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Curatorial Practices of 9/11 Digital
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Preserving Memory in the Digital Age: Curatorial Practices of 9/11 Digital Archives

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“After September 11 everything was different.”

-Stephen Brier and Joshua Brown, “The September 11 Digital Archive”

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, scholars, historians, and archivists alike were faced with the monumental task of preserving a record of the tragedy at hand. The ensuing debates over how best to undertake the responsibilities of collecting, preserving, and displaying the raw materials, both digital and otherwise, of the 9/11 historical and memorial record revealed significant concern about the function(s), purpose(s), and methods of historians and archivists. Such concerns were amplified and complicated when applying these tasks and issues to the digital world in which, for better or for worse, they were taking shape.¹ As archivist Richard Cox noted, “9/11 may be the first truly Digital Age tragedy in the Western world calling on the technologies of this era, the same technologies more often characterized as threatening societal and organizational memory.”² In a post-9/11 digital world which was deemed to be fundamentally different, how were archivists, historians, and especially curators to respond to the catastrophe and interact with the modern digital context in which the catastrophe was being remembered?

Curators of 9/11 digital archives dealt directly with these new dynamics of archiving catastrophe in the digital realm, and so occupied a pivotal role in shaping the parameters of curating public memory online. Thus while much of the scholarly literature on 9/11 digital archives has focused on the digital medium’s mediation of expression and remembrance, this

¹ For examples, see Brier and Brown, “The September 11 Digital Archive,” and Richard Cox, *Flowers after the Funeral: Reflections on the Post-9/11 Digital Age* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

² Cox, 2.

paper will focus on the role of archivist-curators of 9/11 digital archives to understand how public memory is shaped in the digital sphere. Specifically, it will attempt to address two interrelated questions concerning the curatorial role in digitally preserving the 9/11 historical and memorial record. What capacity do curators of 9/11 digital archives have in mediating the collective memory-making process in the digital sphere, and is this curatorial mediation, or lack thereof, a positive development in the formative processes of collective memory-making?

Clearly, analyzing the full breadth of 9/11 digital archives on the Web would be an unmanageable task, so for the purposes of this project four representative online archives were chosen:

- *Wherewereyou.org* (<http://www.wherewereyou.org/>): This archive was founded on September 15, 2001 by three college students, webmaster Geoffrey Hicks from California, designer Lane Collins from North Carolina, and Marie Pelkey from Vermont, who is credited for the archive's concept. Entries from the public detailing the emotions, reactions, and memories of the events of 9/11 were collected for one year, until September 15, 2002.³
- the *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project* (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive/): Originally organized by the American Folklife Center, the project was carried out on the streets of America, with trained folklorists collecting memorial records from the public in a manner similar to a project carried out in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor many years ago. A portion of the archive was later digitized and housed within the Library of Congress' online collection; this is the portion of the project that can be

³ "About," *Where Were You*, <http://www.wherewereyou.org/about/>.

accessed digitally by the public. It is a closed collection, meaning that no new submissions are being collected currently.⁴

- the *Sonic Memorial Project* (<http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html>): This project offers a fascinating picture of the collaborative nature of curating public memory digitally. Initiated by Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, executive directors of NPR's Lost and Found Sound Radio Series, the list of collaborators on the *Sonic Memorial Project* is impressive, with radio, television, museums, and other digital archival projects recognized for their contributions to the project. The site features a dynamic collection of audio recordings related to the Twin Towers site, the surrounding New York City neighborhood, and the traumatic events of 9/11; visitors to the archive are encouraged to submit audio recordings online or to call a hotline number in order to contribute to the rich historical-memorial record of 9/11.⁵
- the *Voices of 9/11: a people's archive* (<http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/>): Created by Ruth Sergel, an activist artist with an extensive resume and a proclivity for community projects, this 9/11 video archive emerged out of Sergel's *here is new york: a democracy of photographs* project. It consisted of 550 video testimonies collected by appointment between March 2002 and February 2003; these testimonies were collected in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville,

⁴ "About the Collection," *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project*, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive/911about.html.

⁵ "The Sonic Memorial Project," <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html>.

PA, and the Pentagon, generally geographic sites specifically connected to the events of 9/11.⁶

These archival projects were selected with the goal of highlighting the diversity of curatorial strategies employed in the digital world of 9/11 archival memory in order to better understand the possibilities that digital curating of public memory may offer to collective-memory-making processes.

Understanding the curatorial dynamics behind the production and management of online 9/11 archives must be an integral component to any historian's attempts to make sense of the 9/11 digital archive phenomenon. The curators of these digital archives occupy a pivotal spot as mediators between the public digital realm, with all of its peculiar methodological intricacies, and the private responses of individuals. If all memory is in some way mediated,⁷ or acted upon by external forces, curators of 9/11 digital archives must be understood as operating upon and within the complex digital medium which mediates the collective memory-constructing process. Most importantly, as this paper will argue, their curatorial choices dictate to what extent the public can engage in curatorial practices towards the historical-memorial record of 9/11 and in dialogue with other people, ideas, and records of 9/11. Curating the past and creating collective memories of tragedy, it seems, may indeed become a collective endeavor, thanks to the groundbreaking work of archivist-curators of 9/11 digital archives.

⁶ "FAQ," *Voices of 9/11: here is new york*, <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/faq/>.

⁷ Ekaterina Haskins, "Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 401.

Preserving Historical Memory in a Digital World: Methodological Debates over Digital Archives

Digital materials (both born-digital and digitalized records), as well as the digital spaces in which they were recorded or stored, have been embraced by many as central to understanding 9/11, if not now then in the future. A whole new range of problems, however, came with the use of the digital medium to collect and preserve the historical and memorial records of the terrorist attacks. Scholars immediately recognized that relying upon new digital technologies and the internet in this process presented problems that challenged the very legitimacy of online archival projects and offered puzzling new quandaries for historians. According to Barbara Abrash,

While they [digital materials and archives] offer unparalleled opportunities for archiving and research, digital forms also present significant challenges. How to select, preserve, and index such vast amounts of material? The digital archives that house the ephemera are themselves fragile—Web sites disappear...., and digital technologies quickly become obsolete. For the historian, evidence that is fragmented, often unattributed, and recombinant raises questions of creditability and historical truth, as well as profoundly challenging conventions of linear narrative.⁸

Archivist-curators were thus faced with decisions over how to manage and organize the sheer volume of 9/11 materials proliferating in the digital format, and how to best preserve these vulnerable materials. Concerns over the historical reliability of materials collected digitally also complicated the digital archivist-curator's task, putting these archivist-curators in a unique position to decide what materials to curate but also how to curate them online.

⁸ Barbara Abrash, "Digital Democracy, Digital History: '9--11 and After,'" *Radical History Review* no. 93 (Fall 2005): 99.

In light of these issues, some historians saw a newfound role for themselves in preserving the historical record of 9/11. Collaborators on the massive September 11 Digital Archive project claimed that the archive was created

Because we believed, as historians, that such digital materials would prove central to any future understanding of September 11 and the larger political, social, and economic meanings of that epochal historical moment. We realized that we could not remain passive because we could not assume that the kinds of diverse information and materials that future researchers needed would still be available in the future, even though September 11 was one of the most well-documented events (in every sense of the term) in human history. In essence, after decades of depending on librarians and archivists to do our work as historians, we decided that we would now have to function in a new role: as archivist-historians.⁹

As new roles appeared for actors interested in recording, preserving, and disseminating digitally the historical-memorial record of 9/11, curators of these digital online archives faced potentially competing methodological demands in terms of organizing and presenting the digital historical and memorial record of 9/11. Even “while archivists have worked to document all aspects of societal and organizational life, experience, and activities,...many of these records could certainly perform the kind of role delineated...by the more spontaneous and emotional process of marking what has come to be a kind of grave site,” notes Cox. At the same time, “an archives also serves other purposes such as accountability and the accumulation of evidence for both

⁹ Stephen Brier and Joshua Brown, “The September 11 Digital Archive,” *Radical History Review* no. 111 (Fall 2011): 102-103.

scholarship and more mundane organizational functions.”¹⁰ The competing demands of archive as popular shrine or archive as scholarly historical record raised an interesting dilemma: should these archives serve the public’s emotional needs in the present, at the expense of creating reliable and historically legitimate historical records of 9/11 for future study?

Other scholars have joined the debate over the role and function of these digital archives in the preservation of the historical-memorial record of 9/11. For example, Ekaterina Haskins’ article “Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age” attempts to grapple with the methodological strengths and limitations of the internet for modern “archival memory.” She concludes that ““digital memory, more than any other form of mediation, collapses the assumed distinction between modern ‘archival’ memory and traditional ‘lived’ memory by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand, and of presence and interactivity on the other.”¹¹ Her analysis of the competing functions of the September 11 Digital Archive points to “a fine balancing act” between asserting its position as “a steward of history” and opening up a forum for “unrestricted public participation,” thus highlighting “a tension between the Archive’s populist commitment to grassroots history making and its professional obligation to maintain impartial factuality.”¹² Curators thus had to decide whether the opportunities for populist record-keeping offered in the digital medium would conflict or complement traditional curatorial management of such historical/memorial records.

Even a preliminary examination of the scholarly debate concerning 9/11 digital archives and digital collective memory-making processes point to a potential shift in the paradigm

¹⁰ Cox, 20.

¹¹ Haskins, 401.

¹² Haskins, 415.

concerning the role of archivists/curators in the digital sphere. The perceived competing functions of these archives as spontaneous memorials in the hands of the public (these archives could emerge relatively quickly online) or carefully curated accumulations of the historical-memorial record of 9/11 in the hands of trained professionals illustrate how important the role of archivist-curators would be in the digital sphere. These digital archives blurred the lines between the public and private spheres, as private memories became integrated into the public digital historical/memorial record as representations of public memory in these public digital archives. The manner in which individuals were allowed to participate in the collection and preservation of their private recollections and materials as part of a broader public collective record of 9/11 thus offered potential new democratic aspects of digital archiving (these “democratizing” elements, such as increased access to information and greater public participation in the creation of the historical-memorial record in the digital sphere, has been highly touted by some scholars). In this light, it is critical to first address how the curators of these 9/11 digital archives imagined their projects to serve the scholarly community and the broader public in the wake of the terrorists attacks of September 11.

Curatorial Positioning Within the Digital Memorial Landscape .

In light of discussions over methodological concerns and the historical impact of archiving 9/11 in a digital world, it is useful to examine the attempts of creators of such 9/11 digital archival projects to establish the present and future worth of their digital collections and methodologies. Legitimacy, in this sense, seems to be defined by how project organizers understood their projects to benefit scholars and the general public. In so doing, the architects of these archives, perhaps self-consciously, offer valuable insight into how they envision their projects to fit within the digital historical and memorial record of 9/11. At stake is the capacity of

these project creators to frame their digital projects as legitimate efforts (both in terms of methodology and content) and unique vehicles of collecting, preserving, and disseminating collective public memory of 9/11 which could serve as valuable resources for future historians and scholars and non-scholars alike.

The *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project*, housed digitally within the Library of Congress American Memory online database, immediately impressed upon the visitor its scholarly “credentials,” imparting a sense of authoritative legitimacy to its own methodological decisions and curatorial voice that digital archives organized under different auspices by different actors might not have so easily achieved. If a visitor wasn’t sufficiently impressed by imprimatur of the Library of Congress American Memory database, one could read on the introductory page of the collection that

The day after the attacks, the American Folklife Center called upon the nation’s folklorists and ethnographers to collect, record, and document America’s reaction. A sampling of the material collected through this effort was used to create the September 11, 2001, Documentary Project. This collection captures the voices of a diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and political cross-section of America during trying times and serves as a historical and cultural resource for future generations.¹³

Clearly, although designed to capture “the heartfelt reactions, eyewitness accounts, and diverse opinions of Americans and others in the months that followed the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and United Airlines Flight 93,”¹⁴ the project was organized by

¹³ “Overview,” September 11, 2001 Documentary Project, accessed November 18, 2013, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive.

¹⁴ “Overview,” http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive.

scholars and professionals involved in the preservation of a national (i.e. “American”) consciousness of 9/11, and the selection of materials collected to be shown in the digital format of this archive remained in the control of the cultural authorities involved. Drawing upon the precedent of a similar project carried out in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor,¹⁵ the creators of the *September 11 Documentary Project* seemed to suggest that their archival project was validated by these past scholarly efforts (as well as by their attempts to represent and include a diverse range of American viewpoints and identities). The project curators relied upon scholarly credentials, historical validation of its methodology, and broad representation in content to establish the legitimacy of the *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project* digital collection.

Cultural, artistic, and intellectual elites who collaborated on some digital 9/11 archives also sometimes attempted to favorably position their projects within the range of 9/11 digital memorial projects by emphasizing their unique content, methodology, or overarching design concept. The collaborators on the *Sonic Memorial Project*, besides drawing upon a scholarly pedigree and an inclusive, democratically-oriented focus in terms of content and collaboration,¹⁶ also emphasized the exceptional nature of the digital archive’s curatorial methodology and conceptual underpinnings. In the “About the Project” section of the *Sonic Memorial Project* website, the memorial’s architects explain that

¹⁵ “Overview,” http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive.

¹⁶ These collaborators are described on the project’s website: “Initiated by NPR’s Lost & Found Sound (The Kitchen Sisters – Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva), the Sonic Memorial Project is a national collaboration with NPR, WNYC, KQED, Picture Projects, dotsperinch, the September 11 Digital Archive Project, the Museum of Television and Radio, ABC News, transom.org, Creative Time, and more than 50 radio producers. Numerous individuals contributed their time and resources to help make this important and living document of this time, these places, and these people. Thanks to our distribution partners: MSNBC, YAHOO!, Real Audio, NPR, PBS, and Real Impact, Sentium” (http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/about_collaborators.html).

Shortly after September 11, 2001, NPR's Lost & Found Sound brought together radio producers, artists, historians, archivists, and the public broadcasting community to collect and preserve audio traces of the World Trade Center, its neighborhood and the events of 9/11....We opened a Sonic Memorial phone line and hundreds of people from around the world have called sharing their stories and recordings—making this a dramatic, unprecedented audio archive of immediate, first-person accounts chronicling a historic event from almost every vantage point.¹⁷

Clearly, the “unprecedented” methodology of collecting historical evidence in the form of audio files as well as the intrinsic collaboration between cultural elites and ordinary people offered through this very same methodology may have been presented in order to set the Sonic Memorial Project apart as a legitimate, even essential, component of any future study of 9/11.

Perhaps one of the more remarkable features of the 9/11 digital archival phenomenon was revealed by the participation of non-academics in the construction and curating of 9/11 digital archives. Such actors sometimes attempted to link into preexisting scholarly projects or collaborators for legitimation of their content and methods, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves as distinctive within the wide range of memorializing projects on the web. For instance, Ruth Segel’s digital archival project, *Voices of 9/11: here is new york*, an outgrowth of the *here is new york: a democracy of photographs* initiative, was described on its “About” page as “a unique time capsule of over 500 personal video testimonies recorded in 2002 and 2003. At a time when language to describe the experience was still being formed, we traveled from New York City, to Shanksville, PA, Washington DC and the Pentagon to record over 500 video

¹⁷ “About the Project,” *The Sonic Memorial Project*, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/about.html>.

narratives to create this people's archive."¹⁸ Again, claims of inclusive representation, collaboration, and democratic participation, as well as a seemingly unparalleled methodology, are employed by the archive's architects to validate the existence of the project.

The curatorial team of the *Voices of 9/11: here is new york* project also emphasizes ties with respected scholarly projects and digital archives, mentioning that "today *Voices of 9.11* is jointly held by the New-York Historical Society and the September 11 Digital Archive which has initiated a long term plan to donate its entire collection to the Library of Congress for permanent preservation."¹⁹ By linking itself with official institutional and scholarly bodies, the curatorial team of the *Voices of 9/11: here is new york* digital archival project could draw upon new sources of cultural and institutional authority to legitimize their attempt to digitally document the historical-memorial record of 9/11.

Archival creators with less scholarly, "authoritative" credentials had to work much harder to establish the validity of their project as a recorder of history, although even then they often relied upon similar legitimizing claims. On its welcome page, the creators of *wherewereyou.org*, a site generated by three American students in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to collect and record the reactions of ordinary people all over the world, explained that

This site exists to gather the thoughts and emotions of everyday people to the events on and after September 11, 2001. Why must we record these thoughts?It would be a great historical resource. The media records everything, true, but those records get lost and aren't compiled like these fresh ongoing thoughts from people of all backgrounds.tell us your story, so generations and generations after will remember that it wasn't

¹⁸ "About," *Voices of 9/11: here is new york*, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/about/>.

¹⁹ "About," <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/about/>.

only a war on our buildings, our government, our economy, but of our hearts and lives and everything that makes us an American. These are the World's hearts and thoughts.”²⁰

By calling into question the perceived methodological inadequacies of the media (i.e. dominant, mainstream sources) as recorders of valuable historical material, the creators of *Wherewereyou.org* self-consciously situated themselves as an alternative, more democratic vehicle for collecting the historical-memorial record of 9/11; their intent was to preserve this “history” through the eyes of the people rather than dominant discourses by cultural and political elites, including the media.²¹ Not only was their archival project legitimate because it constituted a valid source of history and mode of methodology for those interested in studying the history of 9/11, but also because it claimed to represent diverse interests in the accumulation of 9/11 accounts. Thus, the digital archive’s real importance, at least in the eyes of its founders, was marked by its ability to democratize the historical memory-making processes in ways beyond beyond the scope of more traditional forums of collective memory-making. The curators of the archive celebrated their project as a broad challenge to a perceived status quo in dominant modes of preserving history (i.e. through the lens of national media institutions), perhaps in an effort to validate its very existence and to attract more submissions. They claimed to overcome the methodological concerns posed by dominant media sources in several ways: first, by an unmediated collecting of testimonies essential to the historical record of 9/11; second, by their insistence on its national and global representation; and third, by their self-conscious attempts to

²⁰ “An Introduction....Where Were You When America Was Attacked?,” *Wherewereyou.org*, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.wherewereyou.org/>.

²¹ The implication that the media acted as historians, however inaccurate from the standpoint of historians immersed in the traditional study of history, was important because it collapsed the boundaries between history and memory. Private memory thus became part of the historical-memorial record through these digital archiving sites.

maintain their project's methodological integrity, positing their role as mediators of this project to represent an alternative 9/11 "historian." While these amateur archivists drew upon the same strands of thought employed by digital archives run by more authoritative cultural or intellectual bodies, the creators twisted these arguments in new ways to further explain and situate their project's very existence within the digital memorializing landscape.

Curatorial "Objectivity" in the Digital Realm

So what role would curators play in the 9/11 digital archival phenomenon? Clearly, the intensely political nature, and emotional tenor, of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 threatened the understanding, articulated by Cox, that "archives, while they might reflect grander world schemes to dominate society by business, political, diplomatic, and cultural means simply because of the tremendous documentation involved, are not intended to be patriotic shrines."²² For archivists to accept only materials deemed "patriotic" could threaten the free public consumption of information at the heart of a functioning democracy. As Cox noted, "It will be, and always should be, the task of journalists, scholars and citizens alike to have the privilege of wrestling with the diverse evidence offered in such records, making up their own minds about what this evidence means. If records are sanitized, culled, excised, or in any way manipulated then they lose their value and power, and a democratic society is weakened."²³ Archivists were called to proceed with their documenting efforts in as apolitical a manner as possible, in order to maintain the integrity of the archival process itself. This would suggest the need for greater curatorial control over the content and presentation of this content within digital archives.

²² Cox, 19.

²³ Cox, 8.

Examination of the curatorial techniques of these digital archives however suggests a different picture. In this case, objectivity generally seemed to have meant as little curatorial mediation of materials included in the archive as possible. While much attention has been paid to the mediating effects of the digital format and forum of 9/11 memorial websites and archives (in terms of encouraging greater vernacular expression in opposition to dominant narratives of 9/11 espoused by the media, for example),²⁴ attention to the curator's mediating role in these same kinds of digital archives is needed. Whether explicit or implicit, the creators of the archives under consideration here display varying recognition of their own role as mediators between the individual and the broader digital community of visitors to the site. The creators of *Voices of 9/11: here is new york* explicitly stated that "We never edit or alter the testimonies" and declared that *Voices of 9.11* was explicitly designed to give each individual control of their own story. Inside a private video booth participants started and stopped their own recording. Absolutely no restrictions were placed on what could or could not be said. Participants could speak for any length of time and in whatever language they felt most comfortable."²⁵ It is apparent, by noting the grammar, syntax, or punctuation errors in the entries posted in the *Wherewereyou.org* archive, that these materials were collected without any curatorial alteration,²⁶ and the creators of the digital Sonic Memorial refer to their project as an "open archive."²⁷ Clearly, a subtle contradiction existed between the careful curating of the selection of incoming materials based

²⁴ For example, see Aaron Hess, "In Digital Remembrance: Vernacular Memory and the Rhetorical Construction of Web Memorials," *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 5 (September 1, 2007): 812–830.

²⁵ "About," <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/about/>.

²⁶ <http://www.wherewereyou.org/view/>.

²⁷ "The Sonic Memorial Project," <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html>.

on professional judgment (i.e. curatorial “objectivity”) and broadening this power of selection in content to the general public.

Curators’ claims to represent and include a diverse range of participants and responses also could, within this context, be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the curators to downplay their mediating influence and combat the “politicization” of their archives. The creators of the *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project*, while admitting that only a portion of the archival materials were selected to be displayed in the digital forum, could emphatically emphasize that “the voices of men and women from many cultural, occupational, and ethnic backgrounds are represented” in their digital archive.²⁸ By recognizing their archive’s diverse representation and inclusive, democratic participation of many non-curatorial actors in the archival process, the curators of the collection could try to minimize any sort of mediation on their end in terms of shaping the content and overall message(s) contained within the archive.

Claims of curatorial “objectivity” or minimal curatorial mediation in the collection and presentation of the content of a particular archive must be qualified. The choices and methodologies of collection and representation made by curators must be discussed within the context of operating in the digital sphere. Thus it is critical to examine the interaction between curator and contributors, curator and submissions, and curator and the digital forum in which the archive takes shape.

Impact of Curatorial Decisions in the Digital Sphere

Clearly, the choices and strategies employed by curators in the construction of digital archival collections must impact the overall nature of how online visitors are meant to interact

²⁸ “About this Collection,” *September 11, 2001 Documentary Project*, Library of Congress: American Memory, accessed November 18, 2013, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/911_archive/911about.html.

with and understand the historical and memorial record of 9/11. According to Abrash, “The question is: Whose history will it be? What will count as evidence? Will it represent the subjectivity of those who lived it? Here, archives and the ways in which they select, organize, and display their holdings play a crucial role.²⁹ After all, “information in itself is not powerful—how it is shaped, who decides, and how it is circulated [is] crucial.”³⁰ The ways curators can interact with their archive’s collaborators and content is fundamentally shaped, in return, by the digital medium in which these interactions are taking place.

The sheer diversity of curatorial strategies and methodologies for 9/11 digital archives highlights, to some degree, a sense of methodological freedom allowed by new digital technologies which curators and archivists can utilize. Because these individuals seemed to be embarking into new and relatively untested explorations of capturing, recording, or storing historical memory digitally (a process around which the parameters of scholarly debate are still being formed), the diversity of 9/11 digital archives may represent the incredible capacity for creativity and innovation in collecting, preserving, and disseminating the rich historical and memorial record, both vernacular and otherwise, of 9/11.

Curators of 9/11 digital archives must also contend, however, with the peculiar democratizing features of digital archiving in an online setting.³¹ Clearly, the digital forum

²⁹ Abrash, 98.

³⁰ Abrash, 98.

³¹ Haskins, 405-406..

provides an ideal setting for encouraging the production and preservation of vernacular voices.³² The “democratization” factor of archiving in a digital world means that many voices and many stories are indeed heard, and many outside actors can easily involve themselves in the public construction of digital public memory of 9/11 through these archives.³³ The sheer number of voices, perspectives, and contributions to these digital archives could easily be understood by many to mark these archives as “site[s] of cultural resistance,” or “memory place[s] where stories, both grassroots and mainstream, are shared, contested, and circulated over time.”³⁴

The digital medium is also characterized by another “democratizing” element, often referred to as “interactivity” in the scholarly literature. According to Haskins, interactivity refers to “the users’ ability to supply content, provide feedback, and choose their own paths through the system of hyperlinks” which “marks the experience of navigating the internet as more participatory and active than that of flipping through a television channels, scanning a newspaper, or following an audio-tour through a museum. The audience no longer acts as a consumer of a linear story,” but rather “takes part in the experience by making choices to connect particular messages and images as well as to register responses to them.”³⁵ If agency resided solely in the individual visitor to uncover and interpret the information at hand, then the very role of curators could seem potentially irrelevant. Yet curatorial decisions over the content, methods of collecting data, and strategies of organizing the submissions are all areas in which

³² Aaron Hess, “In Digital Remembrance: Vernacular Memory and the Rhetorical Construction of Web Memorials,” *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 5 (September 1, 2007): 812–830.

³³ Haskins, 405.

³⁴ Abrash, 99.

³⁵ Haskins, 406.

these 9/11 digital archive architects could and did negotiate between the general public and the digital realm in which these archives were operating.

Curators of these digital archive sites usually welcome the influx of competing narratives, memories, and submissions, living up to their claims of including and representing many actors, although responding to, interacting with, and organizing the material in different ways. The website for the *Sonic Memorial Project*, referred to by its curators as an “open” archive, contains an explicit call for public participation: “Please help us build this historical archive by calling the Sonic Memorial Phone Line (646-926-1357) or by uploading your sounds,”³⁶ similarly, the creators of *Wherewereyou.org* welcome both national and international participants, or anyone willing to submit entries to the archive.³⁷ Here are two cases in which visitors can (or could, in the case of *Wherewereyou.org*, since the project stopped accepting submissions on September 15, 2002) contribute to the archival project without any direct curatorial interference.

Some archives, although digitized, could be characterized by a more overt curatorial presence in the selection of content and the interaction with those who submitted this content. *The September 11, 2001 Documentary Project*, since it was not born in the digital sphere, but rather was a collection that became digitized later on, does not reflect the same kind of interaction between curator participant or visitor in the digital space. Its website reflects a much more traditional, static, library-like setting in which pre-selected materials are chosen to represent the whole collection and are methodically catalogued, indexed, and arranged (under seven different categories, each arranged alphabetically). This arrangement eliminated the need for public participation in the selection of material to be curated, recreating the traditional

³⁶ “The Sonic Memorial Project,” <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html>.

³⁷ <http://www.wherewereyou.org/>.

archival hierarchy with sole curative power residing in the project's professional archival-curators.

In some cases, digital technology was to blur the boundaries between public and private memorializing in newfound ways through these archives, actively engaging the public in the curating process at the expense perhaps of a more overt curatorial organization. The curators of *Voices of 9/11: here is new york* took advantage of digital technologies to provide the most intimately personal experience possible to the visitor. The use of actual video testimonies, collected by the curators of the project, both personalized the subjects and the curator/participant relationship. Personal individual accounts of 9/11 could be attached to real faces and people and then displayed in the very public online forum of the digital archive. In addition, as the curators note, the videos collected with the utmost respect for the agency of participants to formulate their own narratives in their own way without any curatorial intervention between the time they were collected and the time they were put online. The public is put in control of how its own submissions are to be designed, formatted, and presented. The project's curators also renounce any intention of propelling archive visitors through any sort of predetermined path, instead pointing out that "we provide the viewer with search tools to locate the narratives they might find most compelling."³⁸ Such search tools included a "search by name" or "search by location" option, or an interesting "search by tag" option.³⁹ In addition, a space for visitor comments on the webpage allows visitors to speak directly to individual participants in the videos, thus allowing people to actually engage with the archive's contents. The latter curatorial decision is especially significant when considering Haskins' concern that digital archives such as the

³⁸ <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/about/>.

³⁹ <http://hereisnewyorkv911.org/about/>.

September 11 Digital Archive may offer “no...mechanism...for encouraging the audience to explore views different from their own, in the manner that pedestrians in the streets of New York City were in the weeks following 11 September.”⁴⁰ Clearly, the public is left to complete the important curatorial work of interpreting the material at hand, so that archivist-curator and the public are actually working together to create a final curated product of 9/11 collective memory.

Haskins finds the potential of a more “decentralized approach” to digital archiving, in which curators leave “the task of interpreting this ‘burgeoning dossier’” of digitized archival materials to the “Archive’s users, be they future professional historians or lay visitors,” problematic. According to her, the “preservation of large quantities of digitized materials does not translate into a usable past.”⁴¹ Yet curators may exert interpretive power over visitor through the overall design of a website, what searchable categories are allotted to the collection at hand, and what kind of content is included, as well as how it is presented. Even decisions over when to start and stop collecting submissions for the archive may affect how a visitor absorbs information. For example, while the Sonic Memorial Project represents a living, breathing archival organism, so to speak, since it is continuously being added to, Whererwereyou.org contains submissions gathered within the first year of the terrorist attacks. The passage of time may have had a dramatic impact on the nature of the content submitted to each respective archive. While Whererwereyou.org represents a flashbulb moment or snapshot in time, with its content frozen amid a particular immediate context, a digital archive such as the Sonic Memorial Project may present a more reflective, or at least, dynamic shift in content as the years passed.

⁴⁰ Haskins, 419.

⁴¹ Haskins, 419.

The decentralization of traditional archival hierarchies between archivist-curators, who maintain the sole curative and interpretative power of collective public memory as embodied within an archive's collection, and the general public is perhaps the most innovative and important aspect of digital archives, however. The Sonic Memorial Project is the best example of the creativity in curatorial approach fostered by the capabilities of archiving in a digital forum that can create an inclusive curatorial environment that allows for the public to curate their own collective memories. Despite the curators' apparent decentralized collection approach, the archive itself is organized around a central theme: the site of the twin towers and the surrounding neighborhood. Within that theme, however, a vast and diverse set of audio recordings have been collected. The curators offer many different types of organizational and interpretive structures to help visitors access the information. There is a timeline of historical events which took place on and around the site of the Twin Towers since 1921.⁴² There is a section of selected personal stories and testimonies.⁴³ Most importantly, the archive contains an entire section for educators which presents six difference course modules, each indicative of a different framing of the events of 9/11, to be used with the material found in the Sonic Memorial digital collection,⁴⁴ and a hot line and online submission space are available continuously so that the public can continue to add their thoughts and material to the collection. That digital archiving runs the risk of not providing any sort of defined curatorial interpretation of the information at hand may not be as serious a methodological problem as Haskins might think. Rather, this ability to avoid

⁴² <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/timeline.html>.

⁴³ <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/stories.html>.

⁴⁴ <http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/educators.html>.

“foreclose[ure]”⁴⁵ on any one single, dominant narrative of 9/11 may be one of the most important features of digital archiving for archivists and digital archive curators to understand. As Jarvis argues, digital archive sites can “serve as facilitators of a mnemonic pluralism which is particularly desirable in contexts characterized by the stifling of dissent and opposition such as that which followed 9/11.”⁴⁶ In this way archivist-curators can open up space for public negotiation and participation in the curating, interpreting, and retelling of the events of 9/11.

It is clear that curatorial strategies and decisions are complicated, but not predetermined, by the digital sphere in which they are operating. Indeed, their choices have a great impact on the role and function of these archives in relation to the democratic production of collective public memory of 9/11. Archives that are most innovative in this regard, particularly the *Sonic Memorial Project* and the *Voices of 9/11: here is new york* archives, encourage interaction between curators, visitors, participants, and the archived material in new and creative ways through their curatorial choices; curating the past becomes a joint process, and the production of collective public memory becomes a truly collective effort.

Conclusion

Cox has observed that “archives are usually accumulated after a substantial period of time has passed between the event and acquisition of records and the same is generally the case for museums and their assembling of objects and collections.”⁴⁷ Yet digital technologies have rushed this traditional temporal sequencing of archiving, so that despite the massive archival

⁴⁵ Jarvis, 793.

⁴⁶ Jarvis, 813-814.

⁴⁷ Cox, 21.

projects initiated through digital formats and mediums,⁴⁸ “archivists and museum curators and others cannot understand the significance of what they are doing because the significance of 9/11 in the panorama of American and world history is far from understood.”⁴⁹ This may explain why as of yet little scholarship has been done by historians on the 9/11 digital archival phenomenon.

Yet the 9/11 digital archive phenomenon, as part and parcel of the legacy of 9/11, are particularly rich resources for historians. Lee Jarvis eloquently summarizes why scholars and non-scholars alike must begin to grapple with the complexities of 9/11 digital archives as important vehicles in the collection and preservation of the historical-memorial record of 9/11:

[Digital archives are] of broader interest...for [their] location at the cusp of a potentially significant shift in the practices and technologies of social memory. Digital archives...throw up new opportunities for accessing, transferring, and circulating the content of memories. They do so by providing new spaces for the storage and transmission of stories of the past, assisting individuals to record (and hence reconstruct) those pasts anew for disparate audiences. In Haskins’ evocative summary,

Instead of only official accounts disseminated by mainstream media and the government, all kinds of stories can now become part of an evolving patchwork of public memory. Formerly limited in time and space, ephemeral gestures can be preserved in still and moving images, ready to be viewed and replayed on demand. Previously banished to dark storage rooms, mementos left at memorial sites can be displayed for all to see.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cox, 21.

⁴⁹ Cox, 21.

⁵⁰ Lee, Jarvis, “9/11 Digitally Remastered? Internet Archives, Vernacular Memories, and Wherewereyou.org.” *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2011), 793-814. 798.

Archivist-curators should recognize their leadership role in this burgeoning digital revolution, for they occupy a pivotal spot as mediators between the public digital realm, with all of its peculiar methodological intricacies, and the private individual responses of individuals.

Previous scholarship on 9/11 digital archives ignores curatorial agency in order to emphasize the ways in which the digital medium acts as a dominant mediating force on public memory. Curatorial goals, roles, and methods in the 9/11 digital archive phenomenon must be taken into consideration by historians because curators have tremendous agency in capitalizing on the strengths of digital archives and minimizing the most negative effects of archiving digitally. Curatorial decisions are not predetermined by the digital format and the digital curating of public memory of 9/11 is not a one-sided street, so to speak, in which the digital medium is the dominant mediating force acting on the public's reception of digitally archived materials. Rather, dialectical relationships exist not only between archivist-curators and the digital medium, but, more importantly, between archivist-curators and the public which they serve. It is the latter relationship that is highlighted by the goals of the curator in designing the digital project, the interaction between curator and participant, and the curatorial mediation of the content, method, and forms of digital archives.

Thus, curators' roles in digital archives are most significant when considering the "democratizing" qualities of the digital realm, which offer the possibility of fostering greater active public participation and engagement with materials, ideas, and people. That digital archiving runs the risk of not providing any sort of defined curatorial interpretation of the information at hand may not be as serious a methodological problem as scholars such as Haskins might think. Instead, the curators may employ the digital medium to offer researchers and the public incredible new opportunities to publically and socially engage with each other and with

the curators/archivists themselves in the collective-memory-making process. The extraordinary networks and linkages of information, organizations, people, and ideas that are possible online under curatorial guidance cannot be replicated by traditional paper archives. To some extent, this is due to the peculiar characteristics of the digital medium and space in which these archives operate, which offer public accessibility, ample, if not fragile, storage space, and interactive social space. It is the curator's choice, however, to not only display a wide range of material and showcase the contributions of many different actors without one single interpretational framework, but also to encourage the active engagement of participants and visitors with the curators of these archives and the materials collected by them. September 11th digital archival projects such as the *Sonic Memorial Project* thus represent remarkable achievements in democratizing the collective-memory making process, for it is within these sites that public memory of 9/11 is being curated for and by the very public with which the archivist-curators of these sites interact. In this way, collective-memory making processes can emerge from these digital archives in ways not possible through traditional paper archiving practices.

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