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Technology Intersecting Culture: the British Slave Trade Legacies Project

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Abstract:

British Slave Trade Legacies is a web archiving project that collected websites and online material related to and generated from the 2007 bicentenary of Parliament abolishing the British slave trade. The Internet Archive donated their Archive-It service to harvest websites for this collection and now provides public access to digital objects within it. This paper describes two issues that the project raised: firstly, the validity of the 2007 anniversary as marked by cultural stakeholders; secondly, the challenges of documenting it, thereby adding to historical legacy material of this topic. The archivist's role in the 21st century will also be discussed in the context of new digital age challenges.

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Commemorative sites work best when they position people to make meaningful connections between their everyday lives and a past trauma. This is especially true if the trauma is not their own. Participants in commemorative events need to see that another person's humanity rests in more than his or her status as victim.

-Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace¹

What the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has taught us is a difficult question with many complex, contradictory answers—answers which have also changed through time. In 2007, organizations throughout the UK decided to commemorate the 200th anniversary of an act of Parliament to abolish the British Slave Trade, and official (and non-official) activities generated from these events and programmes produced numerous websites, online exhibitions, and educational resources. From June 2007 to June 2008, these online resources were collected as part of the British Slave Trade Legacies (BSTL) web archiving project, now hosted and made accessible from the Internet Archive (IA), the oldest and largest web archive in the world. I compiled the list of URLs for BSTL from the UK heritage sector, government, charity groups, academia, and the African and Caribbean community. Individuals who created or knew of web resources contacted me in response to emails, notices in professional newsletters and listservs advertising the project. Other suggestions of online topical material were gathered at conferences, workshops and through pre-arranged interviews with specific individuals involved directly in some aspect the bicentenary. I also created the BSTL system interface, although the search function was created by engineers at IA.

BSTL is searchable by keyword and can be browsed by geographic region, type of work created, or category of creator. See Figure 1: Screen Shot of British Slave Trade Legacies. Long-term promotion of this and related non-digital ephemera (including posters, educational resources,

¹ Kowaleski-Wallace, E., p. 27

programme and collection guides) will be undertaken by staff at the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in London. BCA staff are adding this physical material to their permanent collections and cross-referencing the BSTL digital resource in the BCA catalogue.

This paper describes two issues that the project raised: firstly, the validity of the 2007 anniversary as marked by cultural stakeholders; secondly, the challenges of documenting it, thereby adding to historical legacy material of this topic. The archivist's role in the 21st century will also be discussed in the context of new digital age challenges.

Problems and Questions of Remembering

The questions anyone in a heritage institution should ask when planning anniversary commemorations are:

- What is the value of this particular anniversary?
- Whose history is it and who interprets it?
- If the documents generated by the event become important themselves, whose role is it to preserve them?
- After the anniversary, what does it all mean?

With that in mind, although it's fair to say that the BSTL web archiving project was successful on one hand, in many respects and for several reasons it was also problematic. First, the objective of the anniversary event itself is problematic because it recalls a long overdue and highly compromised piece of legislation.² Second, the commemoration events taking place in 2007 were problematic because they were not uniformly coordinated, and the numerous government bodies, heritage organizations, and community groups had their own aims and agendas—taking this anniversary in different directions. The dynamic nature of the events, therefore, influenced what could be captured. Third, while the project scope – any resources online created in Great Britain that

² Wood, M., p. 203.

had to do with the 2007 commemorations – was straightforward, the BSTL collection is problematic because some information is missing. The limits of current technology prevented complete capturing of websites exactly as we see them live, and the fact that there are no online traces of some events, programmes, and resources means that while best efforts were made to create this resource, it is incomplete because they were not created in digital format or because, although created, they have not survived.

Yet despite these issues, the project is successful in the sense that the collection reflects the reality of 2007: It contains the real opinions of people and the sometimes last-minute but valiant efforts to produce imaginative, moving, and provocative online projects. There were critical discussions of the event, about what it did and did not come to mean, and what many felt were lost opportunities to make better connections between the topics, local communities, and heritage institutions or government.³ Because the historical events leading to forced migrations of different peoples to different continents through several centuries were complicated it can be argued that we should not expect the way they will be represented in archives to comply with rigid project management or traditional cataloguing processes.

Context and Historiography

The Slave Trade is the foundation of our commerce, the support of our colonies, the life of our navigation and the first cause of our national industry and riches.

-JP Demarin⁴

The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, passed in 1807, made it illegal for Britain to kidnap, capture, and transport African people from their homeland. Prior to 25 March 1807, Britain was a

³ Open Discussion in *Remembering Slavery: Lessons and Legacies*. Liverpool: Museum Association, 2007.

⁴Demarin, J.P. "Treatise Upon the Trade from Britain."

systematic slave trading nation at the zenith of its nearly 200-year reign. After this date, it became the world's first actively abolitionist state—at least on paper. *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament, and People*, which includes an illustrated catalogue of the Parliamentary exhibition that was held in Westminster Hall, is an example of one of the many high quality works produced in 2007 by leading scholars in different disciplines ranging from economics and visual arts to history and human rights advocacy. This monograph complements the online version of the exhibition too, because it gives context to the objects chosen for the online display. The provocative essays within the catalogue explain the need to “*mark* rather than celebrate” this occasion. They acknowledge the contentious nature of the anniversary centered on these questions:

- Why is the date 2007 being remembered, when it wasn't actually the end of slavery, or even of the slave trade? Does this not do disservice to those who remained enslaved?
- What is the value in having a year of programs and events when ideally, the issues of national identity, race, diversity, historical legacies, should be discussed openly and regularly?
- Are the communities whose ancestors were directly affected by this historical trauma actual participants in discussions and events, or do they benefit from these programs?
- How sincere is the British government in “funding these displays” when it has made no official apology for past participation as a slave trading nation.
- How can ties to Atlantic Slave Trade be made relevant to today to everyone?

The transatlantic African slave trade reached all segments of 18th and 19th century society, a modern day comparison to its extent and influence in everyday society would be the IT or the oil industry.⁵ Marcus Wood, artist and academic, asks why the British government decided to pour a large amount of money into supporting exhibitions, events and programmes in 2007 to commemorate the 1807 Slave Trade Act.⁶ The timeline showing the Atlantic slave trade system is about 400 years long. (See Figure 2: Timeline with close-up of period concerned). Highlighted in the timeline is a 50-

5 Remembering Slavery: Lessons and Legacies

6 Wood, M., p.203

year period which places the Act in its historical context, a context that traditionally focuses on the rise of the British Abolition movement. This Act abolished slave trading, but slavery in British colonies continued until 1838 and in the Americas until it was finally outlawed in Brazil in 1888. Revisionist historians have subjected the 1807 Act as well as the 1833 Emancipation Act to intense scrutiny.⁷ Carey, Kitson, and Walvin argue that until the 1940s with Eric William's *Slavery and Capitalism*, studies about the British participation in the slave trade take abolitionists propaganda at face value, because they have a seductive narrative of divine inspiration offering freedom and the prospect of salvation both in this world and the afterlife.⁸ Revisionists also point out that the institution of slavery was heavily criticized during its own time, not only by abolitionists who opposed it on moral grounds, but also people like Adam Smith who argued the system was inefficient economically.⁹ In fact, more profit was made after trade switched from human beings to commodity trade (See Figure 3: Trade between Africa and Atlantic World).¹⁰ Since Britain seems to have passed a law that was in its own self-interest and prosperity long-term, looking solely at the 1807 anniversary does appear questionable..

In the last few decades, other areas of research have contributed to the view of the Atlantic World as vast global network of commerce, and most scholars now move away from the model of looking at great “heroes,” incorporating other factors in explaining how slavery ended, such as resistance by the enslaved themselves, economic motivation behind European powers, and the study of the ordinary people behind the abolition movements.¹¹ In addition, new data from other areas of study such as oral traditions and archeology provide and integrate information about slave-traders and those resisting slavery, shedding light on the diversity and evolution of cultures in Africa itself.¹²

Furthermore, interpretation of slavery differs greatly between different African and Caribbean

7 Carey, B. and Kitson, P., p. 2

8 Walvin, J., p. 67

9 Smith, A., pp. 82-83

10 Eltis, D., p. 163

11 Gilroy, P. *Socialist Worker Online*, 24 April 2007. [accessed 26 October 2008]

12 Cordell, D., p.32

communities and the British heritage institutions that have collections on slavery. Historian and co-founder of the Windrush Foundation Arthur Torrington said that a museum, for example, may define the exportation of people against their will as “trade,” whereas people within a community see it as human trafficking.¹³ If both parties are coming together from different historical contexts and world views, it is easy to see how crossed wires in conversations can lead to problems. Torrington suggests that cultural stakeholders need to be aware of the different community points of view because while there is a bias in many interpretations, the onus is on heritage institutions to reduce that bias.¹⁴

In the article, “Colliding Worlds in the Curatorial Environment,” authors Berry and MacKeith discuss the need to redevelop a public programme that had originally been planned for Black History Month in 2006 at the University of Exeter. After external consultation, two major problems with the original exhibition plan were pointed out: first, the text accompanying the historic records was to be displayed using “simple and neutral interpretive captions” which essentially dehumanized the people described in the exhibits; secondly, no straightforward relationship was established between the people from the past depicted in the exhibition, and the visitors seeing the exhibition. The article explained that merely “displaying historical records as they stand repeats and intensifies the racist beliefs of that period”.¹⁵ The curators described practical ways of presenting archival material to give the subjects of the exhibition dignity, while actively engaging the audience. In this case, the outcome was positive and many lessons were learned from the exercise. It does, however, illustrate how much work is involved in even a small public programme because the nature of the material invokes strong feelings, such as discomfort and anger,¹⁶ and that outside consultation should have taken place earlier.

Berry and MacKeith predicted that in 2007 when more material similar to theirs would be unveiled for the occasion of the bicentenary, other heritage institutions would face similar problems

13 Nightingale, J., p.54

14 Ibid.

15 Berry, C. and MacKeith, L., p.141

16 Ibid.

related to “remembering.” These problems include additional planning and work with collections, and the possibility of facing criticism from “experts” ranging from academia, the media or the community groups. All of these possible problems are related directly to the questions mentioned earlier relating to an anniversary’s value and interpretation.

The Anniversary and Larger Society

...Take
each glass case as revelation;
the fact you see your own reflection in each
one is no accident. All the future is the past. Remember
that these are not just objects, things that rent
a glass room in the house of history:
yoke and whip and shackle and chain,
were never just words -- they are always
intentions...

(excerpt from *A Guide to the Exhibition*, by Rommi Smith)¹⁷

Perhaps the significance of the 1807 date today isn't actually in the Slave Trade Act itself, but in the opportunity this piece of legislation provides as a structure to discuss topics like race, diversity, human rights, and early 21st century values. The *Parekh Report*, released in October 2000 by the Runnymede Trust, describes Britain at a crossroads, and makes recommendations for the country to acknowledge its diverse nature and refashion itself as “an outward-looking, generous, inclusive society.”¹⁸ According to Wallace, the basis for the *Parekh Report* is modern revisionist scholarship on the 18th century and knowledge that had circulated within academic circles, but had not trickled down into school curriculum or into general public awareness.¹⁹ Seven years after the *Parekh Report* was issued the language of cultural diversity and difference is constructed at various levels in institutional and government documents. Writes Lynn:

The emphasis on diversity and inclusion had brought about a plethora of thinking and writing—research reports, policy documents, standards, curricula—all of which contribute to a dominant discourse in advising, guiding or insisting on how and what should be done to achieve a standard of practice and

17 UK Parliament website: Poetry Please
<http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade/yourvoice/poetrybyrommismith/aguidetotheexhibitionbyrommismith1/aguidetotheexhibitionbyrommismith.html>. [accessed 28 October]

18 Runnymede Trust <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/past-projects/meb/report/reportRecommendations.html>. [accessed 28 October]

19 Kowaleski-Wallace, E., p.5

expectation in providing an inclusive and diverse provision.²⁰

McGuigan discusses the report's practical implications for arts, media and sport which he says are "key to reworking the national story in terms of representation and participation," raising a great many issues with wider social implications such as public funding and employment in these fields.²¹ McGhee states that although there are practical problems in the *Parekh Report* beginning with the assumption that there are shared values and principles throughout multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-lingual Britain, the Labour party has embraced the report's "dream of facilitating a multicultural British citizenship forged in the crucible of commonality."²² He further states:

From the outset, the attempt to create unity out of diversity through the isolation of core principles and forging the values shared by all 'communities' in the community of communities is a highly problematic political project. However, this political dream is not isolated to the speeches made by the Home Secretary, nor to academic communitarianism, it is also central to the recommendations and programmes contained in the reports and reviews...²³

Based on this trend, a year-long schedule of culturally-based events and programs focused on a specific historical theme seems to provide a high-profile way of accomplishing more towards this goal of inclusiveness. Or at least, that is the position government takes. According to the official HM Government *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807 - 2007* Guide explaining why government officiated the bicentenary and provided resources to fund projects associated with it, it states that this "is an opportunity to recognize the contributions of Black African and Caribbean communities to the nation."²⁴

However, as 2007 unfolded, many questions were raised on the effectiveness of it, starting with its structure. Alibhai-Brown²⁵, key-note speaker at the 2007 Museum Association conference in Liverpool said, "These topics and this history have such gravitas, that I question the value of compressing it into a year." Characterising the programmes and exhibitions she observed in 2007 as

20 Ling-Yin, L.A., p.186

21 McGuigan, J, p. 190

22 McGhee, D. p. 382

23 Ibid.

24 Blair, T., p. 1

25 Alibhai-Brown is also well known as journalist and author of numerous books including: *Who Do We Think We Are? Imagining the New Britain* and *After MultiCulturalism*.

“binge” remembering, Alibhai-Brown further stated that in many ways the anniversary structure was counterproductive to discussions of the larger issues because so much emphasis was placed on doing things for the 2007 event; that those planning programs and those attending them were likely to get tired of the topic and feel put off from it in future.²⁶

Bernadette Lynch, at the Manchester Museum, also agreed there were general problems with the bicentenary programme structure, and in particular it showed that numerous heritage institutions were really ill-prepared for working directly with communities. In a *Museum Journal* article, she wrote, “despite the high profile, the bicentenary year demonstrated...[collaboration] still comes from the bottom up” with no real institutional change. Furthermore, she said that museums need clearer definitions, commitment and leadership when developing community partnerships.²⁷

Besides the faulty bicentenary structure, general discontent was expressed about how the events were administered.²⁸ With different degrees of success, the Heritage Lottery Fund provided resources for over 200 projects. However the funding mechanisms were heavily criticized by many already working with communities who felt they were forced to participate in an alien and bureaucratic process of writing grants for “work” they'd been doing for years. Simon Murray, a community artist I spoke with also said, “Really, this anniversary has nothing to do with us [the Black British Community]. It is something imposed from the outside by government.” However, he also noted that one of the benefits of this year was to learning how to “do things better by 2038, the year when it will really count.”²⁹

This diversity of purpose is clear when reviewing all of the different websites in the BSTL collection which, besides the three major browsing categories, are further subdivided to give users an overview of what's in the collection and who created what. Many participants in the bicentenary had

26 Alibhai-Brown, “Keynote Address”

27 Lynch, B, p. 18

28 General discussion in Recovered Histories Seminar

29 Murray is referring to 1838 when “apprenticeships” were ended. Although 1833 ended slavery, apprenticeships to former masters by freed slaves continued slavery in all but name.

different aims and needs. Government, for example, seems to be seeking a means of generating good public relations, by striving to satisfy what it sees as constituent needs and meeting targets set by policy documents. Heritage organizations however, took the opportunity for the anniversary to be vehicles for sharing their collections with historical and social significance whether artifacts, documents, books, or places. Community groups on the other hand, desire to discuss their identity and history on their own terms.³⁰ While all of these goals are laudable, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, it's clear from the BSTL collection that not all expectations and goals were met.

There were some exceptions, however. Of the many experiments born out of 2007, the ones that have the most potential for success do so because they used the bicentenary as a catalyst for a programme or service rather than as a scheduling framework. For instance, in the museum sector, there is the *Revealing Histories*; in the archives sector there is the *Bristol Black Archives Partnership*. *Revealing Histories* is a partnership of eight museums and galleries in Greater Manchester, created to engage in activities reflecting on the impact that slavery has had on Britain's economy, society and culture. The *Bristol Black Archives Partnership* collects documents and objects from the local African-Caribbean people and organizations then adds them to the City of Bristol's main archive collections. Both of these projects use the institution's collections as a starting point for engagement with local community, but go beyond history and ask the communities what is relevant to them today. In addition, they establish an ongoing process to continue looking at local themes with universal relevance.

Where there were online traces of them, the BSTL collection also shows some community voices discussing their attitudes towards the bicentenary. Two very different examples of community reaction to the 2007 Commemoration can be exemplified by *Ligali* and the *Leeds Bicentenary Transformation Project*. *Ligali* is a Pan African human rights-based organisation. Their websites and the reports of them by the media show they took an adversarial role in the commemorations. *Ligali*

30 Hylton, C. p. 77

states it does not recognize any significance in the 1807 events, calling them a false history based on glorifying the abolitionists.³¹ A *Ligali* member also interrupted the Westminster Abbey service in March 2007 as a formal protest against the British government's "statement of deep regret" insisting that Britain should issue a formal apology for its role in the Slave Trade.³² On the other hand, a collaboration of community groups in Leeds set up the *Leeds Bicentenary Transformation Project*. The groups were well-organized and began a two-year planning process in 2005 in anticipation of the 2007 commemorations.³³ The community organisations, having experience since 2000 of organising Leeds Carnival, received the highest grant of all those funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop their community-led programs of exhibitions, revision of school curriculum, and assistance to researchers. Although there were differences of opinion between the *Leeds Bicentenary Transformation Project* and government, the Project decided to work with and get financial support from the government establishment.³⁴

The projects mentioned thus far are only a fraction of the BSTL collection and they illustrate the diverse nature of what was accomplished by various participants. It also shows that because people were concerned with creating events, programs, resources, exhibitions or criticisms for the 2007 bicentenary, initially, not much thought was given to preserving these all together.³⁵ As an outsider who was aware of the fragile nature of online material, which is susceptible to loss unless steps are taken to preserve it, I thought it was imperative to save the discussions of "Britishness," race, and diversity, and the other issues a complex subject like the Slave Trade would stimulate. This sense of urgency led to a conversation with Brewster Kahle in April 2007, who put me in touch with staff at Archive-It.

31 Ligali. "Position Statement." <http://www.ligali.org/truth2007/position.htm>. [accessed 26 October 2008]

32 BBC. "Protest Disrupts Slavery Service." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6497935.stm> [accessed 28 October 2008]

33 General discussion in Recovered Histories Seminar

34 General discussion in Recovered Histories Seminar

35 Interview with Asif Kahn, MLA Policy Adviser 2007 September 14, 2008

Prior to April 2007, I had no official role in the bicentenary commemorations, although I was well aware of the events because of my previous association as a website manager and content creator for Westminster Libraries and Archives, which as an organization had an active role in the London bicentenary commemorations. I also have a general long-time interest in documenting minority groups. Prior to moving to the UK, I was active in the Society of American Archivists special interest group, Archives and Archivists of Color Roundtable (AAC), formerly serving as a chair for the group and, remotely, still serving as the group's webmaster. AAC seeks to promote wider participation of minority archivists in the archival profession and promote the preservation of their archival materials.³⁶ In addition, I also have years of work experience creating websites, online exhibitions, and digital resources for archives/libraries in both in the US and UK. BSTL happened to unite my professional interests and technical expertise. Formally archiving websites on the scale of this project was not something I had done before. However, I did understand the basic processes of web archiving, that one of the major players in the field was the Internet Archive, and through professional connections in California was able to make contact and easily convince IA staff that BSTL was a significant digital preservation project. With them, I established the parameters of collecting websites from June 2007 to June 2008 because while there were some projects that had already commenced in early 2007, there were others that for various reasons were not set to start until 2008.

The Process of Web Archiving

This century, fifty years back and fifty forward, is one of those rare times in history when humanity transforms from one type of human society to another. To use a physical analogy, we are in the midst of a phase transition, when the configuration of the system is switching between two locally stable states. In this transition technology is the catalyst...So what are we humans becoming? Whatever it is, is more connected, more interdependent...The web of our technology weaves us together, simultaneously enabling us and forcing us to depend more on one another.³⁷

Much of modern society is recorded online through websites. The virtual world uses

36 *Archives and Archivists of Color* Website, <http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/aac/> [October 26 2008]

37 Hillis, W.D.A . <http://www.longnow.org/views/essays/articles/ArtHuman.php>. [October 26 2008]

metaphors of physical cities to describe itself: highway, traffic, park, platform, infrastructure, architecture, environment, and home.³⁸ Like the real world, exploring a website or a virtual city will give a general impression of those who dwell in a particular place, what they value, where they work, what they learn, and how they organize themselves. In fact, effective web designers take into consideration the ways in which their users interact with the website, their potential needs, and cater to them accordingly.³⁹ Research also suggests that 70 percent of visitors intending to visit heritage sites will go to the institution's website before arriving at its the door.⁴⁰ Building upon this knowledge, web designers often provide more extensive content online than what may be found by visiting physical heritage sites.⁴¹ Therefore, websites are not only the windows into an institution, but a website's style, content, and means of communication allow one to gauge its user community as well.

The history of web archiving is as long as the establishing of websites, and like the structure of the internet, mostly built from the ground up.⁴² BSTL, along with terabytes of other collections, is hosted by the Internet Archive. Founded by Kahle who was far-sighted enough to realize the internet should be archived and skillful enough to make it practically possible, IA became the non-profit, digital library of internet sites and other cultural artefacts in digital form, freely accessible to researchers and the general public.⁴³ IA uses remote harvesting as its method of collecting, and has developed its own open source software to make this possible.⁴⁴ The components IA uses for remote harvesting are: Heritrix, Arc File, the Wayback Machine, and Nutchwax.

- Heritrix is the software that crawls websites (using a conceptually similar process to the “spiders” or “bots” search engines such as Google) on the World Wide Web and

38 Boardman, M., p.110. To “park” is to reserve an internet domain name until the owner of the domain name develops content.

39 Ball, S., p. 26

40 Calder, P.R., p. 63

41 Lester, P., p. 96

42 Brown, A., p 10

43 About the Internet Archive. <http://www.archive.org/about/about.php> [October 28 2008]

44 Internet Archive Tools. <http://archive-access.sourceforge.net> [October 28 2008]

copies them.

- Arc File is an archival record form used by Heritrix to write content after a crawl.⁴⁵
- The Wayback Machine provides access to the Arc Files allowing users to view archived websites.
- Nutchwax is an open source search engine used to make the archived websites searchable by full text.

Extending the metaphor of harvesting, URLs and content collected from them are referred to as seeds. All data is preserved in the ARC file format which is an open standard.⁴⁶ The archiving service is available to any organization who wishes to be a partner of Archive-It for a fee. If money is an issue, and IA deems the collection valuable, as in the case of BSTL, IA will negotiate costs.

If we think cultural scholarship and attitudes to race relations have evolved rapidly over the last few decades, internet development and its challenges have moved at lightning speed. In the early 1990s websites were largely text only. By 1996, websites started to be more visually engaging as developments in HTML made it possible to design with more complexity, including graphics. Early webmasters had to know how to hand-code in HTML, but within 5 years, authoring tool developers, hoping to make the process of web design simpler and more widely available, were marketing software such as Dreamweaver and Front Page. Software such as these, with graphical user interfaces similar to Microsoft Office style products, unsurprisingly led to popularity of their use across the board, including the heritage sector. For example, a digital imaging librarian from the University of Kansas wrote a popular basic primer for the creation of online exhibitions using special collections material. It is heavily reliant on Dreamweaver.⁴⁷ Howell, another librarian concerned with web accessibility issues notes that:

45 Heritrix Developer Documentation. http://crawler.archive.org/articles/developer_manual/arcs.html

46 IA is starting to also preserve files in the WARC version which is the next generation of the ARC format and has recently become an ISO recognized standard. Currently IA does not have plans to migrate the ARCs into WARCs as it continues to be a widely used format, but the open source access tools used at IA supports both file types.

47 Goodwin Theil, S., pp. 19-79

As [website] developers' hunger for greater graphical capabilities increased...tools were engineered to create web pages that looked exactly how the user of the tool wanted them to look, regardless of the underlying HTML code. The result was a generation of websites that looked great on screen (though different in different browsers and at different screen resolutions).⁴⁸

In the last few years, websites have expanded to include dynamic components such as generating information from databases, and interactive web 2.0 technology allowing media streaming and feedback to be given on items posted. The growth of content management systems for large institutions such as universities or government agencies has led to the growth of non-technical staff creating, editing, managing and publishing a variety of content, without needing to be mindful of code that composes the layout. This change in how websites are built greatly affects how websites can be archived. Non-technical staff may also not be aware of good practice, such as using cascading style sheets which allow website uniformity and structure, which incidentally helps web archiving. According to Viralingam and Ramaiah, HTML interface allows easy copying, reproduction, modification, searching, classification, and reclassification, unlike Flash and other interfaces heavy with animation.⁴⁹

In BSTL, there are a range of websites. Some are very simple, like the .PDF collection guide produced by Sheffield City Council. Some are substantial and interactive like Anti-Slavery International's education websites. While the Internet Archive has achieved its expert status by engaging in this process the longest, and forming partnerships that research how to best archive websites, no guarantee is made to Archive-It partners that JavaScript, Streaming Media, and form driven content can be archived accurately from websites. Brown writes that this type of content, relying on interaction with users, is a major preservation challenge.

Unlike static properties, such as dimensions of an image, behaviour arises out of interaction between user and system and will vary on the user's decisions and even, potentially, who the user is. Two approaches...to capturing may be possible. First the rules that govern the behaviours could be preserved, allowing the same behaviour to be recreated using different technologies...Second; the range of possible

48 Howell, J., p. 59.

49 Viralingam, N. and Ramaiah, C., p.45

behaviours could be captured as transactions between the user and the system.⁵⁰

In other words, the process of emulation is required to preserve a website in the first instance; in the second instance static representations of each possibility would be saved. What does this mean on a practical level for BSTL project? Here are a few examples.

JavaScript is a scripting language used widely by website developers to imbed objects with which users interact. For instance, within a website, a form may use JavaScript to allow users to input information and then validate it before the form is submitted to a server. Or, JavaScript allows an image to change as a mouse cursor moves over it. Another common use of JavaScript enables a user to open or “pop up” a new window with a specified size, position, or attribute. *BBC – History* produced website called *Abolition of the Slave Trade 1807*. A component of the website is an Interactive Map. If you go to the live version of the site (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/launch_anim_slavery.shtml) or take a look at Figure 4: Screen Shot of Live Website and Figure 5: Screen Shot of Archived Websites, you will notice a large button called Launch the Map. This button uses JavaScript to launch a new window which allows a user to see geographic information such as slave trade routes along the Atlantic, locations of resistance, (former slave turned abolitionist) Olaudah Equiano's travels, and key facts and figures. The archived version: http://wayback.archive-it.org/866/20080510013419/http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/launch_anim_slavery.shtml doesn't contain the button with a JavaScript function and therefore BSTL does not contain this map. Likewise, one of the strongest features of the UK Parliament website is a section called *Explore our Documents*. In the live version of the site, users can browse through virtual Parliamentary documents such as the 1807 Act itself and petitions signed by numerous ordinary people requesting the abolition of the slave trade. Users can also scroll through these documents and zoom in for close-up views. This functionality and information is lost in the

50 Brown, A., p. 123

archived version because JavaScript is difficult to capture and more difficult to display.⁵¹

Digital audio or video transmissions via the Internet are called streaming media. Many innovative sites in BSTL contain streaming media. Depending on which format is used, there may be different preservation outcomes. Taking the example of video speeches, the live version of *Socialist Worker Online* contains imbedded YouTube videos of Paul Gilroy and Weyman Bennett criticizing aspects of the 1807 bicentenary.⁵² In the archived version, depending on which version of a browser a user has, the videos may not be viewable.

Fortunately there is link to Paul Gilroy's speech as part of an article in *Socialist Worker* so that the users can get a good idea of what was said, but it is only a partial transcript and the virtual experience of viewing may be lost. The audio format is more consistently successful. In both archived and live versions of UK Parliament Website it is possible to hear Parliament's writer-in-residence Rommi Smith performing her poem, *A Guide to the Exhibition*.⁵³

Copyright is a major issue for the Internet Archive, which they have addressed with a robust takedown policy⁵⁴ and by respecting the *Robots Exclusion Protocol*. Under this protocol website designers use the "Robots.txt" file to tell crawlers like Heritrix not to index certain webpages or not to index the entire website. Since IA respects Robots.txt, special permission must be granted from these providers and this requires contacting individual councils, institutions, community groups, requesting the webmaster to alter code or allow Heritrix to crawl the site. While there have not been any problems getting permission, and this is the general practice for British web archiving programs to take,⁵⁵ the process is time consuming because someone has to monitor what has actually made it into the BSTL archive and then schedule a re-crawl of the seeds after making contact with the webmaster. This has

51 Brown, A., p. 122

52 Cousins, A. *Socialist Worker Online*.

53 UK Parliament, Your Voice Please

54 Samuelson Law, Technology & Public Policy Clinic on Behalf of the Internet Archive.

55 Brown, A., p. 151

been done with BSTL after the official cutoff period.⁵⁶

These examples highlight the limits of technology from a web archiving perspective. IA staff state that Heritrix development is steadily making progress in being able to handle JavaScript heavy sites and streaming media. An IA project during summer 2008 (after BSTL stopped collecting) made a lot of progress in terms of handling JavaScript. To their credit, IA engineers have a good track-record of capturing and archiving most online content developed during the last 12 years. However webmasters in general continue to use a wide variety of techniques and tools to compose their webpages, so IA is continually challenged.

There are different options for harvesting difficult content. Archive-It and the contract crawls are the two main ways that IA staff work with partners. For instance, if a partner is using the web-based Archive-it interface, and not all content from a seed is captured, Archive-It staff can be alerted to make slight program modifications to Heritrix, after which the partner can re-crawl the website. For a contract crawl, IA engineers operate Heritrix directly so they can create a more customized harvest. In the second scenario, IA deals with problem seeds as they are encountered.

What has been captured is protected by a strong preservation policy, outlined by these three areas: 1) Redundancy, 2) Transparency and Integrity of the data, and 3) Best Practices and Standards.

1) Redundancy. This means having multiple copies in multiple places. IA keeps two copies of all data online at their data center in San Francisco, California. Partial mirrors (exact copies) of IA data are kept in the following cities: Paris, Amsterdam, and Alexandria (Egypt). IA encourages partners to receive a copy of their data. In addition, several preservation systems (LOCKSS, D-Space, OCLC Digital Archive) are used so that there is no over reliance on one

⁵⁶ As previously stated the cut off period was June 2008. Some websites in BSTL were re-crawled in July and August 2008.

particular system. There are multiple copies in different systems, but partners manage their own copies of data, so these copies are subject to an individual institution's preservation policy.

2) Transparency and Integrity of the data. Open source software for storage, design, and tools for crawling are used to achieve transparency. IA staff runs regular checksums to verify the integrity of the data and the discs.

3) Best Practices and Standards. IA is a founding member of the International Internet Preservation Consortium (www.netpreserve.org) which works towards enabling international collaboration for preserving internet content for future generations.⁵⁷ IA works with the consortium to develop international standards and sometimes the consortium will directly fund development of open source tools and formats which its members and anyone from the public can use. For example, Arc File was developed with consortium members. There is also an overarching philosophy at the IA, articulated by Kahle, which drives technology innovation but also puts emphasis on using and promoting open source. "Theoretically, it is fine for someone else to make a profit from developing a technology. However, IA believes that the base knowledge of any technology should be free to anyone to use and further develop." IA itself does not profit from their services.

Elsewhere I have evaluated some of the best features found in websites of the BSTL collection.⁵⁸ Here, however, I would like to note that sometimes a good indication of a programme or project in BSTL may not necessarily be determined by the quality of its website. A well-attended lively discussion, where participants were moved, intellectually sated, or established professional or community contacts, for instance, may only be recorded by an online flyer of the event. The Bristol Black Archives Partnership previously mentioned, has a

⁵⁷ Notes from email exchanged 19 November 2008 by Rose Roberto and Molly Bragg

⁵⁸ Roberto, R.V, pp.63-71

remarkably simple website, welcoming people to make contributions but relying on non-digital material distributed in the local community for promotion of its service.⁵⁹ Despite what was said at the beginning of the section about the growth of websites and being able to derive some meaning from online content, the fact is that exploring an exhibition, listening to an academic lecture, or participating in a community concert, is a very different experience from its virtual counterpart. Additionally, just because all aspects of a website cannot be completely archived, that does not mean a great understanding of the event will not be gained. If we look at the role of the archives through the centuries, we can see they contain traces of past, rather than the actual past. There is value in that.

Evolving Role of Archivist

The archivist is guardian of countless truths of all kinds, truths which s/he may not agree with or even perceive.⁶⁰

Narration, never value free, stands between the event and the experience of the event.⁶¹

In his book, *Flowers after the Funeral: Reflections on the Post- 9/11 Digital Age*, Cox states our times are full of contradictions that directly impact the archival field. While there is an immense increase of information, at the same time there is a loss of information with many experts in various fields arguing over what computers can and cannot really do.⁶² Cox vividly reminds his readers that they saw TV images of paper raining out of the Twin Towers after the New York terrorist attacks. Although lamenting loss of thousands of lives, he points to the other long-term losses that day, such as the records of firms with global reach. In the absence of people who did and knew their work, the firms that relied heavily on IT and therefore had back-up systems off-site, retained access to some

⁵⁹ For example, specially made calendars with photos of local people and the material they donated was distributed in Bristol in 2007 and 2008, and probably has more resonance with older members of the community than a flashy website.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, H., p.21

⁶¹ Dodge, B., p.346

⁶² Cox, R., p. 9

institutional memory, enabling recovery more quickly after the disaster.⁶³ Something else shifted as a consequence of that day, Cox writes. “What had once seemed so ephemeral became permanent, and the permanent was destroyed before our eyes.”⁶⁴

The preservation strategy of IA is different from traditional archival strategies. Instead of a single copy kept “safe,” multiple distributed copies are created. Rather than being precious with one item held within our own institutions and only managing our own resources to preserve them, there is an emphasis on sharing resources and actively seeking partnerships with those who have similar concerns. Rather than looking to appraise and describe material after it has fallen into disuse, early intervention at a management and technical level is required. In the potent example given by Cox about 9/11, these new strategies for digital preservation work.

Archivists have more responsibility in the digital age. In addition to doing work as it always has been done, archivists are expected to do more work, and some of it in completely different ways. They must look after the material that has come before and also adapt to preserving what is digital. We think of the slogan “Think globally, act locally” from the environmental movement as a modern phrase, says Flinn.⁶⁵ However any mass campaign movement adopts this philosophy and utilizes it to achieve set outcomes. The Abolitionist movements of the 18th century calling people to boycott sugar produced on slave plantations are really no different from the tactics of today's Fair Trade movement. Everyone must contribute to the common good by seemingly small local actions. In that political spirit, an archivist is also called to be an advocate. Not just about what is in one's own collections, and therefore one's direct responsibilities, but to look after other items which may be in danger of becoming homeless and if they survive, exist outside of anyone's custodial care as orphans. In this way not all new skills are technologically related, some may be more akin to social work.

Flinn says that in order for today's archivist to take this responsibility seriously, he or she

63 Cox, R, p. 33

64 Cox, R, p. 10

65 Flinn, A., p.110.

must take an active role in the process of collecting and constructing archival heritage. That relying on passive accumulation or serendipity is unsustainable.⁶⁶ Archivists already do this to a certain extent. While we do not accession material outside the scope of our collection policy or accept material we have no capacity to care for, we do make recommendations to would-be donors on other possible homes for their collections, even if our own institutions cannot take them. What we do not know off-hand, we can often find out from our colleagues. The competitive nature of acquisitions is evolving into a more collaborative phase as resources in general become scarce. This shift in attitudes and priorities is probably in the best interest of the material, the archives and the users, over the long-term, generating the need for creative, flexible thinking necessary for the profession to thrive in the 21st century.⁶⁷ It also requires looking to do a little bit more than just what can benefit an individual institution, or one's own region.

In the article, *Re-imag (in) ing the Past*, Dodge points out the tremendous responsibility that archivists undertake before historians ever get their hands on records.

It is the archivist who decides what is to be acquired, and once acquired, what is to be permanently preserved. It is the archivist who decides how to organize and arrange a collection of documents. It is the archivist who decides how to describe the materials in their holdings...The archivist decides which documents or photographs to mount on a website thus making them available to an entirely new audience.⁶⁸

She goes on to state that the archive is a site of contested power and that archivists have a tremendous amount of power when it comes to shaping social memory. This sentiment is also shared by Mark Greene in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in August 2008. He says that archivists have power: the power to promote democracy by holding governments accountable to their people. Additionally this isn't just a power over the past, but also a power in the present and over the

66 Flinn, A., p.110

67 Flinn, A., p. 126.

68 Dodge, B., p.349

future. But often, archivists chose not to use their power.⁶⁹

The online digital world provides numerous opportunities for the archival profession—opportunities that professionals should take or make for themselves. Taking responsibility seriously requires taking an active role in the process of collecting and constructing the archival heritage. “In practice this means archivists intervening pro-actively within a national and perhaps international framework to identify and support the preservation of contemporary collections for future use.”⁷⁰

Archivists have relevant, transferable skills in the digital age: the ability to understand historical narratives told by collections; the ability to make management decisions with foresight, the skills needed to plan for the long-term—the really long, long-term. While a research group under the auspices of the Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past at the University of York⁷¹ seeks to determine the effectiveness of the 1807 commemorations with other criteria, as someone concerned with records I would strongly recommend putting an archivist or records manager in at the strategic level for coordinating the type of nationwide remembering characterized by this bicentenary. While it is clear from the BSTL collection that archivists did much work on the ground, I was struck by a telling comment made by a DCMS (Department for Culture Media and Sport) official at the 2007 Museum Association Conference in Liverpool. He said that government was surprised by how much the archives sector had participated in the bicentenary events. That archivists have an interest in wide use of historical documents should not really be a surprise. This off-hand remark, however, suggests lack of understanding in the role of archivists, and therefore underutilization of their skills. I wondered what could have been accomplished if policy advisors at higher levels had consulted early on with people who specialised in community archives or in digital preservation or with knowledge of both. At the very least, more websites could have been captured over a longer period of time and reflective of more groups who had something to say about alternative histories and where to find

69 Green, M. <http://www.archivists.org/governance/presidential/GreeneAddressAug08.pdf>

70 Flinn, A., p. 110.

71 1807 Commemorated. <http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/index.html>

them.

When I interviewed Rommi Smith, Parliamentary Writer in Residence, I asked her why she took this role. She said it was an honour; that the anniversary was personally important for her as a woman of dual heritage [Nigerian and English] but also, she wanted a chance to contribute to, and therefore influence, how the the Transatlantic Slave Trade is taught in the UK curriculum.

When Smith teaches, she doesn't start with slavery. First she talks about names. She asks students to share the story of how they were named; where their names are from and what their names mean. In this process they reflect on their own familial ties, often involving their carers, or parents or other relatives in conversations. In subsequent exercises their names are taken from them. Discussions then ensue on whether it is possible to or acceptable to live with a new, imposed identity.

“One of my concerns is how this topic is taught in the wrong hands. African history did not start and end with slavery. There is a wider history of Africa, which is important for students to be aware of...Within African cultures names can signify Tribe, place in the familial line, parents' or communities' feelings about your birth. It's important to convey that rich heritage in a way that means something to each child individually, not as some clinical abstraction,” Smith said.

I undertook this project because I also wanted to contribute to, and therefore influence, what is saved as part of the archival record. The nature of the collection and professional interest compelled me. Most major world events happen outside the US, but most of what is being collected and arranged digitally, begins and ends there. As a world citizen, I find this alarming. Over-focusing on any country, makes the digital record of world history in the 21st century less accurate, less complete, and less democratic. The 2008 presidential elections show that the United States is facing its ghosts of racism past and present, and hope is given by president-elect Barack Obama's speech addressing issues of mutual prejudice within mainstream and minority communities, and calling for mature discussions on it. But it is important to see race and identity issues outside of the US prism, which is tinged by its own historically unique context. Future generations need records of how any

country views itself, in both mainstream and minority cultures, and how each country deals with the complexity within its own society. The digital legacy of this topic is also invaluable. While at the moment it is being held on American servers, the perspective of all the websites is uniquely British.

It is my hope that the BSTL collection provides enough scope for future scholarship for those wishing to compare these websites with other countries reflecting on similar topics. I see a thread of parallel discussions in this project. One is about turning the common understanding Slave Trade and colonialism on its head. The other seeks to broaden understanding of archival practice with an eye on new technology.

While the idea of using the 2007 Act as a memorial may have been heavily criticized, I think it was an imperfect but valuable exercise to explore timely issues. Important resources were generated because of it. It also provided case studies for how to successfully (and unsuccessfully) work with communities. The 1807 Parliamentary Act was highly flawed, but had value as well. I do have grave doubts as to whether the programmatic, one year – two year structure completely achieved what government intended, which was a well-intentioned attempt to create social cohesion. However, if the anniversary was used as a catalyst for a new programme or service, rather than an activity timeframe as previously mentioned, something new started during the bicentenary can be a long-term success.

“One advantage of the commemorations,” said Carl Hylton of the Leeds Bi-Centenary Transformation Project, “Was that groups who never talked to each other now had a reason to. The University of Leeds, for instance, has some contact with local Leeds community groups, but they were more in touch with international groups working directly in Africa than us before [the 2007 events].”⁷²

Anti-Slavery International managed to be a link between public, government, and community groups. This UK-based charity, founded in 1839 by the generation of British abolitionists after the

⁷² General discussion in Recovered Histories Seminar

1807 era, also managed to be a link between past and present forms of slavery, making the topic relevant to today's audiences. Acknowledged as a *de facto* expert in topic, the organization produced several moving programmes, educational resources and exhibitions, and after 2007 organized workshops to discuss lessons learned, and ways of maintaining the links Hylton refers to above. Anti-Slavery International managed to be the agent of inclusiveness in a way the UK government could not be because of its historical involvement with slave trading; the sins of which the 1807, 1833, 1838 Parliamentary Acts and the 2007 commemorations do not easily wash away.

Conclusion

It is a mistake to think that we live "after" those who came before us. We live with them on a historical continuum that links our behaviours to theirs and allows us to learn from them.

- Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace ⁷³

Some anniversaries carry their own momentum. BSTL is significant on different levels. On one hand, it provides the world with a snapshot of technology in the early 21st century; on the other hand, the ubiquity of so many sites on this topic reveals that the British sense of identity is profoundly affected by its participation in this brutal, inhumane and lucrative business. The British Slave Trade Legacies collection is subtitled "Technology Intersecting Culture" because it records use of internet technology as the communication medium to examine slavery's global impact as well as how participation in the trade affected local communities past and present. It is our responsibility as archivists to provide a means for future generations to access historical sources by preserve important collections when we see them; regardless of the medium, or the problematic nature of medium and its content.

73 Kowaleski-Wallace, E. p. 208

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