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Where did the users go?

A case study of the problems of event driven memory bank

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Abstract

The April 16 Archive (<http://www.april16archive.org>) at the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture is a memory bank of user contributed digital artifacts relating to the event, the April 16 Tragedy at Virginia Tech. A memory bank collects things that people contribute to it; usually digital originals, related to something worth remembering. These digital memorabilia form an esoteric collection that before its collection would have become ephemeral and likely lost (Goff, 2008). However, as collected, they should, as they are tied directly to the act of contribution and the more significant relations beyond that between the individual and the event, have significant social and emotional ties to the contributors and the community. This paper argues that those ties are fading. The April 16 Archive, as an event driven memory bank, originated from a passionate and committed community of users who shared the emotional and social attachment surrounding the event. The paper describes the tensions in the development and maintenance of the archive as the various communities have, through time, grown farther from the event, placing it further into their communal memories. In doing this, I hope to provide insights into the problems that develops in event driven digital archives as its communities grow apart. I also hope to share some of our experiences in developing and maintaining an event driven archive using web 2.0 oriented software.

Keywords: Memory Bank, Audiences, Users, Archives, Web 2.0

1. Introduction

As I sit in my office watching the tail of the web server logs scroll through my terminal window for a few minutes considering how I should start this paper, I am struck by how rarely the topic of this paper, the April16archive.org website is appearing in those logs. This observation is in part the basis for this paper. Event-driven archives, like the April 16th Archive struggle to maintain users overtime as the memories of the event fades, even if the effects of the event do not.

On April 16th, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, shot and killed 32 people and wounded many other faculty, staff, and students Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) . He left wounds both physical and emotional. While I was not on campus that year, I was still affiliated with Virginia Tech, as I am today, and like many I was overwhelmingly concerned for the safety and wellbeing of my colleagues at Virginia Tech. This event was a shock across the global university system and has had broad ranging effects from changing how universities deal with mentally ill students, to how universities manage security, and how we communicate with students, families, faculty, staff, and the greater audience. In short, this event was tragic and



transformative, changing the ways universities and higher education operates in many ways.

Within a few days of the event, my colleague Brent Jesiek, who was managing the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture (CDDC) and now is an Assistant Professor at Purdue University, met with colleagues on campus from departments in the social science and humanities and they discussed options for preserving elements of the event that might be overlooked or uncollected elsewhere. Their idea was to move beyond the archival mission and into the memory mission, even toward a memorial mission, which would enable more personal and shared narratives, such as podcasts, blog posts and similar media to be captured as part of a memory bank like occurred for Hurricane Katrina and September 11th with their respective memory banks. Unlike a normal archive, the idea for the April16archive was to be more expansive:

This project contributes to the ongoing efforts of historians and archivists to preserve the record of this event by collecting first-hand accounts, on-scene images, blog postings, and podcasts. It is our sincere hope that this site can contribute to a collective process of healing, especially as those affected by this tragedy tell their stories in their own words. The April 16 Archive runs on Omeka, a "digital memory bank" platform that uses the Internet to preserve the past and make memories available to a wide audience for generations to come. (<http://april16archive.org/about>)

Contacting colleagues George Mason University's Center for New Media and History (CNMH), Prof. Jesiek discussed the memory banks for hurricane Katrina and Sept. 11 and inquired as to the nature of the software used. The CNMH had software in development that was to become Omeka that they contributed for the CDDC to use on this project. Omeka was still in development at that stage, but one of the CNMH developers had recently graduated from Virginia Tech's history program, between his efforts and the rest of the CNMH staff, within a few days, the software to launch the April16tharchive was in Prof. Jesiek's email inbox. Eight days after the tragic events of April 16, on April 24th, the first objects from the general public began to be donated to the archive. On April 30th, the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences did a formal press release announcing this new memory bank to the [1].

Omeka is a memory bank application that allows the collection and discussion of digital collections in a web 2.0 environment. It is the platform that CDDC uses to host the April16archive today. Omeka is an object-oriented php/mysql web-based software application that can easily be installed and used for a variety of purposes. One such purpose is the memory bank. A memory bank attempts to collect and preserve memories--contributed objects such as images, videos, even word documents. Almost all the material contributed are ephemera, which might not be otherwise preserved were they not found, made, or even constructed to be preserved by their contributors.

2. Ephemera, Events, Memories and Audiences

In the April16archive, we focus on one event and this has dramatic effects in the two plus years that we have been in existence. As an event-driven archive--an archive that documents a


temporal event that occurred at a certain time--the April 16 archive faces the challenge of sustaining a group of users or even a strong audience. In the beginning of the archive this issue was not foreseen. In November of 2007, we presented at the 48th annual Rare Books and Manuscripts section of the ACRL's Collecting for Contemporary Events seminar at Johns Hopkins University, where reported that at that time we had almost 1000 items in our digital collection, and today we have just over 1200, though we have secondary collections like the April 16th Archive Frontpages collection, which adds to that number. In addition, in the last year we have had few, actually very few, contributions to the archive that were not created in house. The drop off in contributions was matched by an increase in spam, which we eventually controlled. However, new contributions are occurring in the order of 1 or 2 every 3-5 months. In short, it appears as if, as one might expect that the memory of the event has faded and with that fading of memory, there has been a fading of the number of contributions.

Contributions to the archive are all similar to the image below:

Memorial After Remembrance

View of the April 16 memorial with Burruss Hall in the background. Photo taken April 17, 2008.

Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0](#)



Tags: [memorial](#), [remembrance](#), [anniversary](#)

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Screenshot of archive material donated under Creative Commons License

In this image we can see all of the user-contributed content of a contribution to the archive. The author provides title, description, license information (if appropriate), tags and the content itself, which in this case is a large picture of which the smaller thumbnail is represented here. The contents of the archive are entirely searchable by author, tags, and almost any conceivable search, such as date, etc. The system provides a clear APA citation for the material, which is useful for future users.

Users are a perpetual question with the archive, while there are interesting academic politics surrounding the archive, its contents, and who can and should use them for what purposes, the



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real issue is less those politics than the lack of use and users in general. From the initial set of content creators and contributors as indicated in earlier discussion, now we are basically only receiving spam, which we filter. The material growth of the archive is minimal in the last year, and without continued effort and as such funding, we doubt it will have any more substantial growth. The competition amongst various parties about who does what with what parts of which archive, especially the tensions between research, memorial and archival missions highlight the differences of users of the current and future archive [2]

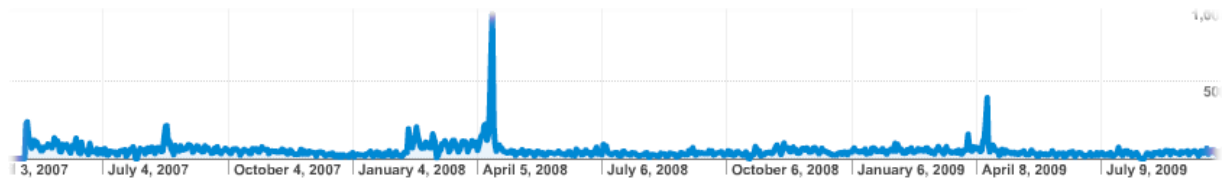
If we think of three sets of users of the archive being contributors/memorialists, researchers including news reporters, and archivists, there seems to be tensions between what they want and what the archive provides. The archive only contains the material contributed and other than two objects, it shows all of that contributed material to the public at any given time. However, the availability of the material does not make it useful to the university researcher who wants to use the material as representing individuals instead of as documentary material, as we did not request rights to use the material to research the creators from the creators. However, over time, the distance between creators and material is fading, much like the memory is fading as described above, and with that fade, the human subjects issues are also fading.

Fading memories and forgetting is quite normal in regard to such tragic events. Forgetting as a social and political process is important for the reconstitution of subjectivities and social, political relations [3][2].

3. Fading relations, Fading Memories, Fading Interests

The question that drives this paper and the descriptions so far has been, "what is this archive?", but the question that this paper answers is, "What happened to the users of this archive?". To answer that question, we will inspect and describe the phenomena of our users as represented in the Google Analytics (TM). We use Google Analytics (TM) for user data because they strip out 99% of the bot and otherwise inhuman access, representing the human, and thus representing the marketable to Google, access to the page. By leveraging this tool, I was able to develop reports at several levels of analysis comparing the 2007, 2008, and 2009 data sets available.

The first data object is on the one hand the most revelatory, and on the other hand, the least data intensive to understand. From the date we turned on Google Analytics (TM) for this in May 2007, the data is fairly consistent, with a few peaks, such as the start of school in Fall 2007, the anniversary of the event, the Tragedy of Northern Illinois University on Feb. 14 2008 and the second anniversary of Northern Illinois and third anniversary of the Virginia Tech Tragedy. The peaks indicate high points of use. Correlating with these reference peaks there are contacts from media and other researchers about some topic via email and phone. We can see that other than on such peak events, the number of visits to the archive is relatively low, averaging below 100 on any given day for the past few years, though it has been decreasing over time, which is clear from the data representations.









May 3rd 2007 to August 2009 user visits report from Google Analytics(TM)

Investigating the peaks reveals a bit more below, I have representations of two peaks. The peaks represent the second and third anniversaries of the April16archive. These two peaks provide insights particular to the archive's significant event. In the 2008, the first anniversary, we can see fairly interesting behavior for an internet archive, the use of the archive for the month of April was 4546 visits with around 3 minutes and 42 seconds per visits with 33,345 page views and only a 44.74% bounce rate. This means that people are coming to the archive and looking around for a significant period of time, clicking from page to page, from object to object. Surprisingly, the time spent on the site and number of pages per visit goes down for the 932 visits to the site and 6491 page views on April 16, 2008. This is likely related to the increase in new visitors over the average to the month of April. Many people will still remembering and revisiting their content in this period. People unfamiliar with the material in the archive are less likely to spend time on this archive when other archives with different content are also available.



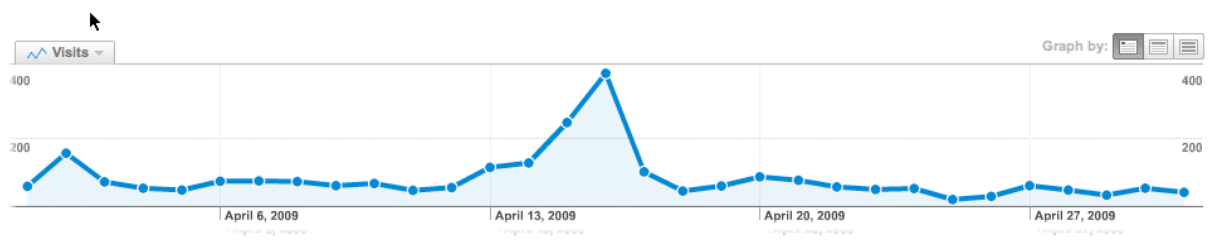
Site Usage

 4,546 Visits	 44.74% Bounce Rate
 33,345 Pageviews	 00:03:42 Avg. Time on Site
 7.34 Pages/Visit	 87.26% % New Visits


Site Usage


• 932 Visits	• 46.46% Bounce Rate
• 6,491 Pageviews	• 00:03:34 Avg. Time on Site
• 6.96 Pages/Visit	• 90.56% % New Visits


While the low numbers in 2008 are interesting to some extent, they gain their strength as indicators of a loss of contributors/interested parties in relation to the even lower numbers in 2009.




Site Usage


 **2,539 Visits**

 **10,600 Pageviews**

 **4.17 Pages/Visit**

 **66.64% Bounce Rate**

 **00:01:30 Avg. Time on Site**

 **88.74% % New Visits**

Site Usage

- **393 Visits**

- **1,752 Pageviews**

- **4.46 Pages/Visit**

- **57.76% Bounce Rate**

- **00:01:37 Avg. Time on Site**

- **91.86% % New Visits**

The third anniversary of the April 16 Tragedy, shows the archive getting significantly less traffic in the month of April, at slightly more than 1/2 the visits and 1/3 the page views, the bounce rate is 1/3 higher, and we have fewer pages per visit. Before the third anniversary we did launch the frontpages archive, but that has had little effect to the primarily site. The day of April 16 is significantly less in all statistics in comparison to the prior archive with our key indicators of pages per visit and average time on site, which we take to be indicators of interest to the site and the material falling off significantly.

Conclusion

With people spending less time on the site, viewing fewer pages on the site, I feel fairly safe in saying that there is likely less interest in the event across various user groups, and with this loss of interest we have a loss of activity. This loss of activity does not hurt the legitimacy of the archive for researchers, but does likely relate to fading memories and the peripheralization of the event to people's lives. This change seems lessens the interaction with the content creators that contributed materials to the archive, which in terms removes over time some of the web 2.0 orientation of the archive. I suspect that most event-driven archives face the same issues of community and fading memories.

References:

[1]Jesiek, B. K., & Hunsinger, J. (2008). THE APRIL 16 ARCHIVE: Collecting and Preserving Memories of the Virginia Tech Tragedy. In B. Agger & T. W. Luke (Eds.), *There is a*



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