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Learning Lessons from Disasters: Is there any point?

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- United Nations: Earth on course to become 'uninhabitable hell for millions'
- 150 million people estimated to be impacted by climate disasters by 2030

The CEISMIC Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive was created in 2011 by a UC-led consortium of cultural heritage organisations to preserve images, stories and media about the earthquakes for the purposes of commemoration, teaching and research. Collecting broadly and eclectically, often filling gaps not covered by institutional collection policies, CEISMIC aspires to be a resource for answering present and future questions about the earthquakes' impacts on culture and society. CEISMIC has also sought to align itself with similar types of post-disaster archiving projects internationally.

This seminar will begin by describing the development of CEISMIC and outlining some of the project's challenges and possibilities. But the main thrust of the session will be to arrive at a robust discussion about the point and purpose of post-disaster cultural heritage digital archives like CEISMIC in an era when headlines like the ones above underscore the accelerating crisis of the global climate disaster, expected to affect over 4 billion people and destroy lives, livelihoods and entire communities. Do small discrete archiving projects like CEISMIC have value or meaning when the climate disaster looms so large?

CEISMIC Design Principles

- **Open Access:** to facilitate a federated archive and attract additional content;
- **Open Source:** to foster sharing and reuse of content and technology;
- **Multi-channel:** to foster a healthy 'ecosystem' with all content nodes of equal importance and partners equally supported;
- **Asymmetry**: to ensure a long-term focus on content ingestion, UC would curate the largest node—QuakeStudies—and oversee the federation;
- **Heterogeneity:** to support multiple standards and technologies and avoid paths that would stifle the development of new archives and leave small community archives outside the federation, a design solution was sought that could cope with a broad range of technologies;
- **Extensibility**: by developing an open dataset to allow for new sites and applications and extend the reach of the Consortium;
- **Leveraging existing assets**: by using existing national digital infrastructure as much as possible;
- **Data consistency**: to support interoperability by adopting basic adherence to Dublin Core Metadata Element Set;
- **Geo-referencing**: as earthquake damage was associated mainly with built environments, content should be geo-referenced where possible to enable the creation of map-based discovery tools and geographic research applications.

CEISMIC Lessons Learned

- **Lesson 1: Don't Wait for a Disaster** Use digital technology to unlock important physical archives; have an archive like QuakeStudies ready to activate, with procedures to facilitate prompt, ethical, and copyright-compliant archiving;
- **Lesson 2: Collect At Once** If a disaster occurs, don't wait until you have your technology in place to begin aggregating content;
- **Lesson 3: Understand Data Sharing Best Practice** Be up to date with existing national and international data sharing frameworks.In NZ DigitalNZ important for aggregating cultural content and NZGOAL—the New Zealand Government Open Access and Licensing Framework, for releasing copyright works and non-copyright material for reuse by others;

- **Lesson 4: Collaborate** One of our most productive activities has been to identify other groups able to collect material, encourage them to do so, and find ways to support and collaborate with them e.g. The Quakestudies Community Collection;
- **Lesson 5: There Is a Small Window for Support** In the period immediately following the disaster target senior leaders in government, business, and education during the brief window when they are accessible, willing to talk, and capable of releasing funding. An approach at this juncture would emphasise the role of the archive in preserving community memory, aiding collective healing, and developing a resource to share with the world;
- **Lesson 6: Make Alliances and Build Relationships** We struggled to collect content if dealing with risk-averse and under-resourced mid-level managers and bureaucrats. Leaders often had a bold vision and a willingness to support us and even participate;
- **Lesson 7: Collect in the Gaps** A 'collect in the gaps' policy saw us actively identifying content we were concerned would be lost over time if we were not the ones to preserve it;
- **Lesson 8: Tell Your Story** Were we to start again we would have immediately created a team of committed, articulate, enthusiastic ambassadors from amongst our own col- leagues, supporters, and students, to go out into the community and tell CEISMIC's story;
- **Lesson 9: Initiate Research** From the start we intended CEISMIC to be more than a passive content aggregator. Of the $450,000 of initial funding requested from the University, $150,000 of it was for a contestable fund to support research related to the earthquakes. Some used as seeding funding. QuakeBox and Quakebox 2.

CEISMIC AND POST-DISASTER POLITICS

- **CEISMIC as a Response to Powerlessness** The impulse to create CEISMIC was at a very visceral level a human response to powerlessness in the wake of crisis;
- **CEISMIC as Therapeutic** Not everything was being forgotten, our stories have value, destroyed communities have not wholly perished, we have something to offer to the future. A first step to regaining what had been lost
- **CEISMIC as a Place of Tension and Contest** Always our intention that CEISMIC would have room for conflicting voices.
- **CEISMIC's Missing Voices** Despite our many efforts to ensure fairness and equity in what we collected, CEISMIC over-represents the experiences of the articulate, the resourced, the controllers of media, the networked, the beneficiaries of various sorts of privilege, and the structures of power. The barriers to inclusiveness were never properly breached—a lot of people fell outside the value proposition. Technology, despite its remarkable powers, tends to only look where its owners or creators direct it. One of the greatest challenges that the builders of cultural heritage digital archives must address is how to be constantly vigilant to reach the nameless, faceless, silenced victims of any disaster. Such stories must be heard, and issues of fairness and equity must be addressed, if recovery from disaster is to be meaningful.

References

Smithies, J., P. Millar and C. Thomson. 2015. "Open Principles, Open Data: The Design Principles and Architecture of the UC CEISMIC Canterbury Earthquakes Digital Archive." *Journal of the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities* 1: 10–36. https://doi.org/10.17928/jjadh.1.1_10.

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