
OPINION

National Museum of Science & Industry: The C21 Museum In Action

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Modern economies are built upon strong scientific and technical foundations. Success, in terms of prosperity and quality of life, can only be achieved by countries that wholeheartedly embrace good science. An informed public, from which come new generations of scientists,

technologists and innovators, is vital to the survival of such "scientific nations".

However, we are witnessing a decline in various science and technology specialisms. This trend has been exacerbated by the unwillingness or inability of lay



publics to understand new developments and their implications. The result, often influenced in part by media, is increasing cynicism and a steady erosion of future scientifically and technologically driven prosperity.

All countries need an informed and aware public. And the public, in turn, needs somewhere to turn for independent and unbiased perspectives. NMSI meets this requirement perfectly: it has a deep understanding of how we arrived at our present condition, derived from its collections of science, technology and human ingenuity. Today, NMSI resources are accessed by over 12 million people each year. Four million of them are visitors to the group's national museums, located in London, Yorkshire, Co. Durham and Wiltshire, and a further eight million are individual visitors to NMSI's award winning websites.

The NMSI museums have over 500,000 objects in their collections, across five sites – Science Museum, London; National Railway Museum, York; National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford; Locomotion: NRM at Shildon, Co. Durham; and NMSI in Wroughton – and in store.

The group is also custodian to collections of a further 5 million two-dimensional items. These were recently further enriched by the acquisition of the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) collection, arguably the world's greatest, now housed at NMPFT. We are also stewards, through the Science Museum, to one of the greatest international collections of the history of medicine, The Henry Wellcome Collection.

Using its unrivalled collections, NMSI can take a sceptical, balanced and questioning approach to all developments in science and technology. We may not have all the answers but, vitally, NMSI puts individuals in a position where they can make up their own minds from the unbiased information that we provide. As a result, every year, it is the trusted reference point for millions.

One of those reference points is the

Science Museum's new Energy Gallery. Opened in July 2004 and targeted at children aged seven to fourteen years, their teachers and families, this curriculum-linked gallery encourages visitors to explore the vital role energy plays in our society and question how we'll meet future demands when deposits of fossil fuels run out. A further example is the new Nanotechnology exhibition opened at the Science Museum in March 2005. Sponsored by the Department of Trade & Industry and opened by Lord Sainsbury, this exhibition looks at issues surrounding this controversial new technology. It presents the facts in an informed and balanced way and asks visitors to consider and express a view on how Nanotechnology might impact on their lives in the future.

NMSI engages with individuals through exposition, experiment and dialogue. Both the Science Museum and NRM, for example, hold regular "Sleepovers" which provide an enjoyable educational experience and fun for children and accompanying adults. Events consist of an evening of planned hands-on activities rounded off by camping in the Museum overnight.

But it is not just children that NMSI is engaging in a new kind of scientific dialogue. The Science Museum's Dana Centre, opened in November 2003, is a state of the art venue for adults to take part in exciting, informative and innovative debates about contemporary science, technology and culture. These, along with entertainments, demonstrations, international link-ups and a range of formats, take place with maximum informality to tackle, head on, subjects that are important to everyday lives – getting to the real science behind the headlines. Events to date have included a live projection of a heart operation performed by surgeons in the US, demonstrations of the most

advanced humanoid robots and debates on key issues such as identity cards, MRSA and Nanotechnology. Forthcoming events include a debate asking "what is the greatest threat to society in the future – climate change, pandemics such as Avian Flu, or terrorism?"

As well as stimulating scientific debate and dialogue among its audiences, NMSI also complements learning organisations in their quest to make sense of science and technology and to better achieve their aims. Its outreach and learning departments are among the best in the world, reaching over 400,000 young people every year through specific outreach and curriculum-linked learning schemes.

Initiatives like the Department for Culture, Media & Sport/ Department for Education & Skills sponsored "Anim8ed" project stimulate individual creativity and fresh thinking in a fun and friendly environment. The project run by NMPFT, in conjunction with two regional museums, explores the potential of animation as a learning tool for supporting a variety of subjects across the National Curriculum, using the museums' collections to inspire young people to create their own animations.

With four national museums spread across the country and a range of cutting edge online and emerging broadcast initiatives, NMSI's engagement with its publics is broad and multifaceted. Both on its own and in partnership with other like-minded organisations, the opportunity now exists on an unprecedented scale to give meaning to science and its application through human ingenuity, to inspire new generations, and to empower individuals and communities around the globe. NMSI is committed to this goal.