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**“Online Social Networking for the Humanities:
the Massachusetts Studies Network Prototype”**

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I. Abstract

The "Massachusetts Studies Network" (<http://MAStudies.ning.com>) is a pilot social network established in June 2008 to examine the technical and organizational issues involved in creating an online network specifically for humanities practitioners in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The project documented the experience of configuring and launching a "micro network" from scratch, examined the interest and involvement of humanities professionals in such a network and tested the customizability of a free network platform (www.ning.com). The pilot project has shown that, despite some drawbacks, a focused social network built on a free platform can be a powerful collaborative tool for organizations or projects with limited financial and technical resources.

II. Project Activities

The Massachusetts Studies Project received National Endowment for the Humanities funding in 2008 to create, test and evaluate a pilot online social network for individuals and organizations involved in the interdisciplinary study of Massachusetts history and culture. As proposed, we created an online "Massachusetts Studies Network" (MSN) using the free, customizable development platform Ning (<http://www.Ning.com>); convened a multi-disciplinary group of humanities practitioners to use the network and serve as a focus group and evaluated the stability, robustness, replicability and customizability of the Ning platform for this use. The MSN has been active since June 2008 at <http://MAStudies.ning.com>.

In late 2007, when the project proposal was being written, "Ning" was a promising new development platform that allowed technically inexperienced administrators to launch narrowly focused "micro networks" that included all the usual social networking features (member profiles, comment walls, discussion boards, photo and video sharing, RSS feeds, widgets, ability to create subgroups of interest, etc.) In addition, Ning offered a powerful advantage over all other available options in that its open API (Application Program Interface) and code access allowed technically proficient network creators to edit the source code and fully customize the network to the needs and preferences of their members. Customized code could then be packaged and shared with others to create a similar network.

Five months after we began this project, Ning closed down its open API with little notice, to the dismay of many network creators include this project's team. Instead, as part of its business strategy, the company bolstered the features and options in the default network offering, which made the Ning platform more appealing to technically inexperienced network creators even as it disappointed the technically proficient, who had reveled in the unparalleled openness and customizability of the Ning platform. The end result, for humanities practitioners, was a less open but still powerful and more readily usable platform.

In the first stage of the project, project administrators created the framework of the Network on Ning.com, a process that proved to be quite simple and could be readily

undertaken by anyone interested in setting up a network of this type for their own organization or project. The step-by-step setup process involved selecting a name for the site, choosing a style template and making a few choices about membership and features. We used project funds to pay a monthly fee to remove the advertisements and Ning branding that usually occupy screen space in basic Ning networks, which freed up space for more features on the network homepage.

As part of the setup process, the network administrator edited the language of the site to replace some of the default language in Ning with more professional terminology, such as "colleague" instead of the ubiquitous "friend" that is used in most online social networks. These changes were saved as a portable package and the file may be downloaded from <http://MAStudies.ning.com/lib/scripts/translations.php>. Anyone setting up a Ning network is welcome to download the file and install in their network via the Manage / Language Editor / Advanced Import option.

Steps were also taken to allow connections with other applications, including setting up the necessary key to allow Flickr images to automatically post to the site, and setting up Google Analytics to track network traffic and usage patterns.

To build the membership of the Network we contacted a multi-disciplinary group of humanities practitioners who had agreed to serve as the project focus group. This group included university faculty, K-12 educators, museum educators, librarians, a historical society director, an educational technology expert and both professional and volunteer public historians. During this meeting, we introduced the seven "seed" members to the network, had them join and create profiles, and outlined the project's modest expectations: that they would experiment at will on the network, invite some friends and colleagues to join, and provide feedback as the project continued. The Network membership is open to all, with a few features, such as Classified Ads section and the Calendar of Events, reserved for registered members only.

We also asked the first generation of members to complete a brief pre-survey with information about how they learned about the Network, their specific areas of interest in the humanities, their level of familiarity with Web 2.0 technology, etc. As the Network grew through personal invitations and word-of-mouth, we discovered that the "viral" aspect of the network drew a wide range of individuals from academia to small historical societies. The pre-survey and its results are available on request.

In keeping with the participatory nature of Web 2.0, the Massachusetts Studies Network was allowed to develop organically, with minimal intervention from the project team after the initial network creation. We determined that the greatest value could be gained by observing how a statewide network might develop from a small group of seed members chosen for their interest and involvement in humanities fields, without any particular technical proficiency or experience with social networks.

We actively encouraged members to use the Network in any way they saw fit, to experiment and "kick the tires" and let us know if/when they had questions or ran into

problems. With the exception of a few spammers who were summarily banned, membership is open to anyone, with some features reserved for registered members.

Early in the life of the Network we developed a list of possible applications that the project software programmer would develop in pilot form to make the Network more useful to humanities practitioners. These included a chat feature, a jobs board and an application to post material to Facebook. However, in late 2008, Ning stopped granting access to the network's source code, which removed the possibility of creating the type of custom applications we had planned for the network, while opening up new options in the area of Open Social application development.

In early 2009, Ning launched several new applications, including versions of all those we originally envisioned (network chat, jobs board, Facebook connection.) So instead, we set the project developer the task of creating an application that would explore the new Open Social framework, the basis for all future network-level application development in Ning and in many other social networks as well. The result was an application that would help the members of our network see themselves in the context of the statewide network, with enhanced possibilities for exploring the connections between and among themselves. We called this application "MA Connect!", a map-based program embedded in the MSN that allows members to connect to other members with similar professional interests in geographic relationship to each other. This application was launched to the site in early September 2009 and will continue to be refined over the coming months.

We held two additional in-person meetings for members of the network to collect feedback on the project. We completed the pilot stage of the network with a post-survey that was distributed first to the initial focus group and specific members who were particularly active in the network, and then to the overall membership. The post-survey and its results are available upon request.

Project staff presented about the network and recruited additional members at several professional meetings, including the Southeastern Massachusetts Library System meeting (June 3, 2008), the National Council on Public History (April 3, 2009) and the North of Boston Library Exchange Tech Expo (June 2, 2009).

III. Accomplishments

To date, the network remains open, active, and growing. New members and new content (discussions, events, comments, and groups) are added each week. Overall, the Massachusetts Studies Network (MSN) was a successful foray into online social networking for humanities professionals, and Ning.com provided a robust, stable and replicable platform for the network. Over the year of the pilot testing of the MSN (June 2008-June 2009) 307 people joined the network and participated in hundreds of

interactions around topics as diverse as Italian internment camps in Massachusetts and interpreting gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered history, and in hundreds of one-on-one communications on members' profile pages. Members created 27 different interest groups, ranging from tide mills to oral history to the use of GIS, started 33 topical discussions and posted dozens of event listings. They expanded their own profiles to include blog postings, photo uploads and more. One member who had been managing an active "group" in Google was inspired by her experience of the MSN to move that network to the Ning platform, creating The Salem History Common (<http://salemhistorycommon.ning.com/>). An overview of website statistics from Google Analytics covering the project year may be found in the Appendix.

As mentioned above, changes within the Ning platform over the course of the project year made the system less customizable than was possible at the time the proposal was submitted, while also improving the its built-in customizing features for social network managers. At the same time, other platforms, such as Facebook, greatly expanded their available features over the course of our project year, to the point where they have become viable possibilities for humanities-focused online social networks. For example, Facebook has opened up its network to use by organizations and projects so that these no longer need to masquerade as individuals, but rather can set up a "Facebook Page" to solicit interested individuals as "fans" of their project for discussions, photo-sharing, event listings and other activities. This is the reality of the fast pace of change in the Web 2.0 world. Ning remains a powerful choice for controlling the parameters of a micro social network, and for creating a more bounded collaborative environment than Facebook and other platforms provide.

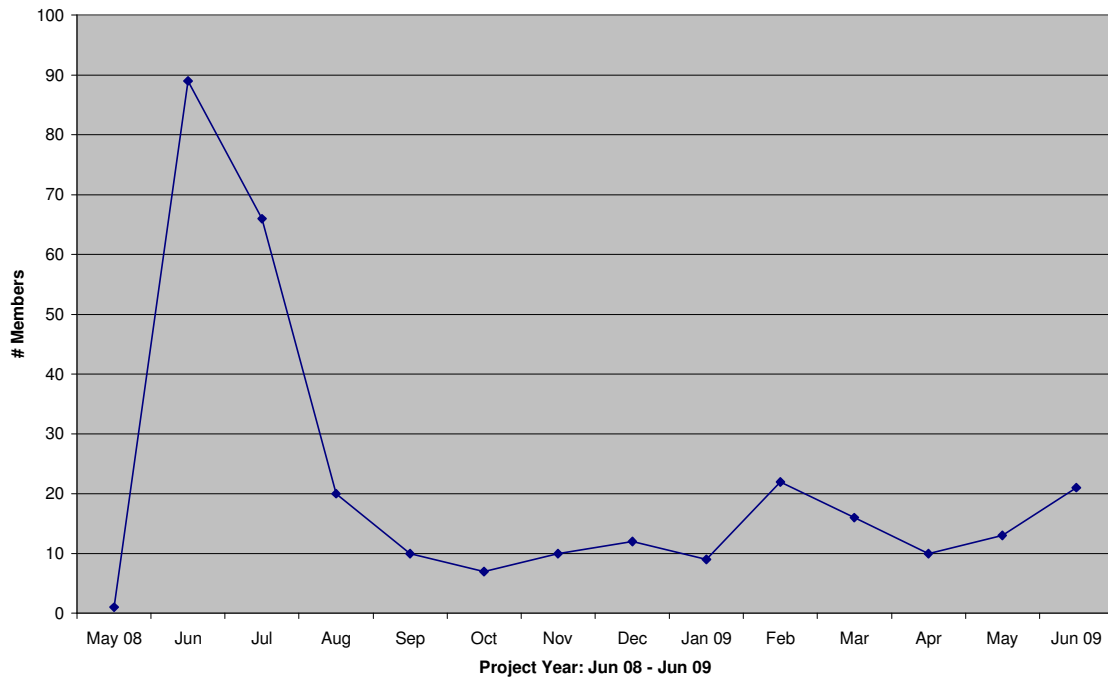
IV. Audiences

By the end of the project year, the MSN had engaged 307 humanities practitioners from 131, or 37%, of the 351 communities in Massachusetts. Network participants ranged in age from 18 to 88, with the average age of 46. In terms of gender, more than half of the participants are female: 202 females, 100 male, with 7 not providing gender.

As of March, 2009, Network members had described themselves as being affiliated with a wide range of organizations throughout the state, 131 in all. It should be noted that members do not necessarily officially represent these organizations, although in some cases they do. As of March, 2009, 141 different job titles were self-reported on the MSN, with some held by a number of members (e.g. 6 Archivists, 19 Directors, etc.) Complete lists of member locations, organizational affiliations and job titles are included in the project whitepaper contributed to the NEH Digital Humanities [Library of Funded Projects](#).

The launch of the MSN in early June, 2008 saw a large influx of new members following a face-to-face introductory meeting and an invitation sent out to the Mass Humanities local history mailing list. Since then, the network adds 10 – 20 new members per month.

MSN Member Join Rates



V. Evaluation

Through two formal surveys, three face-to-face network meetings and ongoing conversations online within the network, we invited members to let us know how they experienced the Massachusetts Studies Network and what they felt was needed to improve or expand the Network. Overall feedback was positive, with members stating that the network was useful and they made connections to new people and organizations. Comments included:

- “I prefer the network to Facebook or other social networking tools - I think the selective and smaller membership is easier to manage and I appreciate that the site is really easy to use...”
- “[It is] great to connect with people that I wouldn't otherwise meet.”
- “I really depend on it for helping me stay involved in local history subjects and interest areas. Money is a problem lately so I don't get to meetings or conferences like I used to. So the network has really become something I depend on for all of that information in this area.”
- “The ability to network with people with similar professional interests is key, so I like being able to "meet" people and discuss things with them in this self-selected environment.”

- “[The network is] a really nice group of interesting, active and thought-provoking members. Love the feeling of being connected, informed, up-to-date with so many interesting and important things...”

Criticism of the network tended to fall along the lines that the network was not “active” enough, that there were not enough members, and that members did not have enough time to engage in another online social network. Twenty percent of the members who completed our post-survey said that having more members in the network is the single feature that would make it more useful and relevant to their work and 67% of respondents said they believe and/or hope the network will grow in size over the next year. Two members strongly suggested that the Network connect humanities professionals from all over the world, rather than focus on Massachusetts humanities practitioners. However, the majority of members including the project team felt there was value in a micro-network aiming to generate and expand connections among people working within a bounded geographic area, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This last issue brought up an ongoing lack of clarity in the mission of the Network, which is whether the Network focuses on Massachusetts-related humanities areas (the focus of the founding organization, the Mass. Studies Project) or on humanities practitioners in any humanities subject area who happen to live or work in Massachusetts (the mission of key partner organizations such as Mass Humanities.) This difference will be worked out in the coming year through the efforts of to-be-constituted Board of Advisors and expanded administrative team.

Throughout the pilot we routinely invited members to suggest improvements to the network, whether additional features, applications, widgets, etc. A few specific requests were made, but in general members seemed to accept the network's features as a given, and "made do" with existing features, despite invitations to "dream big" about possibilities for custom programming. This meant that members used the existing features in creative ways. For example, one member re-tooled the default "group" feature to create a [Historical Speakers Bureau](#). In instances like this, members were, in a sense, using the network themselves to prototype features they need and want. A future development of this network site will involve creating a custom "speaker's bureau" application with the additional functionality that a database can offer, but drawing from the features that the member built into the prototype.

Many members remain unaware of some of the Network's highly usable features. Real estate on the site's homepage is limited, and is devoted almost entirely to dynamic information about members' activities and discussions in the humanities. However, we are working on ways to effectively educate members on how to, for instance, send broadcast messages to all of the registered members in the network, post network page to Facebook, Delicious, Twitter, MySpace, Digg, organize their network content with searchable folksonomic “tags”, and much more.

The fact that most members did not make full use of the features of the network or suggest any specific additional features is probably due to their general lack of familiarity with the Web 2.0 tools and options. According to our pre-survey, although most members surveyed described themselves as “very comfortable” using computers and more than

half maintained a personal or organizational web presence, the majority were not regular users of Facebook, Linked In or MySpace, and more than half of the respondents said they “never heard of” del.icio.us, Library Thing or Second Life. (See the project whitepaper contributed to the NEH Digital Humanities [Library of Funded Projects](#) for fuller results of the project pre-survey.)

Accurate representation of the diversity of members was also an issue on the Massachusetts Studies Network, as it is with many organizations. While we were not able to establish the cultural and ethnic demographics of humanities professionals in Massachusetts as a point of comparison, it is clear that the MSN does not reflect the diversity of those who work in the field. A few observations along these lines, particular to the online environment: "Profile pictures" in a social network give members a sense of the reality of the person represented. In the MSN, the majority of the network's African American members did not upload a photo of themselves to use as a profile picture, but instead used either an historic photo or the default network icon. Although the reasons for this are probably exactly the same as other members making the same choice (shyness, sense of privacy, interest in being represented by their ideas and studies rather than personal appearance) the end result is a diluting of the diversity of the "image of the network", which ideally can have a snowball effect in attracting new members from across the cultural and ethnic spectrum. This area is extremely interesting and deserves fuller, more open discussion on this Network, and further attention and study in general. New networks like the MSN can serve as seedbeds for looking at the networks, social and professional contacts, etc.

From a technical standpoint, member feedback and the project team's experience indicate that the Ning platform is a solid alternative for humanities organizations and projects wishing to take advantage of the benefits of online social networking. The network was readily customizable by the network administrators and individual members had a great deal of control over their own profile pages, where they could add “widgets”, add RSS feeds and maintain their own blog. Members were able to easily create discussion threads, subgroups and event listings, and upload images, sound files and videos to the network's repository. We received feedback in-person and online from members about their desire for more training on Web 2.0 and other technologies. One member suggested, “It would be very useful to have follow-up workshop or an hour's worth of further introduction/training in order to feel more comfortable communicating through MA Studies Network.”

VI. Continuation of the Project

The most consistently expressed desire of members was that the Massachusetts Studies Network grow to bring in as many people as possible. Like the other larger social networking sites, there will always be various levels of engagement but a critical mass would make the network a more active, "go to" place for news, events and discussions in the field. This is a chicken-and-egg phenomenon - the network grows the more people are involved - that may be resolved through more active direction on the part of the network administrators.

Some of the features that MSN members would like to see (wiki capability, single sign on, and ability to read postings from e-mail notifications) are under development by Ning.com. The Events listing feature is highly popular, and was identified by 40% of respondents in the post-survey as being the most useful feature of the Network. In part due to this fact, Mass. Humanities is interested in developing an online collective data-sharing project based on calendar listings; we look forward to using the information gathered in this pilot program to contribute to that project.

The Massachusetts Studies Project at UMass Boston has a commitment to continue the MSN for as long as there is interest and the project is viable. As part of the next phase of the Network's development, additional members will be deputized to serve as administrators, thus activating more involvement and expansion of the network's activities. Of course, opening up the network administration in this way begs the question of the mission and goals of the burgeoning organization that is the "Massachusetts Studies Network." The selection process for assistant administrators, their mandate, scope of responsibility and training would all need to be worked out. Thus, the first step in this direction will be the formation of an advisory board to guide the network's future development.

Google Analytics will continue to run on the network to provide insight into frequency and patterns of use, including using some of its more advanced features, like goal conversion and segmentation, to explore network usage. We would also like to undertake more detailed analysis of how and why members joined the network and the various on- and off-network connections and collaborations that have occurred as the result of membership in the network.

From a technical perspective, the future may see the ability to more fully develop customized network-wide applications on the Ning platform. Ning currently does not provide network-level APIs or APIs to the basic features available on Ning networks (i.e. Photos, Videos, Groups, Events, Discussions). Without an API, there exists no means for applications to communicate and interact with each other. However, it is very possible that Ning will eventually provide network-level and/or feature-level APIs, which will open up a wide range of possibilities. Ideally, core Ning feature would each have a public interface that allowed other applications to retrieve, modify, delete, and create new content. With a means of communication, applications would have the potential to identify and gather potentially useful, contextual information to provide a more enriching experience to a given network's members. Using our mapping application, MAConnect!, as an example, if we knew what groups existed in the network, members could be mapped according to their participation within groups. Likewise, if members engaged in a given discussion could be identified and mapped in order to encourage further engagement.

APIs for Ning's basic features could provide means to create, modify, delete, or publish content. Google Maps provides the ability to overlay geographically relevant photos, videos, Wikipedia articles, and webcams to user created maps. If core Ning features such as Photos, Videos, Audio Files, or Events had APIs, then those same items could be overlaid as well using the geographical data supplied in, for example, an Event's location.

Should Ning provide APIs of this sort, we will integrate our mapping application, MAConnect!, with Ning's Events, Groups, and Discussions. For example, Members could filter the member list according to interests, discussion participation, and could then invite that filtered list of members to an Event or to join a Group or to view a new related Discussion.

Given that Ning does not yet provide these APIs, at this time we would encourage only application development that fully utilized the more limited OpenSocial API.

VII. Long Term Impact

The MAStudies Network has become, in one short year, an established part of the humanities landscape in Massachusetts. The enthusiastic interest and support shown by members in the pre- and post-surveys make it clear that this online social network meets a need for connection and collaboration in the Commonwealth. We will work with Mass Humanities and other interested organizations to analyze the data from the pilot year to determine how best to move forward. It is likely that the next steps will include creating an Advisory Board as well as a wider group of network administrators in order to allow the Network to grow in productive ways that meet members' stated needs.

Through member feedback and observation, we discovered that there is a significant need for expanded technology training in the humanities community which will have a notable effect on productivity and networking among humanities professionals in the future. This case study suggests that expanding training for humanities professionals on free, web-based technologies and "Web 2.0" applications could advance the field in a number of practical ways and would help overcome the barriers to greater involvement among members. Training could be delivered through any number of local history, museum and humanities organizations, in person or online.

The second of the project's focus group meetings indicated that many members strongly desire connections with others on technical grounds as well as intellectual and scholarly grounds. That group included technical neophytes and highly sophisticated developers and users, all of whom expressed interest in further meetings to help them determine how to best develop and deliver web-based data, applications and services. We do not know if the Massachusetts Studies Network is the appropriate venue for offering such training, but are exploring options with other organizations including Mass Humanities.

From a technical standpoint, the MAStudies Network is a work-in-progress. The activities of the pilot year reinforced our sense that a free platform like Ning is a useful path for launching a focused, professional micro-network. The changes in Ning's Terms of Service over the course of the year reminded us of the degree to which users are vulnerable to business decisions made by companies offering free services. On the other hand, the new features and controls added to the default Ning package over the course of

the same year made the platform even more useful “out of the box” to humanities practitioners than it was when we proposed to test it for this project.

Overall, our goal is to position Mass. Studies Network members to efficiently assist each other with projects, job hunts and scholarly inquiries, connecting the professional fundraiser with the struggling historical society, the archivists with the custodians of the state's cultural heritage artifacts, the database experts with the maintainers of unique data repositories. Many members of the network share this desire to make the MSN a "go-to" place online for Massachusetts humanities professionals. In the coming year, we hope to advance towards that goal through fairly straightforward steps like the development of technology assistance and training programs, establishment of an Advisory Board, expansion of the administrative team, attention to the programming opportunities that may open up through Ning's OpenSocial and API offerings, and through ongoing tuning of the online network.

VIII. Grant Products

- ∇ The Massachusetts Studies Network is active at <http://MAStudies.ning.com>. The network has 337 members as of September 15, 2009, and contains a wide range of information and ongoing discussion related to humanities activities in Massachusetts.
- ∇ The custom Ning language file used during the project year is available at: http://www.massmemories.net/MAStudies_Files/MAStudies_Language_File.txt. Up-to-date version of this file can be downloaded from the network site: <http://MAStudies.ning.com/lib/scripts/translations.php>
- ∇ Full details about the development of the Network, data from the pre- and post-surveys, and technical notes from the project's applications developer are available online in the NEH Digital Humanities [Library of Funded Projects](#).
- ∇ [MA Connect!](#) is a pilot program undertaken to explore application development for the Ning environment. The application allows Network members to connect with other members based on shared scholarly interests. It is fully functional (see screenshot below) and can be viewed on the Massachusetts Studies Network. Detailed technical notes on the development of this custom application within the Ning environment may be found in the whitepaper contributed to the NEH Digital Humanities [Library of Funded Projects](#).

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Massachusetts Studies Network. At the top, the network's logo and tagline "Collaborating in the Commonwealth" are displayed. Below this is a navigation bar with links for Home, My Page, People, Events, Chat, and Sharing. The main content area is titled "MA Connect!" and features a map of Massachusetts with numerous red location pins indicating member locations. To the right of the map is a "Welcome to The Massachusetts Studies Network" message with "Sign Up" and "or Sign In" links. Below the map is a "Refresh Map" button and a list of interests for filtering members. The interests list is organized into three columns:

<input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology	<input type="checkbox"/> Archives	<input type="checkbox"/> Arts
<input type="checkbox"/> Community Life	<input type="checkbox"/> Cultural Heritage	<input type="checkbox"/> Dance
<input type="checkbox"/> Education (college/university)	<input type="checkbox"/> Education (K-12)	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment
<input type="checkbox"/> Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/> Ethnic Studies	<input type="checkbox"/> Genealogy
<input type="checkbox"/> Geography	<input type="checkbox"/> History	<input type="checkbox"/> Jurisprudence
<input type="checkbox"/> Languages & Linguistics	<input type="checkbox"/> Literature	<input type="checkbox"/> Local Studies
<input type="checkbox"/> Music	<input type="checkbox"/> Philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> Religion
<input type="checkbox"/> Visual Arts		

The right sidebar contains a calendar for September 2009 and a list of events:

September 2009

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
	1	2	3	4	5	
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

Last Month Next Month

"In These Imperiled Times: The Civil War Correspondence of the Men of South Danvers"
September 24, 2009 at 9am to December 31, 2009 at 9pm – Peabody Institute Library

2009 Photo Contest for Essex National Heritage Area
September 24, 2009 at 11am to October 16, 2009 at 7pm – Essex County

A Visit with Harriet Beecher Stowe
October 1, 2009 from 7pm to 9pm – Peabody Institute Library

Exploring Paul Cuffe: The Man and His Legacy
October 3, 2009 all day – New Bedford Whaling Museum

The Civil War: From

APPENDIX: Network Statistics as of June, 2009

Google Analytics statistics for the project year show an active network with 6,349 unique visits and 52,769 pageviews, with an average of 8 pages viewed per visit. The bounce rate (visitors leaving from the same page they arrive on) is a healthy 24.5%. Visitors spend an average of 7 minutes on the site.

