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Bearing Witness

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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When crisis hits, libraries step up to save the stories

Civic unrest and natural disasters are not unique to the 21st century. But with the growth of rapid news cycles and citizen documentation through social media, as well as technology-enabled decentralized grassroots movements and an increasingly democratized understanding of whose stories should be preserved, careful documentation of these tragedies—in real time or close to it—is a responsibility that public and academic libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions are taking on more and more. They have the infrastructure necessary to preserve physical and digital records, oral histories, and data, as well as the often critical metadata attached to them, and the means to incorporate both official and citizen documentation. In addition, in a world where privacy is a very real concern, archivists and librarians are deeply aware of those issues and keep them at the forefront, helping gain the trust of subjects whose experiences enrich the collective memories preserved. Since, by their nature, such crises tend to come suddenly and unexpectedly, learning from prior projects can help new ones get up to speed sooner and avoid missteps.

AGGREGATING STORM STORIES

One of the earliest of the current natural disaster archival initiatives, Narrating Hurricane Katrina Through Oral History, launched in fall 2005 immediately following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the category five hurricane that made landfall in Louisiana and Florida in late August of that year. Archival responses to hurricanes Katrina and Rita were swift and urgent, arising in response to both the widespread destruction and the domestic diaspora prompted by evacuations, disproportionately affecting the economically disenfranchised and people of color.

Under the direction of Associate Professor of History Lisa Pruitt, then director of the Albert Gore, Sr., Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), Murfreesboro, interviews were conducted with survivors by Gore Center staff, MTSU students, and volunteers. The subjects included evacuees, volunteers from churches and the American Red Cross, students, members of the National Guard, the director of the Tennessee Emergency Management Administration, a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) veterinary responder, and representatives of the American Association of State and Local History who assessed impact on cultural institutions.

The Gore Center's oral histories became part of the larger Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (HDMB) at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University and the University of New Orleans, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. This collection, also established in 2005, brings together collections documenting hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"Our target audience was anyone who was affected by the 2005 hurricanes," recalls CHNM Associate Director of Public Projects Sheila A. Brennan on the digital environmental humanities blog Ant Spider Bee, "survivors, emergency responders, volunteers, and concerned citizens. Because the hurricanes created a diaspora of individuals, we believed that launching a website could reach the largest number of the affected—wherever they may have landed."

HDMB includes collections from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Hurricane Katrina Photos, with nearly 14,000 images; United States Coast Guard Released Photographs of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, documenting recovery and relief efforts; Katrina's Kids Project Artwork, started by a group of Houston area parents to provide emotional support for young evacuees through art; and many more. It was presented with the Award of Merit for Leadership in History in 2007, and with more than 25,000 items is the largest free public archive of Katrina and Rita.



PAIN AND HOPE Images from the Documenting Ferguson initiative (left, center) chronicle a community's response to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown; an anonymous memory shared with the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank

DOCUMENTING FERGUSON

Not all disasters are natural. On August 9, 2014, a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, shot and killed Michael Brown, a young African American man. Following Brown's death, protesters flooded the streets in Ferguson. Nadia Ghasedi, associate university librarian for special collections services at Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL), recalls being at an event and observing a large number of attendees with their phones out, taking pictures and recording their experiences. At the same time, she says, the university was discussing the value of building a repository or website of these ephemeral recordings.

Given the fleeting nature of these protest recordings and the need to move swiftly, the Documenting Ferguson team decided to actively get the community to contribute content, capturing the local impact of the events and not just the ways that events were captured in the local media. The library already had access to the web-publishing platform Omeka, which supports community contributions.

Librarians developing the platform leveraged their own relationships, including with local photographers, to attract content. Other community members found the platform on their own and independently submitted materials, as the archive received local media attention. "It was very much in the moment," says Ghasedi. "It is still a living archive, and we are still actively engaging the community in it." The process was unusual for archiving work, she says, because the collection was created without the customary planning and forethought.

Ghasedi also contrasts the events in Ferguson with other major crises, where perhaps "tragedy brought a community together and was very unifying," she says. "For us, Ferguson was very divisive." This presented the question of how archivists could maintain some level of objectivity. "We know no one is truly neutral, but our objective in the long term is to capture this moment firsthand, with primary source content, from anyone willing to give it to us, and to hopefully be comprehensive, with different perspectives represented," she says, noting that an effort was made to reach out to police for contributions. An effort to include broad perspectives, she notes, could enhance the collection's value as a research tool.

All materials submitted to the platform needed to be approved before posting, with a staff member filtering out inappropriate materials. In terms of sustainability, "had the contributions been huge, this would have been hard to manage," says Ghasedi. She acknowledges that there is more that could be done with Documenting Ferguson as a community-powered platform. The team did not go into the platform and enrich any of the metadata beyond the basic information provided by the person submitting the content. As time goes on, it may become more and more challenging to identify people and events in the images, and that information may be lost. She also notes that Omeka was an imperfect tool for this collection, for example making it difficult for people with a large number of phone pictures to bulk upload.

For submissions, the university utilized permissions language stating that contributors retained rights to their content but that the university had the ability to make the content accessible. Having that general language already developed for other community-based projects, she says, helped in quickly putting the site together. Sharing this content on the platform does present other challenges, she adds, with the risk of the university becoming the broker for other people's work, which may not always be properly credited by the person submitting. "As librarians, we have obligations to make sure our institutions follow copyright law," she says.

NOW FOR THE FUTURE

The Documenting Ferguson initiative, in turn, helped seed 2016's Documenting the Now: Supporting the Scholarly Use and Preservation of Social Media Content (DocNow), which collects, archives, and provides access to Twitter feeds that chronicle historically significant social justice events. DocNow emerged from the 2014 Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meeting, which convened in Washington, DC, the day after events in Ferguson (for more, see [LJ's coverage](#)).

DocNow leads Bergis Jules, university and political papers archivist at the University of California at Riverside; Ed Summers, lead developer at the University of Maryland's Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities; and Chris Freeland, associate university librarian at the WUSTL libraries, joined forces with Meredith Evans, at the time associate university librarian at WUSTL and now director of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum.

"That week there was just so much conversation about what was going on, policing in America, and treatment of poor communities," said Jules at the time. "And most of that conversation was being spurred by what people were seeing on Twitter." With its commitment to prioritizing ethical practices when working with social media content, especially in terms of collection and long-term preservation, DocNow has become a model for best practices in social media and web archiving around social justice issues.

Moving forward, Ghasedi tells *LJ* that one change she would make to her approach would have been better documentation, noting that "a lot was on the fly" and based on personal relationships between the university and community organizations. Focused strategizing becomes challenging when it is necessary to respond and create an action plan immediately. She notes that it would have been helpful to have a record of what was done, including who the team contacted for materials. Ghasedi also emphasizes the need to remain sensitive to the emotional strain of people living through a major crisis, and how this may impact the stories they tell; she also says professionals must be aware of the impact of a tragedy on themselves, as members of the community. There is no right or wrong, she notes; you have to be in tune with your community, as well as with the priorities and scope of your institution.

"ALERTNESS AND ACTION" IN LAS VEGAS

As domestic mass shootings continue to increase, the urgency to document such human-caused tragedies has grown as well. Shortly after the events of October 1, 2017, in Las Vegas, NV, when a gunman opened fire on a crowd at a music festival and killed 58 people, injuring many more, a community of local archivists and librarians sprang into action to preserve web and social media reactions to the tragedy. The Web Archive on the October 1, 2017, Shooting in Las

Vegas, NV, collected by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), is now housed on Archive-It.org and has gathered hundreds of websites and posts from the days immediately following the shooting.

According to Tammi Kim, who oversees Special Collections and Archives at UNLV, this collection represents a natural outgrowth of the university library's mission to "collect, preserve, and document the history" of the region. UNLV is the only university in the Las Vegas Valley to have a web archiving program, and already had experience with documentary projects and community events. In addition to web archiving, the UNLV team utilized a tool called Twarc to collect Twitter data, capturing what people said online related to the shooting, using parameters to capture any tweet in this period referencing Las Vegas.

Kim also characterizes this project as part of a broader initiative among local libraries and cultural heritage repositories, which have also included an oral history program and physical collections. Shortly after October 1, there was a meeting of representatives from a number of archives, museums, and libraries in the Las Vegas area. Institutions clarified what they would be able to do in terms of collections, and ensured that no one would be duplicating work: UNLV made a decision, for example, not to collect physical artifacts and to focus instead on its existing infrastructure for web archiving.

According to Kim, a major and unique challenge to archiving tragedy is that "you're just acting on capturing—acting as soon as you can. News sites are constantly changing," requiring alertness and immediate action. Another challenge, she says, is "in terms of selection, trying to capture a broad range of voices and perspectives." For this reason, there are two parts to this collection: URLs selected and curated by the staff at UNLV Special Collections, and a collection extracted by Twarc, gathering URLs that people have retweeted and linked. With this latter collection, it is also possible to quantify how many times a particular article was referenced. It was "interesting to see" what ranked as top online references, Kim says, noting that both a tweet from President Barack Obama and an Instagram post from Brendan Urie (lead singer of the group Panic! at the Disco, originally from Las Vegas) ranked near the top.

Ultimately, the UNLV team viewed news and social media content as ephemeral, primary source evidence of a historical event, no different from other types of ephemeral archival materials such as posters and flyers. These kinds of web archiving projects require "reframing our mind-set and thinking more broadly about where does information live, what else should we be documenting and preserving?" says Kim.



NEVER FORGET UNLV's Web Archive on the October 1, 2017, Shooting in Las Vegas commemorates memorials to the victims throughout the community (l., top and bottom); r.: Interviewers Catherine Magruder and Sarah Reith speak to Mary and Kim Monroe about their experience of the Redwood Complex Fire in 2017 (top), contributors to the California Wildfire Story Collection (bottom)

LISTENING IN CALIFORNIA

In California, wildfires have exacted an enormous toll from numerous communities. In 2018 alone, the Camp Fire became the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state's history, with at least 85 fatalities reported. Stories of those who survived recent major California wildfires have been collected in an oral history project through StoryCenter and the California State Library, joined by public libraries in Mendocino, Sonoma, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Napa, Shasta, Lake, and Yolo counties.

The StoryCenter and California State Library "California Listens" project began as a digital storytelling project that has traveled to numerous California libraries to gather stories that can be held in permanent archives. After the 2017 California wildfires, StoryCenter returned to affected communities specifically to gather perspectives on the experience of wildfires. In 2018, the project returned to eight counties for wildfire-related oral histories. This year the project has focused on the Camp Fire and the community of Paradise, which remains devastated.

To connect with people willing to share their stories, participating libraries put out a call and provide a link to a registration page for those interested. “It’s a self-selecting process” of those willing to record their oral histories, according to Joe Lambert of StoryCenter. For a number of reasons, it has not been easy to find oral history participants, he says. “There have been a lot of cameras and microphones” already, and survivors may prefer to take time and distance away from the experience. In addition, displacement from the fires means that many survivors are no longer physically present. For those who do agree to participate, organizers will also make sure they have access to community mental health professionals, as Lambert recognizes the potential that “talking about these issues might retraumatize them.... We try to be as careful as we can [and will tell them], ‘You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.’ ”

At the heart of this and other oral history projects is the need to prompt people to tell stories. “Most people at first blush will fly 60,000 feet above the experience,” says Lambert, without focusing on their own very specific story. Such a personal focus may be particularly hard for survivors who are still struggling to comprehend what they lost, or what impact the fires had on their lives, ranging from destroyed homes and livelihood to evacuation and toxic air.

StoryCenter has created an iPad-based kit for gathering oral histories, which is technically straightforward. After stories are recorded, however, things become more challenging and labor intensive, ranging from transcribing material to finding a home for the recording. Aside from traveling to support the recording, and sending back materials, StoryCenter does not have a sustained relationship with libraries. While StoryCenter works with institutions to manage this aspect of oral history work, it requires time and other limited resources that libraries may not possess. “What we haven’t had happen is a library dedicated to exhibiting these resources, maybe on their website,” says Lambert. “Nobody has been funded to do that...there simply aren’t the resources to make an exhibition.”

Overall, Lambert observes that the Wildfires project has not gone as far as it could with greater resources. He emphasizes the need for a larger scale of remembrance “about what this climate shift and this mega fire phenomenon means to the Western states. The communities most affected have the most reason to do it, but also the least resources.”

Unless StoryCenter or another organization is adequately resourced, he tells *LJ*, the work done thus far is “a drop in the bucket” and “a snapshot of what these stories are like.” Lambert says that archivists must be “looking at the ways these stories are emerging and the ways that the parties are looking at them,” and urged coordination, particularly among larger and better-resourced institutions.

MEANINGFUL RESPONSES

In general, institutions faced with archiving traumatic events have found value in knowing that others have already dealt with similar projects. Kim suggests looking at the Internet Archive Spontaneous Events project for insights on moving quickly to capture information at a time of crisis. She also points to documentation of the Pulse nightclub shooting and the web archive from Virginia Tech as further references.

In addition, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) has developed a Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force, which recognizes the extent to which archivists will have to deal with these kinds of events, and provides a space for sharing ideas and best practices.

Ghasedi also notes the value of the task force and the importance of a toolkit for archivists confronting traumatic events—which are “not as straightforward as other types of collecting.” Archivists and librarians coping with these kinds of projects do not have to start from scratch in developing a meaningful response, she says. As more members of the archival community come forward to share their work and approaches, they can support one another—and those whose stories they document—through difficult times.

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[Hurricane Digital Memory Bank](#)

[Documenting Ferguson](#)

[Documenting the Now](#)

[DocNow](#)

[Web Archive on the October 1 2017 Shooting in Las Vegas](#)

[California Wildfire Story Collection](#)
