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Rebuilding Post War Europe: New York and Digital Archives as Reconstitutive Fabric

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Abstract

This project explores four digital initiatives that document and make available to the public information related to American, German, and Jewish relationships before, during, and after World War II. The goal of these projects is to make primary source information available to the public using digital technology, in effect, creating an educational infrastructure for enhancing understanding among these groups. These four projects will be treated as cases, with the guiding question being: what infrastructures are needed to create a contemporary, educational, primary source-based digital platform? The goal of this study is to highlight those infrastructure elements that are instrumental in assembling such digital initiatives. In addition to digital infrastructures, this project will find that New York City's infrastructure—particularly buildings, transportation, cellular capacities, and the organizations maintaining those structures—all play an active role in making educational and historical content available to the public.

Keywords: digital archives; mobile technology; World War II, digitization

Introduction

The Second World War left Europe devastated, and raised questions that still plague scholars today as to how the greatest civilizations of the time could have descended into barbarism. Nearly 70 years later, work remains in rebuilding relations, especially building trust and understanding, among Americans, Germans, and Jews of German and non-German descent. Whereas international relations have recovered in terms of functions among nation-states, continued effort is still required on an individual and community-level. Bombed-out buildings have been rebuilt or are in the process of being rebuilt, yet work remains in rebuilding human relationships (e.g., Figure 1 shows the contemporary rebuilding progress in Dresden, Germany).



Figure 1: Rebuilding of Dresden, Germany, in 2008. Photo by Anthony Cociolo.

This project will explore four digital initiatives that document and make available to the public information related to American, German, and Jewish relationships before, during, and after World War II. The goal of these projects is to make primary source information available to the public using digital technology, in effect creating an educational infrastructure for enhancing understanding among these groups. These four projects will be treated as cases, with the guiding question being: what infrastructures are needed to create a contemporary, educational, primary source-based digital platform? The goal of this study is to highlight those infrastructure elements that are instrumental in assembling such digital initiatives. In addition to digital infrastructures, this project will find that New York City's infrastructure—particularly buildings, transportation, cellular capacities, and the organizations maintaining those structures—all play an active role in making educational and historical content available to the public. However, before this finding will be discussed, literature related to the use of physical environments in digital initiatives will be examined, followed by an analysis of the four cases.

Literature Review

In popular culture, rhetoric that dislocates web-based services from their physical instantiations and the human labor involved in maintaining these structures is frequent. This is best captured by discussions of web services “in the cloud,” which often—if inadvertently—obfuscates the physical reality of digital data and the

human labor involved to maintain it, leaving the user with little or no idea of where his or her data resides, or who is involved in its maintenance. This discourse is punctured when the physical reality of cloud computing becomes apparent, such as in 2011 when the cloud computing data center of Amazon.com in northern Virginia became inoperable, leaving thousands of popular websites inoperable (Lohr, 2011). This tendency to dislocate is countered by various strands of academic research, such as research that takes a sociotechnical systems approach. This approach looks to understand technical systems in interaction with individuals and environments (Ropohl, 1999).

Recent research perspectives have incorporated environmental factors in analyzing use of digital systems, especially as a consequence of mobile technology such as smart phones. For example, interest in the use of place as a factor in mobile computing environments—for educational or other purposes—has grown within diverse fields such as the human-computer interaction (HCI), information and library science, and design. In the field of HCI, Hecht, Schöning, Erickson, and Friedhorsky (2011) put forth the notion of geographic HCI, which is human-computer interaction work that takes a geographic approach, with geographic referring to the “processes that occur on or near the Earth’s surface over any time period, but ... typically limited to processes that vary over scales greater than a meter or so” (p. 448). Messeter (2009) argues for an approach that goes beyond geography and location-awareness to one of place-specific computing (PSC), which he describes “as computing in which the designed functionality of systems and services, as well as information provided by these systems and services, are inherently grounded in and emanating from the social and cultural practices of a particular place” (p. 32). In his conception, place-based information is not merely delivered to the user but the interaction of the system is designed with a particular place in mind. The goal of this perspective is “to enhance places through digital media and technology that are grounded in the specific socio-material circumstances offered by a place” (p. 39).

In the field of Information and Library Science, Fisher has extensively explored the issue of place through theoretical development and empirical investigations in such contexts as the Seattle Public Library, the Queens Public Library, and in mobile contexts (Fisher et al., 2007; Fisher and Naumer, 2006; Counts and Fisher, 2008). In this work, she uses the notion of information grounds, which pays “deep attention to the nature and impact of social settings on information flow” and suggests moving “social settings to the forefront and study them holistically as an equal and motivating partner in the phenomenon of information exchange” (Fisher and Naumer, 2006, p. 97). Fisher argues that an information grounds perspective is useful in thinking about the role of information use in space and can act to compliment established notions of place, such as those developed by Cresswell (2004) and Oldenburg (1999). These studies highlight how factors other than the

information system, such as physical place and social settings, have bearing on how information is exchanged.

Case Study Data Sources

Overview

The four projects that will be explored include: 1) German Traces NYC, a joint project between Goethe-Institut New York and Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science (SILS), 2) German-Jewish traces, a project of the Leo-Baeck Institute, 3) Archives of the American Field Service and AFS Intercultural Programs Oral History digitization project in collaboration with Pratt SILS and 4) American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Oral History digitization project in collaboration with Pratt SILS. These projects have been selected as cases because the author played a role in each and illustrate a number of issues worthy of discussion. An overview of each project will be included, followed by a discussion of the infrastructures that play a role in each digital initiative.

Case 1: German Traces NYC

German Traces NYC is mobile, augmented reality experience designed to let learners explore German cultural heritage in New York City. The application makes use of archival documents, photographs, and multimedia narratives to bring to life to this thread of New York City and United States history. German Traces NYC was developed through a partnership between Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science (Anthony Cocciolo and Debbie Rabina) and Goethe-Institut New York (Brigitte Doellgast), which is the Federal Republic of Germany's cultural institution.

In this project, we developed multimedia narratives around the history of Germans in New York (1840-1945), and delivered this content to users via their mobile phone. We focused the narratives on specific places within the city, where German traces could still visibly be found. For example, starting in the 1840s, large numbers of German immigrants entered the United States by way of New York City, creating Little Germany or Kleindeutschland, which today makes up a large portion of the East Village and Lower East Side of Manhattan (Nadel, 1981). Between 1855 and 1880, New York had the third largest German-speaking population of any city, behind only Berlin and Vienna (Nadel, 1981, p. 1). Also interesting was the move of the German population uptown, to what is known today as the Yorkville neighborhood of Manhattan, during the early part of the twentieth century (Jalowicz, 2009). In this project, 38 sites were chronicled, most of them centered in Kleindeutschland and Yorkville. This content area is valuable in that it paints a rich portrait of German and American interactions before World War II, a

content area that has largely and actively been forgotten as a consequence of the war.

Users can access this multimedia content through their mobile web-browser, or through Layar, an augmented reality (AR) web browser. Using the AR web browser, users are able to hold up their mobile phones and see archival photos layered on top of the images visible through the camera's phone. For example, users can find sites such as the Ottendorfer Library, the oldest public library in Manhattan, opened originally to support the German immigrant community in Kleindeutschland (see Figure 2). We included augmented-reality photos not only for the “cool factor” but to reveal changes over time between U.S. and German relationships. With the Ottendorfer library, the signage in German was temporarily covered over during the 1940s and 1950s with an English sign. Today, the original German sign announcing the existence of a “Bibliothek” is visible.

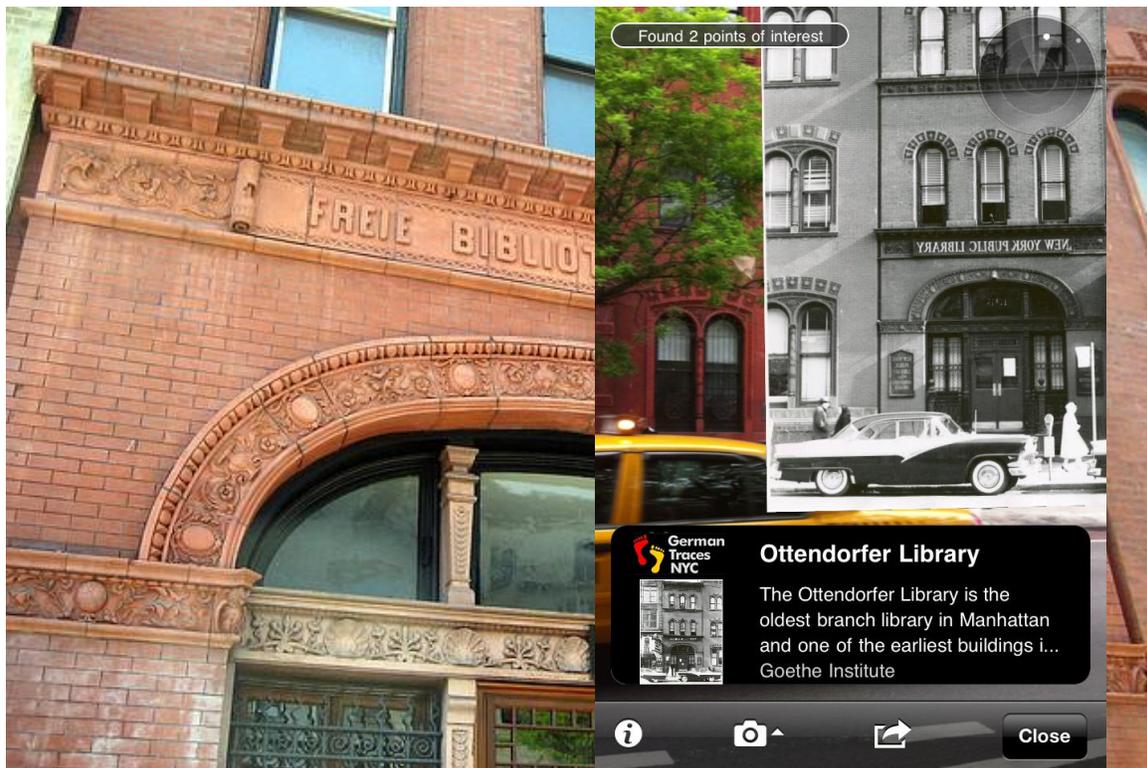


Figure 2. Left: Present day signage announcing a “Library” in German; Right: Augmented-reality interface for retrieving multimedia stories, with German sign covered with an English sign.

Cocciolo and Rabina (2013) studied user reaction to this mobile experience, specifically looking at the extent to which user understanding and engagement around the historic topic was impacted. They found that the participants agree or strongly agree (90%) that being on physical location increased their interest and understanding of the historical topic (in this case, the history of German

immigration, 1840-1945). Participants were especially keen to learn the backstory on familiar places (e.g., store fronts on St. Marks St.). Interestingly, the engagement was not from novel technical interfaces, such as augmented reality (65% experienced usability problems with this function), but from the multimedia narratives combined with the physical places themselves. In essence, access to the city's physical places, combined with educational material made available to the user over their Internet-enabled mobile phone, made this strand of history interesting and engaging to the user. Digital access alone did not provide the positive impact, but the city itself—acting, as one participant described, as an “outdoor museum”—played an equally important role (p. 112). Thus, access to the physical places where historically significant events occur can aid understanding and engagement.

Case 2: German-Jewish Traces

One aspect of the German Traces NYC project was to develop a platform for authoring stories about physical places and deliver them to users' mobile phones. These stories—which we have dubbed GeoStories—are authored and delivered to users via the GeoStoryteller platform (Cocciolo & Rabina, 2013). GeoStoryteller is an open source platform that can be downloaded as software and hosted on a webserver, or a user can use the software hosted by Pratt SILS at <http://geostoryteller.org>. This platform allows users to author their own stories to contribute to such initiatives as German Traces NYC, or start their own initiatives around some content and geographic area of interest. This platform has been used for other cities (e.g., the German Consulate in Toronto created “German City Walk Tour,” and a librarian in Los Angeles created “German-speaking Exiles in Los Angeles”). A class at New York University has also used GeoStoryteller, resulting in “Bushwick Flavor” (Brooklyn, NY), “Williamsmerge” (Brooklyn, NY), and Temporary Neighborhood (for the ephemeral neighborhood created on the NYC subway).

One particularly relevant application of GeoStoryteller is the creation of German-Jewish Traces, a project created by archivist for the Leo Baeck Institute, Michael Simonson. The Leo Baeck Institute is a research library located in Manhattan that contains the “most significant collection of source material relating to the history of German-speaking Jewry, from its origins to its tragic destruction by the Nazis and continuing to the present day” (Leo Baeck Institute, 2013). Simonson created German-Jewish Traces to draw attention to important German-Jewish historic sites, including museums, bakeries, department stores, social clubs and synagogues. Although the site does not make use of multimedia narratives or augmented reality, it includes photographs of sites, such as a former synagogue which started out as a Baptist church, became a synagogue, then became a Roman Catholic Church, and now is just a façade to a NYU dormitory (see Figure 3, Simonson, 2012).

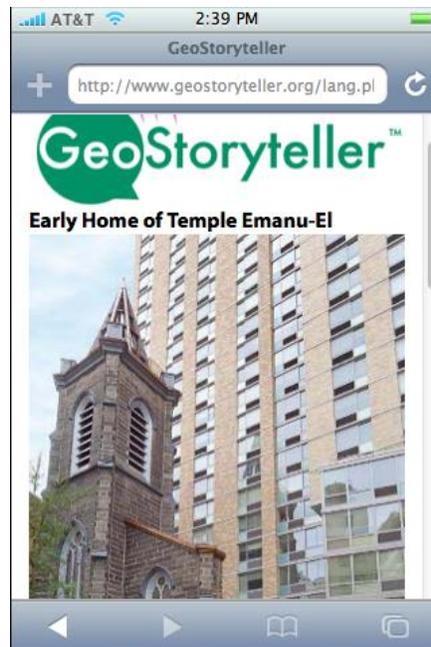


Figure 3: Former church and synagogue façade from German Jewish Traces

German-Jewish Traces uses physical spaces, traces, photographs, digital technology and historic research to recreate an ethnoreligious group that was nearly destroyed. It illustrates how German and German-Jews lived alongside each other in New York's Kleindeutschland long before the Nazis came to power. In sum, these projects recreate German and German-Jewish New York from the nineteenth century through traces and digital technology, with the aim of teaching users about this largely forgotten relationship.

Case 3: Archives of the American Field Service

The American Field Service (AFS) emerged shortly after the outbreak of World War I, when young Americans living in Paris volunteered as ambulance drivers at the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine. (Milano & Cocciolo, 2012). The group was reactivated during World War II, where by the end of the war 2,196 AFS volunteer ambulance drivers had carried more than 700,000 wounded combatants from both sides of the war (Milano & Cocciolo, 2012). In 1980, the AFS created its archives to preserve and provide access to the organization's historical material. Among the activities of the archive was creating oral histories (audio and video) of its ambulance drivers, especially those from World War II. In Spring 2012, I teamed the students in my course, "Projects in Digital Archives," to digitize and make available those oral histories from the AFS archives in partnership with the archivist, Nicole Milano. The students created a website that showcased the oral histories, based on the Wordpress and Omeka open source platforms (see Figure 4),

and AFS has made the digitized audio oral histories available through their finding aids.¹ The video-based oral histories are forthcoming.

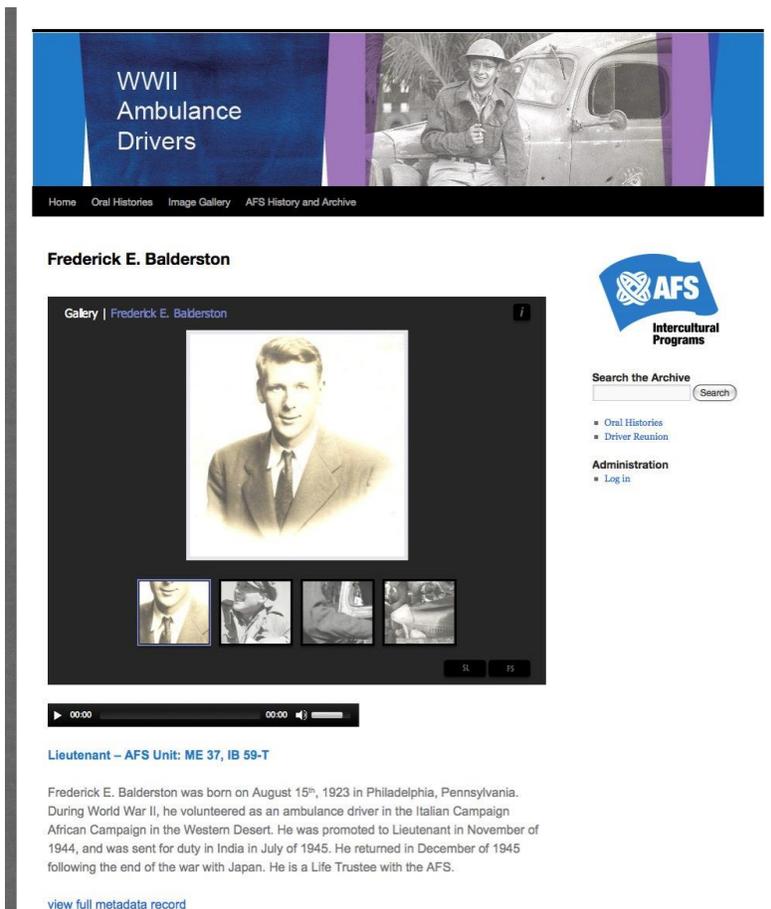


Figure 4: Digital Archive for AFS Oral Histories created by Pratt SILS students

The oral histories themselves illustrate American, non-military efforts in Europe during and after World War II. The individuals who participated as AFS ambulance drivers were often deemed unfit for military service, many having received the classification of 4-F which means there is some physical or mental rationale for exclusion.

From listening to the oral histories, most ambulance drivers joined the AFS because they felt a need to contribute to the war effort. Some interviewees were particularly interested in helping the Jews of Europe. For example, one interviewee—Robert Tscherfinger—before joining the AFS participated in a program to resettle Jews in Cuba through a program of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Although not Jewish himself, he was clearly interested in helping this group and could grasp the threat to Jews by the late 1930s. Other ambulance drivers become

¹ <http://afs.metarhythm.com/archon/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=5>

aware of the extent of the crisis to European Jewry once they made their way into Belgium and Germany. For example, a major activity of the AFS ambulance drivers was the evacuation of the Bergen-Belson concentration camp, which is in present-day Belgium. The ambulance drivers speak of what they saw and what their specific activities were during the evacuation of the camp. Although difficult to listen to at times, the value of these oral histories illustrate American, non-military contribution to ending and rebuilding after World War II, and the motivations for individuals aiding in this effort.

A system was devised for digitizing the oral histories in a way that ensured the safety of the original materials. Each week only four tapes would be taken from the AFS archive, and then returned before another four could be checked-out. My graduate assistant or I would transport the materials via the New York City subway from the AFS Archive in Lower Manhattan to Pratt's Manhattan campus on 14th Street. This system had the advantage of being very secure, which was a primary objective of this digitization process. However, Hurricane Sandy interrupted the class during the digitization process of the analog videotapes. AFS' archive, which is located on the second floor of 1 Whitehall St., was not physically impacted, but access to the building was restricted for two weeks, which delayed the planned digitization process. Even after the digitization resumed, getting to the AFS archive was more difficult because the subway stations nearby were closed (e.g., Figure 5 shows the South Ferry subway station that remains closed, which was the primary way we would transport materials from the AFS archive to Pratt).

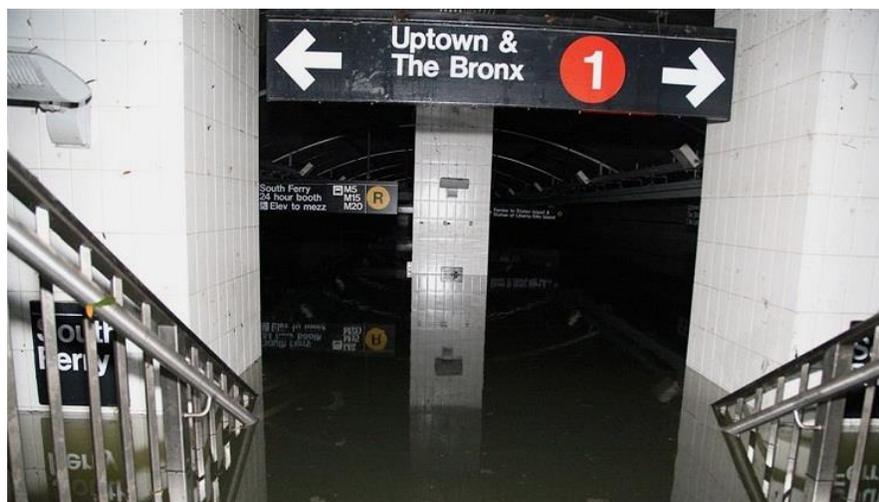


Figure 5: South Ferry subway station submerged by flood water (photo from U.S. Dept. of Transportation, 2012)

In essence, the city's subways and physical infrastructure play a role in making this significant historical content available to users. Digital initiatives are often divorced from the physical infrastructures that support them (such as in discussions of cloud computing), but this experience illustrates how the city itself is part of the

digitization chain, playing a role a role in making such content available to the public.

Case 4: Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)

The last case that will be discussed is the Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The JDC was formed during World War I in response to a crisis to European Jews, thus providing a way for North Americans to provide assistance to Jews in need (JDC Archives, 2013). The JDC proved instrumental during World War II by running programs to get Jews out of reach of the Nazis and after the war to resettle the Jews via the displaced persons camps (JDC Archives, 2013).

One particularly powerful story from the JDC Archives is the account of the sailing of the *St. Louis*, which left Hamburg port in 1939 with 938 passengers—mostly Jewish—bound for Cuba (U.S. Holocaust Museum, 2012). All of the passengers onboard had entry visas for Cuba, but during the voyage the Cuban government nullified their entry visas. The JDC worked with governments around the world to take the passengers so that they would not have to return to Europe. Unfortunately, the JDC was unable to induce North or South American governments to take the refugees, and the vessel was forced to return to Europe with all passengers onboard. The JDC was able to secure entry visas for the passengers in other European countries, with 288 to Great Britain, 181 to the Netherlands, 214 to Belgium, and 224 to France. The Netherlands, Belgium and France fell to the Nazis, with only 278 of the 532 passengers who were allowed entry into those countries surviving the Holocaust.

The oral history collection focuses most strongly on interviews with JDC relief workers who engaged in activities related to the displaced persons camps after the war. The oral histories were a passion project of former JDC staff member Herb Katsky, who interviewed on audiocassette people he knew from the organization who were working on projects significant to the events around Word War II. The students made a website to showcase the interviews based on the open source Omeka platform (shown in Figure 6), and cataloged each oral history.

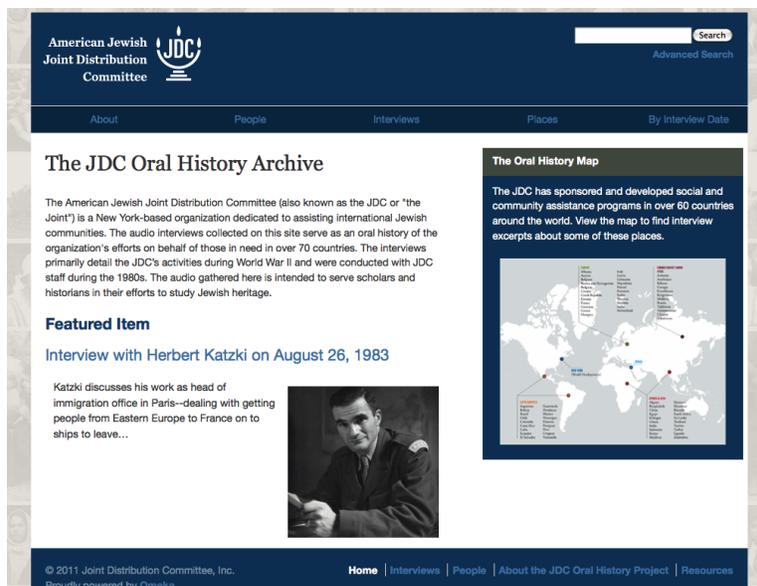


Figure 6: JDC Oral History website (not yet available on the public Internet)

Like the AFS project, this project also used a system where four audiocassettes would be digitized at a time, and then returned before another four would be taken out. Likewise, my graduate assistant or I transported these materials via the NYC subway from the JDC archive, which is located in Manhattan and Long Island City. Like the AFS project, the city's infrastructure, particularly the subways, became part of the digitization chain, playing a role in making these important oral histories available to a wider public.

Results

From the four cases examined the infrastructures for creating an educational, primary source-based digital platform is summarized in Table 1. What these cases and the table illustrate is that digital technologies as well as non-digital technology play an active role in making these digital resources available to the public. For example, the physical traces of historic value play an active role in telling the story of German and German-Jewish relations in the United States before the war, as they are extensively used in German Traces NYC and German-Jewish Traces. These physical traces show how both groups lived together in the same German-speaking neighborhood before World War II. Efforts to use these traces are aided by preservation activities, such as the creation in 2012 of the East Village Historic District (Newman, 2012). Other non-digital aspects are important as well, such as the subway for transporting materials for digitization, archival storage for preserving original material, and ability for the public to move safely among historic traces on sidewalks and roadways.

Table 1. Infrastructures for creating an educational, primary source-based digital platform

Digital	Non-Digital
Open-source software (Omeka, Wordpress, GeoStoryteller)	Physical traces of historic value
Webhosting	Subway for transporting archival materials
Smart phones and/or Internet-connected computers for end-users	Ability to move safely through physical spaces (e.g., walking down sidewalks)
Digitization equipment (computers, analog audio converter, photo scanner)	Preservation of historic places (e.g., East Village Historic district created in 2012)
Cellular data networks for getting content to end-users	Archival storage for original materials; archivist for preserving materials
GPS networks (for calibrating content based on location)	Organizational infrastructures for maintaining physical and digital assets
Digital preservation and maintenance of all digital assets	

The digital technology is also critical in making available historic material to the public. For example, webhosting, open source software, computers with Internet access, and digitization equipment, are critical components. Additionally, cellular network infrastructures and GPS functionality provide the geographically relevant information to the end-user. And lastly, both digital and non-digital aspects require maintenance activities (digital preservation for digital assets, and conservation for original analog assets), as well as organizational infrastructures for supporting such long-term maintenance.

Conclusion

In the four projects explored, the digital space and physical space act as communication infrastructure for undergirding the possibility of enhanced understanding between Americans, Germans, and Jews of German and non-German descent. Combined, these projects illustrate Harvey's (2003) notion that the "right to the city" is also a "right to change ourselves" in that access to the city's physical spaces, in conjunction with digital spaces, open possibilities for enhanced understanding between individuals. As Cocciolo and Rabina (2013) found, access to the physical places where historic events occurred increased learner engagement and understanding of the historic topic. Access to these spaces—and preservation work to maintain them—play a role in building awareness about the past, which could help build future relationships. This is accomplished by making use of the

city's infrastructure (digital and physical) to facilitate the obtainability of primary source-based educational material with bearing on these communities. Future studies could uncover the extent to which these infrastructures have had an impact on rebuilding relationships between these groups once divided by war.

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