A VIRTUAL HUMAN RIGHTS MUSEUM
Outline for a web-based resource and education centre
Daan Bronkhorst & Nick Verouden, Amsterdam

Why a Virtual Human Rights Museum?

An international network of human rights museums should not only facilitate access to geographically widespread venues. It should also contribute to the conceptualization of human rights presentation. An online museum such as ‘virtualhumanrightsmuseum.org’ will do both.

The Virtual Human Rights Museum will be a unique interactive space that brings together a wide variety of human rights issues. It will educate visitors about the origins and key concepts of human rights, violations of human rights and activities of past and present human rights defenders. A virtual museum is a world apart from a ‘physical’ museum. It exists only online and will appropriate the assets of the Internet. One advantage is that information can be continuously added to the virtual network. The virtual museum will enhance visibility and accessibility of human rights issues by making them accessible to public, educational and professional audiences, in order to actively engage them with human rights.

The fundament of this museum will be a pragmatically defined concept of human rights. The museum will start from an ‘inner shell’ of key human rights information, established by a group of experts, and work progressively outwards. For a successful website, it’s crucial that the essential information is as much as possible of the same ‘tone of voice’, style and level of sophistication. So this website should proceed from a thesaurus of texts, a kind of compact encyclopaedia in which all major topics are covered in succinct form. From those brief descriptions, the site can link to external sources at the websites of museums and human rights organizations, and online histories and historical material.

To ensure that virtual presentations of human rights information attract the attention of the visitor, digital storytelling will be used on the website. People of different backgrounds will tell about their personal experiences with human rights in a compelling and emotionally engaging way. The telling of ‘true’ stories can help make information more accessible and identifiable. The stories will confront the visitor with events that are ‘close to home’, enhancing the possibility to identify with human rights issues and reflect on their own experiences. The exhibitions will avail themselves of photo material, video interviews, movie clips, and audio stories. More specifically, the museum will feature video interviews with human rights defenders, footage of victims and survivors, and testimonies of perpetrators and bystanders.

To make full use of the potential of a virtual museum, active participation on the part of the visitor is expected. Along with information and resources, there will be learning resources that engage visitors by providing quizzes, puzzles, opinion polls and other learning activities. In this scheme of things, we have provisionally put them in the Hands-On Space. There’ll also be a forum where visitors can discuss relevant topics and exchange information.

A virtual museum provides an excellent opportunity for targeting human rights presentations to groups of varying ages and educational or interest levels. The museum should, in particular, work together with schools and universities. The information on the museum can be used in classrooms to contribute to debate about human rights issues, and so stimulate active involvement of students. The museum certainly should attract audiences that would normally not be particularly interested in human rights. A virtual museum can also reach out to people who are not in the position to visit actual museums: visitors from parts of the world without museums, those who are physically challenged, or those who like many of us just don’t have the money to travel far. But evidently, a
visit to the virtual museum should prompt interest in visiting the real-world museum buildings.

A Visit to the Virtual Museum

What will the Virtual Human Rights Museum look like? Let’s do a brief tour of the museum as we imagine it.

**Entrance**
Entry to this Virtual Human Rights Museum is without a ticket. It's always open, for everyone. You can learn all you ever wanted to know about human rights here. You'll be touched, shocked, moved and inspired. There are things to be found for young or old, beginner or advanced, the casual visitor or those with a passion for history. All you need is a computer. There's also plenty of opportunity to participate. To test your knowledge. To come and visit real and virtual places. To engage in actions and campaigns. The Museum comprises a Reception, a Central Hall, Four Exhibition Rooms – and many links to make you wander all over the world.

**Reception**
In the welcoming area you'll find a little map of the museum. You'll see what special exhibitions are running. You'll find a list of Frequently Asked Questions. You can leave a message, when you enter or when you leave or at any time during your visit. And you can find out more about the people and museums behind this website. Visitors will also find an Announcements Board, where they are informed of upcoming exhibitions and updates to the site. For a greater feeling of reality for the user, the reception recreates a 360-degree image of an actual museum reception, and helps the user orient themselves in the museum.

Visitors can choose their own route and follow their own path. The museum will also offer a number of customized Guided Tours. Each tour will explore a different area of the museum in a way that appeals to the background of the visitors. The tours will be developed based on a number of visitor profiles that reflect the visitor’s understanding of, and engagement with human rights issues. In this way, the website will offer a multi-entry learning environment which is tailored to the interests, needs and wishes of the visitor, and will greatly enhance the overall learning experience. Each tour is marked by a colour, so that the visitor can easily re-trace their route through the museum on a later date. We have provisionally defined the following visitor profiles and matching Guided Tours:

1. **Green Tour: Basic Learning**
The purpose of this tour is to provide a first orientation on human rights issues. For most, the tour will be an introduction to key human rights concepts; hence access has to be easy. 'This tour will guide me through the history of human rights, with accounts of human rights abuses or issues and an overview of core concepts of human rights thinking.' The orientation of this tour is didactical. The tour will be especially useful for the general non-professional visitor and can be used for general educational purposes.
2. **Red Tour: Advanced Learning**
A tour for those whose underlying motive for the museum visit is intellectual. 'I come to the museum because I want to learn things I did not know before. I will see that things are more complex (or simpler) than initially thought, more interrelated. I'm helped in analyzing complex human rights issues.'
The incentive of the tour is to make the visitor more aware of the scope, the depth, the character of an issue. It is useful for people who already have a basic knowledge of human rights or are experts on the subject. The content is presented in a subject-oriented way and will be less didactical than the green tour. The visitor will frequently be directed towards connections with related subjects.

3. **Blue Tour: Civil Practice**
A professional motive underlies a visit to the museum. The visitor may be a health worker, lawyer, corporate responsibility executive or local government employee. 'I'm aware that human rights concern and impact my professional life. Human rights (and civil rights) make me think about my position in society.'
The information is presented in a context-oriented way, in which human rights are linked to relevant social and professional issues. The goal of the tour is to trace the practical and applied aspects of human rights, which will help gain insight into how one can apply human rights in everyday situations.

4. **Orange Tour: Solidarity**
The principal motive for a visit is to become more committed, with a local or worldwide perspective. The virtual visitor is clearly aware that the issues demand action. 'I may want to change my professional choices, or initiate action of my own, or donate money, or join an organization.'
The goal of this tour is to enhance the feeling that individuals can make a difference, encouraging people to act in a concerted way in order to bring about particular changes.

5. **Yellow Tour: (In)Humanity**
The motive behind a visit is above all personal, sentimental, philosophical. 'I'm really concerned with human rights events, with what happened here in X or is happening there in Y. How is this possible, what does it say about mankind?'
Information is presented in a context-oriented way. The tour will give insight into cultural and religious values underlying different, and sometimes conflicting, ideas about the human rights paradigm (its nature, its particularity, its universality). It links human rights thinking to secular or religious worldviews. This tour may be the option of choice in preparing a debate, a church group, a school session.

These Guided Tours are liable to change. The should be elaborated and adapted on basis of research into actual visitor profiles.
**Central Hall**

After entering the reception, you come to the central hall. The central hall offers an overall orientation on human rights history. Here you’ll find the pillars of human rights thinking, old and new texts, human rights defenders past and present, and international law.

Human rights concepts can be found in the oldest law systems and religions: Babylonian and Egyptian Codes, Greek philosophy, Jewish/Christian and Asian traditions. None of these however reflects a true human rights thinking, i.e. a universal protection of each person’s dignity. Show-windows in this hall display topics such as The origins, Slavery, War, Repression, International treaties, Courts of law, Human rights defenders, Solidarity. Each window starts with some 400 words of text, plus illustrations. There are extensive text links in each of these windows, both internal and external.

**Room I: The Foundations**

How did human rights originate? This room portrays with thinkers, organizers, reformers and law makers from a variety of cultures: They include Hammurabi, Moses, Mencius, Ashoka, Justinianus, Ibn Khaldun, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Eleanor Roosevelt and others. The room also has displays of the corner-stone texts: the oldest laws in Mesopotamia, China, India and Greece, the Magna Carta, the various declarations on independence and human rights.

**Room II: Human Rights Violations**

The Human Rights Violations room addresses all the forms and instances of repression and inhuman behaviour: slavery, imprisonment, torture, execution, deadly violence & disappearance, freedom of opinion and adequate living standards.

Let’s take slavery as an example. With each subject of the museum, we can start with information from the major museum or museums on the issue. In this case, basic material has been drawn from Liverpool's International Slavery Museum. To this information we can add links, or material derived from websites, of organisations covering various aspects. For example, there would be links to Anti-Slavery for campaigning, the US Library of Congress' Slavery Resource Guide for documentation, History.com for audiovisual material etc. Imperative for the Virtual Museum is, as we stated above, that its core 'shell' is well-established by the web's hosts.

This is how you would make a Slavery tour through the Virtual Museum:

- Click on Slavery and you’ll find a brief introductory video and a general description of the subject:

  ![Slavery video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGSzv-lVCb0)

  *Slavery, as you all know, is a thing of the past. Slavery is shiploads of negroes going from Africa to the West Indies and the southern American states. Slavery is inhumane treatment and the unthinkably cruel punishments for runaway slaves. Slavery is Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the underground routes for escaped negroes to reach the safety of places such as New York or Boston. Slavery is the perennial predicament of how Thomas Jefferson, who wrote a declaration of independence on the equality and liberty of men, himself treated slaves. That’s what we think of when we mention the word slavery. A thing of the past. So it may come as a surprise to you to read reports of slavery that are just days old.*
From here, you can click on a number of subheadings:

- Ancient history
- Slave trade
- Slavery conditions
- Abolition
- Present-day slavery
- Exploitation of labour

Let’s click on Abolition:

In present-day campaigning, not only against slavery, but also against torture and disappearances and other gross violations of human rights, we can learn from the past. Abolitionism is the name we give to a movement, a history of campaigning, that seeks to end the practice of slavery and the worldwide slave trade. It began in the late 18th century and grew to large proportions in Europe and United States during the 19th century. It had a huge success. Yet child and adult slavery, and a variety of forms of forced labour, are still present in today’s world.

You’ll find the subsequent headings:

- Historical movements
- Law
- Human rights
- Present-day campaigning

Let’s click on Historical movements:

The struggle to end the transatlantic slave trade and slavery was achieved by African resistance and economic factors as well as through humanitarian campaigns. Opinion in Europe was also changing. Moral, religious and humanitarian arguments found more and more support. A vigorous campaign to achieve abolition began in Britain in 1783 and also developed in North America and the Caribbean, often led by the Black churches. An active counter campaign was mounted by those who profited from slavery. From 1815 to 1865, the British Royal Navy undertook antislavery patrols off the West African coast, seizing hundreds of vessels. Britain was forced to pay compensation for seized ships and to encourage countries such as Spain and Portugal to abolish slaving. Economic interests were also at stake. Liverpool merchants developing the palm oil trade with West Africa feared illegal slaving would damage their interests.

Finally, at the Hands-On Space, there will be quiz questions such as this one:

One of the following statement is false. Click on that one.

1. The world now has the largest number of people that has ever been in slavery at any point in history – about 28 million.
2. The world now has the smallest percentage of the total human population that has ever been enslaved at once.
3. The profits from forced trafficked labour are estimated to be in excess of 250 billion dollar.
4. More than 2.4 million people have been trafficked. [Statement no. 3 is wrong: human trafficking is profitable, but not that profitable – the sum is in the order of 25 billion.]

ROOM III: DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS
The Human Rights Defense room deals with past and present human rights defenders. It is concerned with how people, individually or organized, stand up for human rights. You’ll find portraits and background information on a wide array of groups and defenders that:
- work for prisoners
- campaign against torture and political violence
- work for the human rights of women
- fight censorship
- counter discrimination and marginalization
- are devoted to social justice

ROOM IV: DOCUMENTING & CAMPAIGNING
The Human Rights Mapping room is on monuments, memorials, truth commissions, institutions and NGOs. It is occupied with how organizations research, report and mobilize human rights. They include:
- Governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- United Nations
- Regional inter-governmental organizations
- National institutes for human rights
- International human rights NGOs
- Local human rights NGOs
- Truth & fact-finding commissions
- Museums & memorials

ROOM V: TEMPORARY EXHIBITION
The museum will not only provide a lot of background information on human rights, it is also engaged in current activities and addresses important contemporary human rights issues. The temporary exhibition room provides an arena for exhibits about human rights issues from around the world that have given cause for concern. There may, for example, be a special display on water and human rights, or on gender violence. Ideas for the temporary exhibitions can be added at the Forum and will be evaluated by the web’s hosts. The exhibition will feature on the museum’s home page for several months, after which it will be ‘stored’ in the permanent collection.

ROOM VI: THE FORUM
The Forum page will contain a Museum Shop with merchandise from museums and organizations (the shop may actually sponsor maintenance of the website). The Forum also facilitates a Resource Centre and links that connect to in-depth articles, readers and scholarly material found in other institutions. There will be a Discussion Square where relevant issues can be discussed and which will bring interested parties together.

This museum is under construction. Please have some patience, it’s going to be more interesting and sophisticated over time.
About the authors

Daan Bronkhorst (1953) is a sinologist and historian who has been at the staff of the Dutch section of Amnesty International since 1979, next to working for other human rights organizations. He published over two dozen books and numerous articles, and established an online human rights encyclopaedia (in Dutch), amnesty.nl/encyclopedie, with over 1,000 entries. Nick Verouden (1975) is an anthropologist who has done research work on human rights, health care and water issues. After teaching at Amsterdam's Free University, he joined the student health services of the University of Amsterdam to develop a radically new website concept to link students with care provisions. Most recently, he did field research on water related human rights issues in Southeast Africa.
Appendix: International Human Rights Museums

They include participants to the 2010 Liverpool FIHRM conference:

- Canadian Museum For Human Rights
- National Museum of the American Indian, USA
- Galicia Jewish Museum, Poland
- Museum of New Zealand - Te Papa Tongarewa
- Liverpool International Slavery Museum, UK
- The Museum of Genocide Victims, Lithuania
- Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance
- Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia
- Memoria Abierta, Argentina
- Movimiento Ciudadano Para Que No Se Repita, Peru
- Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Chile
- Museo de las Memorias: Dictadura y Derechos Humanos, Paraguay
- Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia

As of 2010, over 125 memorials, museums, sites and centres are connected to the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. They are in Argentina (5 memorials), Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Italy, Japan, Kosovo, Liberia, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Africa (10 memorials), Spain, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States (55 memorials) and Uruguay.