by party.



The news-ticker offers more than 10,000 news items per week. Visitors are able to choose among various fields of interest.



One specific news-item from the miscellaneous rubric.



A film shown on the giant panoramic display at the end of the exhibition offers an outlook into the future.