

2011


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Recommended Citation

Brier, Stephen and Joshua Brown, "The September 11 Digital Archive," *Radical History Review* Issue 111 (Fall 2011), 101-09. doi 10.1215/01636545-1268731

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The September 11 Digital Archive

Saving the Histories of September 11, 2001

Stephen Brier and Joshua Brown

After September 11 everything was different.

This phrase became the mantra employed to justify nearly every action taken by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania—whether the circumstances had anything to do with the attacks or not. The repetition of and rationale for misadventure behind the “9/11 made everything different” trope quickly became a cliché, a dismissible simplification that unfortunately obscured some of the events’ actual and unique attributes. One of those attributes, one difference demarcating September 11, 2001, from previous epochal historical moments, was its status as the first truly digital event of world historical importance: a significant part of its historical record—from e-mail to photography to audio to video—was expressed, captured, disseminated, or viewed in (or converted to) digital forms and formats. Moreover, the impact of all that digital activity extended beyond downtown Manhattan or northern Virginia, or even beyond the United States, becoming worldwide in scope. And yet, if any form of historical evidence was vulnerable to destruction, whether because of sins of commission or of omission, it was the eminently disposable and ephemeral forms of communication composed of ones and zeroes.

The fate of digital evidence was not the first item on historians’ agendas following September 11. While still confronting both the palpable and the psychological effects of the attacks, academic and public historians grappled with the role they should play as they made tentative efforts to identify the historical significance of

Radical History Review

Issue 111 (Fall 2011) DOI 10.1215/01636545-1268731

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the event, especially its place among the many disasters that have occurred throughout New York City's history. On the evening of October 4, 2001, for example, about fifty academic and public historians, archivists, librarians, and directors and staff members of museums and historical societies in New York and New Jersey gathered at the Museum of the City of New York and spent an intense few hours pondering appropriate responses to the collection, preservation, and interpretation of materials documenting the attacks and their aftermath. In many ways, the gathering articulated more clearly the stunning array of obstacles that confronted all of us in that room than it yielded any kind of coherent program of coordinated preservation or archival action. But the meeting also revealed a striking spirit, a willingness, often at great emotional and physical expense, to act individually and collaboratively, which would result over the course of the next year or two in extensive efforts to collect, preserve, and present significant aspects of September 11.¹

With that lack of systematic archiving and collecting in mind, in November 2001 staff members at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, a major funder of a number of digital media and digital preservation initiatives, invited the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University and the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning (ASHP) at the City University of New York Graduate Center to meet at the foundation's Midtown Manhattan offices. Both ASHP and CHNM were located close to one of the attack sites — ASHP in the Tribeca neighborhood of lower Manhattan, CHNM in northern Virginia — but it was our previous digital media work that prompted the meeting. The two organizations had worked collaboratively since the mid-1990s on a number of digital history projects — including the second *Who Built America?* (1914–1946) CD-ROM, the History Matters Web site, the *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* CD-ROM and Web site, and The Lost Museum Web site — that had all been developed, produced, and published by the fall of 2001.² ASHP and CHNM throughout their respective histories (thirty years in the case of ASHP; sixteen years in the case of CHNM) had been committed to finding innovative ways to use emerging media and digital technologies to present historical ideas and information to broad public audiences. Our collaborative efforts helped define the burgeoning field of digital history at the turn of the twenty-first century.

At the meeting, the Sloan Foundation staff challenged us to think about what historians fifty years from now would want to know about the September 11 events and what data they would want to have access to in order to construct a full historical narrative of what transpired. The foundation's staff was concerned that without a coherent and deliberate plan to capture, archive, and preserve digital materials related to the September 11 attacks — particularly the stories of individuals who had personally experienced the events — such materials would be lost to future generations.

With support from the Sloan Foundation, CHNM and ASHP decided to undertake this major project 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 gather, catalog, and make accessible the vital data that we needed to do our work as historians, we decided that we would now have to function in a new role: as archivist-historians.³

While we assumed that new role, our previous work as social historians and our commitment to documenting and teaching about working people in U.S. history prompted us to approach the digital record of September 11 with a critical eye. What kinds of information and perspectives, we asked ourselves, were not being fully represented in the huge effusion of documentary evidence that began to emerge in the immediate aftermath of September 11? Mainstream media institutions such as the *New York Times* and CNN had done a good job presenting immediate and often in-depth information about the victims of the attacks. The *Times'* *Portraits of Grief* series, for example, profiling the nearly twenty-seven hundred people who died in the towers of the World Trade Center, was particularly compelling and will prove especially useful for future historians intent on constructing a picture of the victims of the attacks.⁴

But what about the larger context in which most people experienced these events? What about the attitudes and perspectives of “ordinary” people, here and abroad, especially those deeply affected by the attacks, those who were not necessarily inside or near the towers or in the Pentagon or in Shanksville, but whose lives were nonetheless profoundly affected by what happened on September 11? What about people who did not, a decade ago, have direct access to digital media through which to record their ideas and experiences, let alone preserve them?

The Evolution and Growth of the September 11 Digital Archive

Our initial goal was to quickly get online a free public space for people to contribute their stories and to allow them to deposit the rich array of digital evidence that they had created personally or received electronically, all of which would help future historians document what ordinary people saw and experienced on and immediately after September 11. We mounted the initial version of the September 11 Digital Archive Web site (www.911digitalarchive.org) on January 11, 2002, just two months after our preliminary meeting at the Sloan Foundation. Our first task was to allow individuals to easily and quickly deposit their word-processed “stories” about what had happened to them on the day of the attacks, as well as to submit the e-mails they had received and/or sent to family, friends, and work colleagues in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. We believed that those stories and messages (the full extent of which we could not even begin to comprehend) would contain unique insights



The September 11 Digital Archive home page (911digitalarchive.org) in January 2011

into how people immediately experienced September 11, how it shaped their subsequent behavior and beliefs, and how they came to interpret the meaning of those events in their lives. We also decided to seek out and secure for the archive various listservs and Web logs (blogs) that discussed September 11.⁵

We also wanted the September 11 Digital Archive to serve as a space for the general public to deposit what we reasoned would be a large number of digital still and moving images taken or created before, during, and after the attacks, as well as digital sound recordings, including telephone answering machine and voice-mail messages. We were intent, as well, on finding and digitizing as many of the extraordinary number of flyers that people pasted all over Manhattan in an effort to find missing loved ones. We also wanted to include myriad political and organizational flyers that appeared around the city after the attacks. While these last two resources were not “born digital” (which had been the Sloan Foundation’s primary interest in funding the project), we knew they were an important and perishable historical source that we needed to locate, scan, and deposit in the database of our expanding digital collection. We were fortunate to secure the extensive collection of Michael Ragsdale, a videographer who collected almost a thousand flyers from all over New York City in the days following the attacks. We also saved nearly one hundred Flash files, animated programs posted on the Web that conveyed individual artistic or propagandistic responses to the attacks locally and internationally.⁶

The real burst of online submissions came on the six-month and one-year anniversaries of the attacks. The site went fully public on March 11, 2002, with a series of press releases and media coverage. On the one-year anniversary of the attacks, the existence of the September 11 Digital Archive garnered much media attention on CNN, on MSNBC, in the Associated Press, and in hundreds of newspaper stories. This publicity drove much traffic to our site; more than one hundred thousand visitors accessed the site on the first anniversary, and we received thirteen thousand new personal stories during the next few days.⁷

At this juncture we had to address the inequality of access to digital media. The initial spate of digital submissions tended to be skewed toward particular groups and individuals who were largely white and middle class. Taken as a whole, while indisputably valuable, they did not represent the broad demographic range of submissions that we had hoped would find their way into the archive. That fact indicated that online digital collecting alone would not suffice and that we would need to undertake additional targeted outreach to particular ethnic and national communities if the archive were truly to encompass a wide range of individual and collective responses to the September 11 attacks.

We began that outreach in earnest at the beginning of 2003 by developing a Spanish-language version of the September 11 Digital Archive site to encourage input from the large Latino communities in New York City and Washington, D.C., and we sent project staff to Shanksville, the site of the crash of United Airlines Flight 93, to solicit testimony from that community. We also worked closely with the Middle East and Middle East American Center at the CUNY Graduate Center to reach out to the Arab and Muslim community in New York City and, via the Internet and telephone, to Arab and Muslim Americans across the country. Even though the seventy-two interviews carried out for this project did not represent the full range of opinions of Arab and/or Muslim Americans, the voices of these individuals provide invaluable insights about what members of these communities felt on the day of the attacks and what they have experienced since. Finally, we secured a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct video interviews in three Chinese dialects (which we also translated into English) with residents, workers and stakeholders in Manhattan's Chinatown community, a neighborhood just ten blocks away from the World Trade Center site.⁸

We also built collaborative ties to other archives and museums, with the goal of having those links help us generate additional submissions. These joint projects included the New York cultural organization City Lore and the New-York Historical Society (where we placed a computer terminal to collect stories from visitors to their 2002 *Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning* exhibit); public libraries in Somerset County, Pennsylvania (where Shanksville is located); and public schools in the New York City and Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas. We also collaborated with the National Museum of American History (NMAH), Smithsonian Institution, where thousands of visitors to *Bearing Witness*, an exhibit commemorating the first

anniversary of the attacks, had an opportunity to tell their stories and recount their thoughts about September 11 in voice-mail messages on a special telephone installation (which we then captured digitally and transcribed), and also by using old-fashioned pencil and paper (which we scanned in bulk and later imported into our growing database). In the end, we secured thousands of new stories for the archive from visitors to the NMAH exhibition.⁹

Two years after we had conceived and launched the September 11 Digital Archive, we had collected a total of nearly 150,000 individual digital items, including 45,000 personal narratives, 60,000 e-mails and electronic communications (including blogs and listservs), 14,000 digital images, 6,000 print documents, and 4,500 audio and video files, many of which we streamed on our Web site. The September 11 Digital Archive Web site in the same two-year period received nearly 120 million hits and more than 2 million unique visitors. And to this day it consistently ranks third or fourth among the more than 350 million “September 11” and “9/11” Web pages indexed by Google.

Filling out the Digital Archive Collection and Ensuring Its Permanence

We also worked closely with other September 11-related archives, several of which asked us to help their collections survive and remain available to the general public on the Web. Two such collaborations are of particular note. The first is the Sonic Memorial Project, which collected hundreds of digital and analog voice-mail messages from inside the World Trade Center towers, concert recordings from the World Trade Center Plaza, works by center artists-in-residence, home movies, tourist videos, rare on-site field recordings, newsreels, and oral histories. These rich audio resources are now preserved in our archive.¹⁰

The second, and one of our most important collaborations to date, is with Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs (HNY). The HNY project, built around a collection of six thousand photographs taken by mostly professional photographers in and around ground zero in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, ranked among the most visible projects internationally about September 11. In addition to the six thousand digitized photographs, several thousand of which were printed and exhibited internationally and published in a widely disseminated book, HNY received hundreds of thousands of e-mail messages on its Web site from individuals around the world. HNY also solicited nearly six hundred digital video interviews with people in New York City, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, to record their feelings and reactions to the events of September 11. After more than a year’s negotiations and the formal dissolution of the HNY organization in 2006, the HNY *digital* collection was legally accessioned by the September 11 Digital Archive (the HNY *physical* collection, including its archive of high-quality photographic prints, was given to the New-York Historical Society, which has made some of it available online).¹¹ HNY’s project leaders chose the September 11 Digital Archive as a

permanent home for their digital materials because of our commitment to respect and protect the rights and feelings of the people who submitted materials, and also because we had developed a plan for stabilizing and securing our archive and for ensuring an enduring existence for it.¹² Together, the Sonic Memorial and HNY materials comprise an additional one hundred thousand discrete digital items, many of them substantial and important video and sound files that have not yet been fully integrated into the larger structure of the September 11 Digital Archive online database.

By the close of 2003 and the end of funding from the Sloan Foundation, the active collecting phase of the September 11 Digital Archive had been completed. Nonetheless, we continued to incorporate previously acquired materials into the collection and undertook a preliminary redesign of the Web site to better assist online researchers. But now that we had become archivist-historians, we learned that our obligations did not end with collecting. A number of final challenging tasks still lie ahead:

- to stabilize and secure the vast collection of digital resources that currently comprise the September 11 Digital Archive;
- to update the metadata associated with each of the tens of thousands of items in the overall collection to make digital searching easier and more successful;
- to build a robust and open-source database back end to secure materials in the archive and to properly display them on the Web, using Omeka, a leading open-source, collections-based Web publishing platform developed by CHNM (and written for the Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP server configurations and released under a GNU General Public License); and
- to make the integrated collection available to the public through a thoroughly redesigned Web site.¹³

In addition to vastly improved searches and browsing, a more standardized digital archive will allow scholars to ask new research questions that can only be answered through the use of powerful data-mining tools. Better structured metadata and the addition of APIs (application programming interfaces, which facilitate the interaction among different software programs) will allow scholars to apply these tools to the archive, uncovering new relationships among digitally created and discovered primary sources.

Finally, we decided that we had to secure a permanent archival home for the September 11 Digital Archive to assure its long-term availability and stability. We have maintained the archive for the past six years without any additional financial support from our original funders. We have recently applied for additional grants to complete the final stages of our work as described above. Neither ASHP nor CHNM, nor our sponsoring universities, have the financial and human resources to

sustain this project into the foreseeable future. With that in mind, we approached the Library of Congress (LC) early on in our work to gauge its interest in becoming the ultimate repository for the September 11 Digital Archive. The LC agreed in 2003 to accession the entire archive (the first fully digital collection ever accessioned by the library), which was announced at a major convocation held at the library on September 10, 2003. All of the September 11 Digital Archive servers and our Web site (and those of HNY) will be turned over to the LC, probably sometime in 2013 (on or near the tenth anniversary of the signing of the original agreement). Once that transfer occurs, all the digital data contained in the September 11 Digital Archive will be made available to historical and other researchers at the LC in Washington, D.C. We also hope that the library will continue to make the digital information contained in the archive available to the general public via the Internet.¹⁴

We hope that members of the public and, particularly, professional historians will in the future use the vast and diverse digital materials contained in the September 11 Digital Archive in sensitive and nuanced ways. To be sure, much of the material submitted to the archive was riddled with jingoistic, racist, xenophobic, and messianic attitudes and opinions. Yet precisely these problematic aspects of the material offer historians a uniquely complex vision of the events that occurred on that clear morning in September 2001. If we might hazard to find one word that succinctly captures what the quarter of a million digital items comprising the archive offer future scholars, it is a sense of the *zeitgeist*: an intricately detailed panoramic view revealing the myriad ways Americans and others throughout the world experienced, understood, deciphered, distorted, and rationalized—*located meaning in*—an epochal traumatic event.

Notes

1. Similar meetings discussing the ways scholars should respond to the attacks (as well as to policies imposed in their aftermath) were held at humanities and social science annual conferences throughout the fall of 2001. See, for example, the special panel titled “September 11, 2001” at the American Studies Association annual meeting, held on November 10, 2001, in Washington, D.C.
2. *Who Built America? From the Great War of 1914 to the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Worth Publishers/Learn Technologies Interactive, 2000); *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* (historymatters.gmu.edu); *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); *The Lost Museum: Exploring Antebellum Life and Culture* (www.lostmuseum.cuny.edu).
3. A large number of people collaborated on the September 11 Digital Archive project, led by Greg “Fritz” Umbach at ASHP and Tom Scheinfeldt at CHNM, who served as codirectors of the archive project. A full list of contributors can be found in two places on the Web; the group that launched the project is detailed at old.911digitalarchive.org/about/staff.html (accessed March 10, 2011), while the group that will be finishing work on the project is detailed at 911digitalarchive.org/about/staff.php (accessed March 10, 2011).

4. The *New York Times*' *Portraits of Grief* archive is available at topics.nytimes.com/top/news/newyorkandregion/series/portraits_of_grief/index.html (accessed March 10, 2011).
5. Most individuals did not then (and do not now) archive their e-mail messages beyond a few weeks or (at most) a few months. This was especially true in 2001, when digital archiving systems were nonexistent or quite primitive and the cost of digital storage was considerably higher than it has become. Three blogs or listservs of note that are contained on the September 11 Digital Archive site are the Downtown Blackberry group (www.september11digitalarchive.org/email/downtown_blackberry.html); the SEPT11INFO group (911digitalarchive.org/repository_object.php?object_id=83390); and the Hash House Harriers (911digitalarchive.org/repository.php?collection_id=12443). It is important to remember that blogs were still a relatively new and underused digital format in the fall of 2001.
6. For collection of flyers, see 911digitalarchive.org/galleries.php?collection_id=12 and 911digitalarchive.org/galleries.php?collection_id=15 for the Flash files.
7. Our CHNM colleagues Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig describe the early successes of the September 11 Digital Archive in the chapter "Collecting History Online," in their *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 185–88.
8. The fruits of the collaboration with the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center can be found at 911digitalarchive.org/galleries.php?collection_id=14: they include seventy-two anonymous interviews with Arab and Muslim immigrants and Arab Americans. The Chinatown Documentation Project was done in collaboration with the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA), a Chinatown-based community history museum; New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Institute; and Columbia University's Oral History Research Office. The fruits of the Chinatown project are archived on the MoCA Web site at 911chinatown.mocanyc.org.
9. For the *Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning* exhibit, see www.citylore.org/911_exhibit/911_home.html. See www.911digitalarchive.org/smithsoniancards for the results of the more than twenty thousand written recollections gathered from *Bearing Witness* visitors.
10. The Sonic Memorial site is still available on the Web (www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html).
11. For the physical collection, see www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=exhibits_collections&page=exhibit_detail&id=3585525 (accessed March 10, 2011).
12. All rights to materials deposited in the September 11 Digital Archive remain with the individuals who donated them. We refer any publisher or journalist interested in publishing material contained in the archive to the individual donors. The HNY Web site is currently in the process of being accessioned and integrated into the September 11 Digital Archive. HNY's original Web site is no longer available to the public.
13. For details about the Omeka software, see omeka.org.
14. See www.loc.gov/today/pr/2003/03-142.html for the LC's online report on the accessioning of the September 11 Digital Archive. The LC has also made the September 11 Digital Archive part of its ongoing National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program's Archive and Ingest Handling Test (AIHT), which tests various formats and approaches for absorbing digital materials into the LC's collections.