How much technology is too much?
Re-Thinking Digital Collection Management Practices in Memory Institutions
(long abstract)

Collection management system (CMS) is software to catalogue, maintain and manage collection information. All professionally run museums use this kind of technological solution extensively in their everyday museum practices, as in many cases the collection is perceived as the raison d’etre for the museums. However, the rapid growth of digital technologies has resulted in more and more sophisticated CMS’s. Consequently, it has brought new challenges, especially in the institutions that do not have appropriate resources to follow the newest trends. In many cases, museum professionals seem to be overwhelmed by new technologies, their functions and possibilities.

Drawing on my doctoral research (ViMuseo project) on small museums and new media, I would like to try to answer these questions: how much technology is needed in small museum in relation to collection management practices? Do small museums really need fancy collection management systems in order to disseminate the knowledge on collection? What are the most optimal features of the collection management system that can be successfully used in small museums? Finally, I would like to discuss how new technologies make us rethink many of the traditional museum practices and concepts.

ViMuseo is a project developed at the Department of Art and Culture Studies at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and within the doctoral program of the Finnish Research Education Network on the Society’s Memory Functions (MEMORNET). The research aims to investigate the possibilities of new media in presenting cultural heritage in small museums in Finland, analyzing the cooperation among the researchers, graphic designers and programmers, and designing an online ViMuseo.
tool for small museums to create virtual museums. Ethnographic and participatory design methodologies are used in this research. A number of representatives of small, local history museums have been interviewed and invited to cooperation.

The ViMuseo service is designed for small, local history museums, which are not active online but want to increase their digital accessibility, network with other museums, and interact with new and old audiences. In Finland, there are around 1100 small, local history museums, which are run by volunteers (representing the older generation) and open mainly during the summer. These museums’ representatives are very eager to be present online, but there are no adequate tools that they could possibly use. However, as volunteers, they are more focused on community-oriented projects and activities, rather than on demanding cataloguing, and managing museum collection information.

The ViMuseo service is planned to be implemented as a Web content management system, but it has features of the collection management system. By using simple templates, the museum representative can register and describe the institution using the predefined categories and objects. The objects can be used to create virtual exhibitions and collections. The object consists of textual description and other media, such as images, Google maps, YouTube movies and animations. The digital object may be a museum object from the collection, but it may be a person, idea or dance. In this way, not only tangible cultural heritage, but also intangible heritage can be used in a digital environment to disseminate, construct and negotiate the knowledge with the communities.

In this paper I would like to discuss how new technologies make us rethink many of the traditional museum practices and concepts.