Do you, don't you want my trauma? Some issues facing post-disaster digital memory projects

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The last few years have seen the emergence of a range of Digital Humanities projects concerned with archiving material related to traumatic events and disasters. The 9/11 Digital Archive, The Hurricane Memory Bank and the CEISMIC Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive are a few such projects committed to collecting, curating and making available disaster-related images, stories and media for the purposes of commemoration, teaching and research. In this paper Paul Millar

1. examines the value of such projects in preserving post-disaster memories,
2. explores some differences between passive and active digital memory projects, and
3. asks whether even the most determinedly open and inclusive digital memory project can preserve its values when issues of race, class, gender, politics and economics impact upon its activities.

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PP Title Slide

If you've noted the reference in my title to the Beatles' lyric 'Do you, don't you want me to love you?' from the song 'Helter Skelter', then I'm sorry, but it probably dates you as much as it dates me.

But just so I don't date myself too much, mine is a reference to U2's live version of 'Helter Skelter' from *Rattle and Hum*, which has Bono proclaiming, 'This is a song Charles Manson stole from the Beatles— we're stealing it back."

PP2a Helter Skelter1

In the Beatles' lyrics, Helter Skelter refers to the fairground ride in which you climb a steep tower and spiral down a slide to the bottom— **PP2b** 'when you get to the bottom you go back to the top'. But the phrase 'Helter Skelter' is much older, dating back to the 1590s, and meaning **pp2c** 'a disorderly confusion, or turmoil'.

For those of us who lived through the Canterbury earthquakes, both definitions work literally and metaphorically. As I'm sure you all know, since 4 September 2010 Christchurch has experienced over 3,000 earthquakes above magnitude 3.0, including one at 7.3 and the lethal 6.3 event on 22 February 2011, which had the highest ever recorded peak ground acceleration rate, and killed 185 people, made 15000 homes uninhabitable and caused nearly 50 billion dollars' worth of damage to the city. In those months after the first earthquakes, when we were experiencing daily aftershocks, it did indeed feel we were unwilling patrons of the sort of hellish helter skelter ride one might find at Banksy's Dismaland theme park.

PP Sequence of before and after

Every time we thought things were on the up, another shock would send us back to the bottom—more damage, more liquefaction, more fear and trauma, more insurance claims, more promises, more frustration and more despair. It has indeed been a time of disorderly confusion and turmoil—and for those worst affected it has lasted for five years, and counting.

PP Ceismic Logo

It was out of this disorderly confusion and turmoil that the CEISMIC Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive was borne—a Digital Humanities cultural heritage memory project modelled on **[PP CHNM]** CHNM's 9/11 Digital Archive. **[PP Vision]** In so many ways,

CEISMIC has been a success—a growing, evolving, collaborative effort to create a federated archive to collect, preserve and human-curate images stories and media about the Canterbury earthquakes for commemoration, teaching and research. **[PP Guiding Principles]** It's success has in large part been due to the successful application of Digital Humanities principles to create an archive offering anyone, anywhere free and open access, collections developed on a principle of federation—**[PP Digital NZ search]** where Digital New Zealand facilitates searches across a range of resources, to surface everything in one place. **[PP consortium**] There has been productive collaboration through a University-led consortium of content providers and cultural heritage organisations. There has been careful attention to human ethics and copyright issues, with encouragement to use creative commons, and the augmentation of the resource through high quality human-curated metadata. Our mantra in the early days was that we would collect anything and everything, that we would make no judgements about the value of material. That if a researcher 100 years from now found an answer to a question we hadn't even thought of asking, then CEISMIC would have done what it intended to. At last count, CEISMIC has collected over 250,000 digital objects—the 9/11 digital archive collected 150,000 and it has partnered with the Smithsonian and is now preserved by the Library of Congress.

Describe collections [PP 17-32]

So what is in CEISMIC? Very quickly, to give you a flavour of the collections, though this scratches the surface.

[PP33] The difference between an active and a passive memory project

And yet, even as I consider our successes and feel great pride for what we have achieved, I'm forced to reflect on what might have been. For I'd have hoped that instead of having collected 250,000 items by now, we'd have collected 2.5 million, or more. I recognise, and freely acknowledge, the idea that this archive could be somehow inclusive was a romantic one. For all of us involved there has been a

compelling personal dimension to what we have been doing—it has been therapeutic to respond to the chaos by trying to make sense of it, to put it in order, to preserve some sort of "truth" for someone who in the future will want to know "what really happened".

It is interesting to consider—bearing in mind our theme of memory, and in particular traumatic memory—**what the creation of the CEISMIC Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive tells us about the post-disaster zeitgeist.** Looking at it now, I find the archive as interesting for why and how it was created as for what it contains. Understanding the conditions of its creation, the multiple aims of its founders, contributors and users, and the connections between the archive's life-cycle and the narrative of the post-disaster city, offers insights into an the arbitrary and contested nature of such a memory project.

The things I'm referring to are too numerous to dwell on in any detail in this brief paper. But let me sketch a few things, and I'll be specific, because I'm not sure all the things I am observing can be generalised:

- **pp33a Impulse against powerlessness**

 The archive was a response to powerlessness. I've touched on this already. The impulse that drove us to create the archive was a very visceral level a human response to powerlessness in the wake of crisis. With people we knew killed or injured, families dispersed, our homes damaged, our city and places of employment shut down, , it was something we could do that gave us a sense of agency. How often such an impulse underlies an effort to preserve memories would be interesting to explore further?

- **Pp33b Storytelling therapeutic**

 The archive was therapeutic. This is tied to my previous point. On so many levels, for so many individuals and groups, the project gave people a sense of purpose, a sense that not everything was being lost, that our stories have value, that destroyed communities have not wholly perished, that we have something to offer to the future. In a

real and tangible way the digital was preserving the local—"the digital realm", to adapt a quote from Radstone, "was helping render our place of home and its location, with all of its historical and affective dimensions" at least in part preservable and relevant.

- **PP33c Disaster a catalyst for a greater memory project**

The archive required the trauma of the earthquakes as a catalyst, but it became almost immediately the story of Canterbury. This is probably obvious, but deserves emphasis. Although CEISMIC calls itself the Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive, it is much more than that. It has material going back to the 19th century [discuss]—if it could grow organically and unchecked, it would eventually be the story of Canterbury, with the earthquakes as a peak of activity, a defining or redefining moment. Yet it took an earthquake to precipitate this—no one was trying to develop an integrated, comprehensive digital archive of Canterbury's history before the quakes. It took a profound trauma for us to want desperately to preserve our stories. We wish we'd been doing it in the years leading up to the quakes, because so much more could have been preserved. And yet it isn't as if other communities have learned from us and are working to ensure the comprehensive, joined up presentation of the past (I've tried). It will probably still require a traumatic event as a catalyst for other communities to do likewise. That said, a question worth exploring, is whether advancing digital technologies and activities, will ultimately lead to the easy creation of memory archives?

- **Pp33d Healing from trauma aided by local voices and representations**

The archive responds to trauma with a myriad of voices and representations I won't even pretend I know a lot about the intricacies of trauma theory. What I do know is that our archive responds to trauma by working to diminish it, by allowing people to give voice to experience. Interestingly, some people voice more than others. Women seemed likely to talk about experiences in the

Quakebox than men. Men didn't want to revisit it—how much is this related to the taciturn kiwi male?

- **PP33e** Healthy, active disaster archives must contain tension and conflict

The archive is a place of tension and contest This was always the intent—we wanted the official and unofficial histories to be talking, if not shouting at, each other. We wanted the memory of a single red-zoned homeowner to be as carefully preserved as every pronouncement of CERA. We wanted the messiness of a community newsletter or a child's school project, to have the same status as the framed and transmitted memories of our local and national institutions. As Merridale insists, "though suffering may be universal, experiences of and reactions to suffering – how it is felt and remembered, whether it is remembered –are culturally specific." To which I would add they are also often class, race and gender specific.

My great disappointment is that we don't have enough tension and contest. There are many reasons for this—most of which relate to my final point for this slide:

- **PP33f** The Post-disaster cycle will always force a digital memory project from being an active collector to a passive archive—the challenge is finding ways to resist this for as long as possible

There is a post-disaster life-cycle, and a very defined period within which conditions exist to ensure that your project remains active for as long as possible—there quickly comes a time when groups feel they've done enough, and if you haven't secured your archive's future within that time, your opportunity has passed. And those lessons are another paper.

PP 34 Can even the most determinedly open and inclusive digital memory project preserve its values when issues of race, class, gender, politics and economics impact upon its activities?

For every item we have collected there are a dozen we are missing, some already lost for good. Why should this matter? Isn't a quarter of a million items about a disaster an amazing achievement? Yes… except it bothers me that this archive, this digital memory project, has developed credibility, mana even, and it is seen as having institutional authority. Why is this a bad thing? Because CEISMIC will

become the basis of much of the future storytelling and research efforts, and it is partial, and not only is it partial, but with the best will in the world, it over represents the experiences of the articulate, the resourced, the controllers of media, the networked, the beneficiaries of various sorts of privilege, the structures of power.

What were some of the barriers to more inclusiveness? Time, money, will. There is a lifecycle to a disaster.

- The willingness to open the pockets is inversely proportional to the distance from the defining events.
- Also, priority. When people's homes and lives are destroyed, a 'database' seems a frivolous waste of money and resources.
- Because nothing like CEISMIC existed, we were forced to build it from scratch. We were a year past the defining events before we were in a position to begin collecting material.
- Bureaucracy—fortunately not too much, we didn't have the FBI knocking on our door like the 9/11 Digital archive did. Government agencies were supportive, especially those working in the cultural heritage sector. But some organisations seemed to have a new CIO every time we visited them, mid-level bureaucrats in Wellington scuppered developing relationships.

  Philanthropy's Public Image Even with the billions sloshing around Canterbury, we never seemed to be able to secure a fraction of the 3 million dollars that would have seen us collecting at full speed for 10 years. We weren't sexy enough or needy enough—not like a new cricket stadium or a destroyed school. Our greatest benefactor was our own, hard-hit university—our VC jumped on the idea immediately. "Give me a budget - I'm sold on this already. We have a statutory obligation to protect and disseminate knowledge and this is a unique opportunity to create an archive for collective memory, future research and the development of applied skills as well as the use of new technologies." And we had significant support from overseas.

What worked? Two examples: The Quakebox, CEISMIC Learning Legacy Scholarships

Oral History It is probably in our efforts to collect oral accounts that we have been most successful, to use Radstone's terms, in 'soliciting the voices of those who have been silent and ignored'. The Quakebox is one of our success stories—a shipping container outfitted as a studio and moved around Christchurch, focusing quite deliberately on Eastern communities. The Quakebox also exemplifies another CEISMIC ethos—where possible research must be collaborative and re-purposed.

This was a a collaborative project between the New Zealand Institute of Language, Brain and Behaviour (NZILBB) and UC CEISMIC (Canterbury Earthquake Digital Archive)

The stories were recorded from members of the public using an innovative, mobile recording studio which started life as a shipping container. (hence 'QuakeBox')

The nice thing about using a shipping container was that it could be transported around the city, reaching a wider cross-section of the population than it otherwise might have. In total, it was moved to 8 different sites in and around Christchurch including shopping malls, a large and popular public library next to the beach, some of the more badly damaged suburbs, the university and the Canterbury A&P show, a very popular local event which attracts thousands of attendees .

The stories were recorded in high quality audio and video, and they are mostly monologues - people were prompted with 'tell me your earthquake story' then left with the video camera to do just that.

In total, 722 members of the public came forward to share their stories, in 13 languages.

PP CEISMIC Learning Legacy scholarships—in conclusion