

Final Report for development of the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* by the Center for History & New Media, George Mason University

CHNM concluded a program grant that we received on March 28, 2006 to develop the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (HDMB)* (<http://hurricanearchive.org>) for collecting and sharing the digital record of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This serves as a final report on the grant, which concluded March 31, 2008.

Throughout the grant we set and met two main goals for this project. First, we wanted to collect and preserve digital evidence of the devastating Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2005, because such evidence will prove invaluable to future historians and analysts. In addition, we thought that the process of recording experiences of those affected by the storms would contribute to healing and rebuilding in their communities. Second, we see *HDMB* as a way of further developing and disseminating the practice of collecting and preserving the past online. Not only is *HDMB* an award-winning project that stands as an important example to other practitioners, but its open source backend platform, *Omeka*, offers anyone a free and easy way to reproduce similar digital memory banking projects. *Omeka* owes a great deal to *HDMB* because it was during the lifetime of the *HDMB* project that we were able to test a variety of functionalities, some of which made their way into *Omeka* and some of which did not.

Based on our experience with the *ECHO* and *September 11 Digital Archive* projects, we knew that it would be difficult to predict the success of the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, but we set out to collect at least 3,000 online narratives and photographs—that would make *HDMB* 50 percent more successful than the *September 11 Digital Archive* relative to the target population. We also sought to attract 1 million page views of the website in 2006.

To accomplish our goals and build a robust digital memory bank we implemented several strategies. We knew from our previous experiences that it is important to seed any online archive with stories and photographs before inviting the general public to contribute. Potential contributors need to see content on a website which therefore encourages them to add their own. We therefore began this project by spreading the word through personal networks of project staff that resulted in a small cluster of initial contributions. Our earlier experiences had also taught us that digital collecting requires a network of partnerships, so we next began to build strategic partnerships with institutions in and outside the Gulf Coast area. With these two strategies in place, we then began to promote the archive with the goal of soliciting contributions and visits to *HDMB*. Fourth, we looked to moments of commemoration to stimulate contributions in 2006 and 2007 during Mardi Gras (February and March) and the anniversaries of Katrina and Rita (August and September). Fifth, we began creating an automated collecting tool to take advantage of contemporary trends in the online world to facilitate both the automatic discovery and collection of digital photographs uploaded to Flickr.com. Finally, we reached out to public historians through three workshops and numerous conference presentations.

Overall, we proved much more successful than we had hoped in our online collecting by gathering over 25,000 digital objects by March 2008—more than eight times our initial goal. Because of other work continuing during the spring semester at the University of New Orleans we expect that number to grow by June. While we fell a little short of our goal for website visits for the first year—receiving about 900,000 page views rather than one million—the site received 1.6 million views in 2007. And, since its launch, the site has attracted nearly 2.5 million page views, which is quite impressive considering the “Katrina fatigue” felt by many in and outside the Gulf Coast region.

Despite this overall success, we faced some significant challenges in this project. Unlike the September 11 attacks, which elicited emotional reactions from most Americans, these hurricanes, while nationally significant, did not directly affect the entire country. As a result, many of those outside of the Gulf Coast region whom we asked to contribute to the project expressed a reluctance to do so. Moreover, we found it hard in some cases to get those who are still rebuilding to tell their stories, because they are still struggling to deal with the storms’ aftermath even in 2008. And we were less successful than we hoped (see below) in reaching the poor and unwired. Overall, we probably underestimated the degree of physical, institutional, and emotional devastation and how that would hinder our work. Nevertheless, we have accumulated a major archive that includes the words and images of those directly affected by the hurricanes, first responders, and those who voluntarily traveled to the Gulf Coast to help rebuild to share their stories through *HDMB*.

After *HDMB*’s launch, outreach consumed the project team’s efforts. Outreach Coordinator, Michael Mizell-Nelson, spearheaded efforts in the greater New Orleans area, first through his students and colleagues at the University of New Orleans, and then with community non-profits, other local colleges and universities, artists, and local media. Project Manager, Sheila Brennan, targeted communities in Western Louisiana and Texas and also broadened the scope and reached out to national relief organizations, service groups, and other hurricane-related projects. Many of these contacts led to the development of twenty strategic partnerships, which include: universities and colleges (University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi, Al Gore, Sr., Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University); museums (Smithsonian Institutions’ National Museum of American History, Louisiana State Museum, Museum of the Gulf Coast, National Hansen’s Disease Museum, Historic Naval Ships Association); state humanities councils (Mississippi Humanities Council, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities); military units (Kansas Army National Guard); media outlets (NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Beaumont Enterprise); non-profit relief groups (Katrina Kids Project); and grassroots empowerment groups (Student Hurricane Network, Katrina’s Jewish Voices, Do You Know What it Means, New Orleans, the Floodwall Project, New Orleans Oral History Project).

We also worked with some of these partners to create special collections for their hurricane-related materials, and helped other groups to preserve their digital record.

Examples of objects collected for these 44 unique collections include: images from the U.S. Coast Guard, Louisiana and Kansas National Guard; post-hurricane artwork by Gulf Coast artists; poems; narrated walking tours of New Orleans's Lower 9th Ward; installments from an in-progress digital graphic novel; and columns from the *Louisiana Weekly*, a widely-read African American newspaper.

Throughout the life of the grant, but particularly during Mardi Gras and the anniversaries of Katrina and Rita, we distributed press releases, flyers, and postcards in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. During Mardi Gras celebrations, the Outreach Coordinator, Project Manager, and Graduate Research Assistants distributed nearly ten thousand Mardi Gras-style cups and bumper stickers emblazoned with the project logo and URL during numerous parades and celebrations, and left them in coffeehouses and libraries with wireless Internet access. They also conducted radio and television interviews reaching audiences in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas that drove web traffic to the site.

To further encourage online contributions and boost visitation, we leafleted public and university library workstations on the Gulf and distributed them electronically through Webjunction, an online community of librarians, across the country to gain spontaneous contributions from those sitting at internet-ready computers. To reach college students, we distributed 15,000 flyers at twenty Gulf state universities through Facebook.com. During the world-premiere of Spike Lee's documentary on Katrina and the re-opening of the Superdome in New Orleans, project staff passed out flyers and postcards to crowds gathering for those events. With Patti Giglio's assistance, we contacted the media via the PR Newswire. *HDMB* also secured a Google Ad grant in August 2006 allowing us to run free ads on Google's high traffic search portal that would have cost over \$23,000. *HDMB*'s ad, on average, falls on the first page of search results for anyone entering the keywords, "Hurricane Katrina," "Hurricane Rita," "memory bank," and "New Orleans." Because of this increased exposure in the sponsored link section, these ads improve *HDMB*'s overall Google ranking.

To encourage the submission of online stories, Project Co-Director Mills Kelly and Brennan recorded a series of seven podcasts, "Voices from the Storm," during the 2007 hurricane season. Each podcast featured two online stories contributed to *HDMB* that Kelly and Brennan read aloud to listeners. These were then posted to the site's blog and are still available through iTunes. And, we experimented by creating an online collecting tool to detect and ingest Creative Commons photos tagged or labeled with appropriate key words posted to Flickr. We have used this tool to ingest over 300 digital photos, and are planning to collect additional images through the spring.

In addition to our online efforts, we tried reaching the displaced and unwired by establishing a voicemail account with the Internet phone service Skype with a New Orleans exchange, and by printing and distributing postcards with a pre-paid reply card with space for writing a short personal reflection (to be scanned into *HDMB*). This strategy was less successful than we hoped, but we are still distributing the phone number and are ready to save and upload any audio stories recorded. Mizell-Nelson also worked to bridge language barriers with students in the English as a Second Language

program at Delgado Community College to compose and contribute their stories.

We also took a number of steps to spread more generally the practice of online collecting through digital memory banks. In particular, we brought six Gulf area scholars working on a hurricane-related public history projects to Chicago in October 2006 to attend a digital history workshop, to teach them about online collecting, and to discuss ways for them to contribute to *HDMB*'s collections. In November 2007, Kelly organized workshops for faculty on two University of Southern Mississippi campuses (Hattiesburg and Long Beach) to advise them on using *HDMB* as a tool for research and writing in their undergraduate history and English classes.

We continue to spread the word about the practice of digital memory banking through conference presentations and in print including: Texas Association of Museums and Louisiana Association of Museums Conference (April 2006); American Association for the History of Computing Conference (April 2006); Society of American Archivists Conference (August 2006); Gulf South History and Humanities Conference (October 2006); and *Vectors Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular* (Spring 2006), Concordia University (October 2006); and Marymount University (September 2006); Society for the Anthropology of North America (April 2007); Mississippi Non-Profits Association (May 2007); New Media Consortium Conference (November 2007); and Oral History Association Conference (forthcoming, October 2008).

HDMB serves as an excellent example of digital memory banking process and has encouraged others to create similar projects. Ease of use and accessibility of *HDMB*'s *Omeka* backend has led to three new collecting projects, just shy of our goal of four. These projects are: *Do You Know What it Means New Orleans*, School of Visual Arts (NY) and the Historic New Orleans Collection (<http://doyouknowwhatitmeans.org/>); *April 16 Archive*, Virginia Tech (<http://april16archive.org/>); and *Catawba River Docs*, Light Factory and Cultural Heritage & Museums (<http://www.catawbariverdocs.com>). We anticipate that additional collecting projects will arise as the popularity of using *Omeka* with institutions and individuals grows. The contribution plugin (<http://omeka.org/download/plugins/>) was designed with digital memory banking in mind and is readily available to anyone running an *Omeka* installation.

Finally, *HDMB* was recognized nationally for its work in collecting and preserving the history of Katrina and Rita when it received the Award of Merit for Leadership in History in June 2007 from the American Association of State and Local History that honors significant achievement in the field of local history and excellence in special projects.

We will continue to work on *HDMB* into 2008 to ensure the long-term sustainability of this rich archive. We plan to write a case study in June 2008 about building and disseminating *HDMB* to assist others interested in using *Omeka* to create their own digital collecting projects.