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# Our Marathon: The Role of Graduate Student and Library Labor in Making the Boston Bombing Digital Archive

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## ***Our Marathon: The Role of Graduate Student and Library Labor In Making The Boston Bombing Digital Archive***

By Jim McGrath (Brown University) and Alicia Peaker (Bryn Mawr College)

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This chapter will describe the institutional origins and collaborative dimensions of *Our Marathon: The Boston Bombing Digital Archive*, a community project hosted by Northeastern University. *Our Marathon* is a crowdsourced digital humanities initiative that collected stories, photos, oral histories, social media, and other content related to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings and their aftermath [1]. While *Our Marathon's* core project team was primarily made up of graduate students and faculty members from Northeastern's English Department, its success was dependent on collaborations across and beyond campus. Northeastern University librarians and archivists shared best practices for gathering, contextualizing, and preserving the project's digital assets, and Boston-area public librarians and city archivists helped the team stage public events across the city and engage with audiences in several Boston and New England neighborhoods.

In the following pages *Our Marathon's* Project Co-Directors will highlight some of the lessons learned from these collaborations. We hope that others finding themselves interested in or inevitably taken far afield from more traditional forms of academic labor might be inspired to take on similar projects. Working on *Our*

*Marathon* taught us how to foster productive relationships beyond our department's resources and made us aware of the challenges involved in creating and maintaining public-facing digital humanities projects in a university setting. Specifically, we argue that collaborative initiatives between faculty, students, librarians, archivists, and community partners are places where the benefits and values of digital humanities labor often come into conflict with institutional conventions and procedures.

In addition to providing a description of *Our Marathon's* beginnings and an overview of our digital and in-person crowdsourcing initiatives, we will focus on three particular kinds of labor essential to the project: the labor of graduate students, librarians, and community partnerships. While *Our Marathon* originated in the institutional context of an English department and the project's labor often conflicted, challenged, and subverted ideas about scholarly engagement and knowledge production, we hope that our observations productively engage a wider range of practitioners, including undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, archivists, administrators, and community partners, among others. We imagine our discussion of *Our Marathon* as a kind of case study highlighting the time, labor, and resource commitments needed to successfully complete collaborative, public-facing digital humanities. While we faced difficulties and challenges, we also document here the benefits of investing in collaborative, interdisciplinary, and ethical labor practices on digital humanities projects.

## Project History

*Our Marathon* began in April 2013, when two Northeastern University English faculty members, Ryan Cordell and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, received seed funding from the College of Social Sciences and the Humanities to create a digital space where users could read and share reflections on the recent traumatic events. With this money, Cordell and Dillon hired a team of five graduate student researchers from Northeastern's English and History departments, and these individuals worked with faculty to create and begin populating the digital archive over the summer of 2013. Cordell and Dillon were very active in various parts of the project's initial development: securing initial project funds, negotiating media partnerships with WBUR, WCVB, and *The Boston Globe's* GlobeLab (among others), and, in the case of Cordell, working with developers and project team members to build a customized project site in Omeka. *Our Marathon* also employed oral historians and work-study students and benefited from an arrangement with Northeastern's Archives and Special Collections to host project interns from Simmons College's MSLIS program. Eventually, Cordell's and Dillon's professional obligations beyond this collaboration led them to delegate control of the project's trajectory, in the fall of 2013, to McGrath and Peaker, who became Project Co-Directors.<sup>1</sup>

Omeka provided *Our Marathon* with a digital mechanism to crowdsource and curate digital materials, but the project team, under McGrath and Peaker, quickly

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<sup>1</sup> Kristi Girdharry, a doctoral candidate in English, stayed on the project as its Oral History Project Manager, and Dave DeCamp, a doctoral candidate in History, remained on the project as its Technical Lead. Elizabeth Hopwood, a doctoral candidate in English, worked on the project in the summer of 2013.

realized that community engagement efforts would need to extend beyond digital forms of outreach. Successful on-campus programming related to the six-month anniversary of the bombings in October 2013 led us to develop a “Share Your Story” campaign that brought the project and its representatives directly to communities across Boston and New England. From January to April 2014, we hosted 14 “Share Your Story” events across the greater Boston area in public libraries, university libraries, and at the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. For each event, a small team of volunteers and student workers brought suitcases full of donated and borrowed laptops. We set these laptops up in quiet rooms where community members could browse the *Our Marathon* site, ask questions, and share their stories. The project oral historians, Jayne Guberman and Joanna Shea O’Brien, frequently attended the “Share Your Story” events, recording audio and video interviews that complemented textual and photographic contributions.

Unlike many digital humanities projects, we employed both digital and in-person crowdsourcing methods of collection building. The solicitation of materials and the discussion of the potential value in sharing this content was frequently done with direct, person-to-person communication and other forms of outreach at select physical sites occupied by members of our project’s intended audiences.<sup>2</sup> Our motivations in building collections through crowdsourcing were driven by our belief in the intrinsic personal value of telling your own story, a value shared by the *September 11 Archive*, *History Harvest*, and *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of uses of crowdsourcing for digital humanities projects, see Peaker, “Crowdsourcing and Community Engagement.” *EDUCAUSE Review*. 50.6 (November/December 2015)

many other digital humanities projects. The phrase “No Story Too Small” became part of the project’s promotional materials, and it was frequently a valuable phrase we used to begin discussions about the value of local and recent history, such as personal reflections, social media content, and images from camera phones.

At our “Share Your Story” events, we relied heavily on the expertise of public librarians’ knowledge of their community members’ greatest needs and adapted local site visits accordingly. At one site we brought in professional counselors, at another we borrowed a flatbed scanner for digitizing photographs, at another we introduced the project via a public access television series, at another we helped to bring together a panel of survivors and first responders who shared their experiences.

In addition to collections being built through face-to-face community crowdsourcing, a collaboration between the Boston City Archives, Iron Mountain, and *Our Marathon* resulted in the project’s largest acquisition of digital objects related to these events in the spring of 2014. The Boston City Archives preserved perishable materials from a popular temporary memorial constructed at Copley Square and inventoried letters mailed to the City of Boston from across the globe. Iron Mountain digitized these items, and *Our Marathon* hosted them online. Graduate student staff added descriptive metadata to increase their accessibility. Like Middleton and York [2] we found that humanities graduate students, though largely new to the concept of metadata, brought invaluable research experience and writing skills to the project. Graduate students employed by the project became involved in work related to metadata creation, event planning, and project

management. *Our Marathon* arguably enabled these students to imagine new professional and scholarly possibilities.

## Graduate Student Labor

Cordell and Dillon frequently used public forums like blog posts, media interviews, and conference panels to highlight the labor of graduate students. In an April 2014 blog post for *ProfHacker* reflecting on the project and its accomplishments, Cordell notes that the “real story” of *Our Marathon* is “further down the staff page” and that his and Dillon’s label as the project’s “Primary Investigators” is “an artifact of institutional structures” [3]. Media coverage frequently muted or altogether omitted these contributions: for example, a *Chronicle of Higher Education* feature on the project mentions an anonymous, amorphous team of “graduate students” and fails to identify McGrath in the image of him that accompanies the article [4]. Many, if not most, academic citations of digital humanities projects similarly omit significant graduate student labor. Instead, they more closely resemble ubiquitous monographic citations through which humanities faculty members achieve tenure.

The “institutional structures” referenced by Cordell and the narratives constructed by media coverage and bibliographic records all variously obscure forms of labor that fall outside the realm of conventional academic products. In our networked age of attention, the privileging of certain collaborators at the expense of others creates gaps in professional profiles that circulate on the web. Collaborative digital projects can and should take steps to document the various forms of labor and the wide range of contributors shaping a project: *Our Marathon* has an

extensive “About” page that names and describes project collaborators, and we encouraged project members to help us designate their roles with job titles that held value to future employers. They could document these roles on resumes and professional web presences. But institutional web sites, academic journals, and media outlets are more visible and heavily-trafficked sites than the spaces where project laborers control project narratives.

We highlight these concerns about attribution to document some of the ways in which collaborative digital humanities projects surface issues around equitable and appropriate distributions of labor and credit. While the courts have tended to protect faculty’s intellectual property in regards to their scholarship, the same cannot be said for library staff or student employees [5]. Individual digital humanities projects have sought to redress this inequality by explicitly raising issues of intellectual property and attribution at the beginning of a project [6]. Many are working to make crediting all collaborators on digital humanities projects a field standard—whether through citation, acknowledgements, or some other mechanism (see, for example the “Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” and a “Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights”) [7,8] . But as long as institutional intellectual property policies favor traditional forms of scholarship produced by people in traditional roles, equitable attribution and recognition cannot exist.

Both authors received graduate assistantships for their work that underestimated the amount of time each would contribute to the project. In part the fault lies with us—through this project we learned intimately and painfully the effects of “scope creep.” We learned to set boundaries on professional work.



Academic workplaces — especially in the professoriate — model and forward (whether explicitly or implicitly) an “always-on” attitude toward work. The pressures created by this attitude resulted in nearly all of the core team regularly exceeding their paid 26 hours per week, often by running events held on weekends and evenings that better accommodated the schedules of our community members. Though we didn’t have a name for it, we developed an “ethics of care” [9] toward each other that countered at least some portion of the “always-on” attitude, acknowledging the emotional toll of creating a “trauma archive,” encouraging breaks during and between events, and shifting workloads according to individual needs. In April of 2014, for example, Peaker was able to defend her dissertation because McGrath and others shouldered much of the work of the community events she had been directing.

## Libraries & Labor

While we have primarily focused our attention on the impact of collaborative labor on ideas, expectations, and forms of compensation for graduate student labor, we also acknowledge the ways in which collaborative, public-facing digital initiatives highlight similar labor issues in academic libraries. While *Our Marathon’s* website documents the support received from library metadata specialists, archivists, and graduate students in Simmons College’s MLIS program, it is telling that there were no librarians or archivists on the project’s core staff at its foundation. As one of Northeastern’s first public-facing, community-oriented digital humanities projects, *Our Marathon* did not have obvious on-campus models for how to productively collaborate across or beyond campus, let alone models for

acknowledging those contributions. *Our Marathon* largely operated without the benefit of established institutional infrastructure for digital humanities projects. It preceded the creation of Northeastern's Digital Scholarship Group (DSG), a unit of the library that shapes faculty and student-led digital projects. And yet regular consultations with metadata specialists, library technologists, and archivists, many of whom now have formal relationships with the DSG, shaped the project in innumerable ways. While library staff contributed in many ways large and small, we highlight three collaborations that had major impacts on the project's success, explicitly calling attention to labor that might otherwise remain invisible.

One of the first places project team members turned to for collaboration was the Northeastern University library. Specifically, Ernesto Valencia and Karl Yee in Library Technology Services were essential in installing the project's Omeka instance on library servers and providing project members with access to and some autonomy over server space, which allowed us to quickly and efficiently add plugins and upload media files. Reliable server access, whether it is available to project team members or via a reliable conduit through the library or IT, is particularly vital when working on a developing digital humanities project. We have found that establishing and documenting protocols that acknowledge the aims and commitments of library staff as well as the project minimizes miscommunications and frustrations and demonstrates a shared respect for all collaborators' time and work. This is particularly important in libraries that use a service model that may set up staff members as "support" staff, available at the whim of faculty members and students.

Once Omeka was in place on secure servers and accessible to project team members, *Our Marathon* next needed to determine its metadata needs. After initial conversations with library metadata specialists Dan Jergovic and Sarah Sweeney, the project began to determine which Dublin Core fields were most vital to project aims and which stylistic conventions to adopt when internally creating or refining metadata. This work was greatly enhanced by the addition of Andrew Begley, a Simmons College graduate student pursuing an MS in Library and Information Science. After assessing the need for a formal set of metadata conventions, the library was able to bring on Begley as an intern dedicated to this dimension of the project.

Work on metadata stretched across months and involved regular consultations at the library, drafting and revising standards, and finally implementing these protocols. Later in the project's lifespan, when *Our Marathon* acquired thousands of items from the Boston City Archives in need of metadata creation and cleanup, this customized set of metadata guidelines proved essential in quickly establishing a workflow with graduate students hired to complete this work in the summer of 2014.

Finally, our collaborations with Northeastern's Archives and Special Collections ensured the longevity of a project that might otherwise be at risk of languishing after the graduation of its graduate student Co-Directors. Early in the life cycle of the project, Giordana Mecagni, the recently hired Head of Archives and Special Collections, committed to hosting and preserving *Our Marathon's* digital assets in perpetuity. While project materials are currently published and organized

in Omeka, they will eventually migrate to Northeastern's Digital Repository Service. This migration will ensure materials are preserved and accessible, and their residence within the DRS, which also has an API available, opens up the possibilities for researchers interested in using this material. Additionally, there are aspirational long-term goals to have content accessible via the Digital Commonwealth and Digital Public Library of America portals, allowing users of these sites to discover our content and connect it more directly to similar digital objects available through these aggregators and their attendant interfaces.

More generally, Northeastern and Northeastern Library's commitments to creating, staffing, and supporting the DSG suggest that the college both values the visibility of community work like *Our Marathon* and understands that such large-scale public scholarship requires specialized labor and technical support that extends beyond the resources of an academic department. Like similar digital scholarship centers, Northeastern's Digital Scholarship Group provides a visible framework and *modus operandi* for digital scholarship. The group provides a context that enables its directors and staff to clearly argue for the value of particular forms of collaboration and, perhaps more importantly, for room within academic contexts for library staff to pursue their own research agendas and endeavors.

## The Bigger Picture: *Boston Better* and Better Models of Collaboration

Our varied collaborations with media partners, Boston Public Library staff, and Northeastern University curators and student designers were some of the more

exciting and generative elements of the project, but they also frequently reminded us of the differences between our project and other forms of labor, academic and otherwise. We witnessed our collaborators in other fields facing similar challenges when it came to participating in interdisciplinary, cross-institutional, community-oriented, public-facing work. They were navigating their own professional challenges and identifying the particular ways in which these projects raised questions about their own forms of labor, their own perceptions of audience, their own institutional role in relation to the Boston community, and their own conventions of collaboration and knowledge production. But all of these various groups, be they universities, public libraries, museums, or gallery spaces, were united in their desire to acknowledge the impact of the marathon bombings on their homes.

*Boston Better* was a collective formed by representatives of the many marathon-related projects in Boston and New England. Participating in *Boston Better* was a useful way of balancing the individual aims, needs, and workflows of individual cultural heritage organizations with a desire to collaborate and reflect on our varied responses to the bombings. Created by Rainey Tisdale, then an independent museum curator, *Boston Better* was an attempt “to start a conversation” with Boston’s various communities: “What helps you heal? What helps the city heal?” [10]. United in its commitment to the healing process and the incorporation of educational, museum, library, and other institutional spaces to enable these conversations, *Boston Better* rejected a more traditional and hierarchical model of knowledge-making in favor of a more varied approach,

encouraging partners to participate in ways that made the most sense to their local collectives of experts and practitioners. For example, the Museum of Fine Arts displayed flags made by quilters from across the country and the world in its “To Boston With Love” exhibit, while the Community Church of Boston held a debate about the meaning of (and the limitations of) the popular “Boston Strong” slogan. There were also opportunities for collaboration: *Our Marathon’s* “Share Your Story” events were mostly held in conjunction with groups supporting *Boston Better*, and a group of curators and archivists from the general pool of collaborators joined forces under the supervision of Tisdale to stage the “Dear Boston: Messages from the Marathon Memorial” exhibition at the Boston Public Library in April of 2014.

While some institutions had louder voices and larger budgets for their projects, *Boston Better* was an attempt to make sure that local cultural heritage groups were not drowned out or overshadowed by groups with deeper pockets and bigger labor pools. Its desire to encourage Bostonians “to summon our best selves, individually and collectively” may be a worthwhile reminder to future projects with highly collaborative dimensions.

## Conclusion

In 2010 Matt Kirschenbaum wrote “What is Digital Humanities and What’s it Doing in English Departments?” for the Association for Departments of English (ADE) bulletin, in which he argued that “digital humanities has accumulated a robust professional apparatus that is probably more rooted in English than any other departmental home” [11]. While there were (and there continue to be)

skeptics and vocal opponents of digital humanities methodologies in these institutional spaces, his point was that many English departments had already begun to embrace, cultivate, or otherwise contend with the impact of digital tools and contexts on literary studies. But in the case of *Our Marathon*, many of the questions we received about the institutional context of our project stemmed less from an aversion to digital humanities work and had more to do with the project's self-identification as an archival initiative and its investments in the curation and preservation of particular kinds of material culture: items left at public memorials, social media activity, and first-person narratives, all of them related to a national tragedy. Why is an English major behaving like an archivist, a metadata specialist, a project manager? What more could they know about the long histories of curation, preservation, and community engagement, topics that may not be covered in English department coursework? How might English departments anticipate student and community investments in initiatives like *Our Marathon* and be prepared to support such work?

The authors of this article believe that these are questions worth asking, especially when planning and developing future digital humanities projects with collaborative dimensions. Both authors have moved on to careers where they now institutionally reside outside of English departments: McGrath is a postdoctoral fellow in Digital Public Humanities at Brown University (in a Public Humanities program that resides in the university's American Studies department), and Peaker is a Digital Scholarship Specialist working for Library and Information Technology Services at Bryn Mawr College. We ended up in our current positions in part

because we were in search of academic contexts where we could continue inhabiting the roles of project managers, public humanities practitioners, curators, and digital consultants. We value positions where collaborations are not always driven by singular faculty or departmental research agendas. We privilege work where the aims and methodologies begin with direct forms of engagement with various publics in digital spaces, not disseminations or remediations of traditional literary scholarship. And we continue to work within and beyond investments in literary studies, focusing on broader definitions of digital storytelling and more interdisciplinary forms of digital curation and publication.

*Our Marathon* institutionally resides under the purview of Northeastern's Digital Scholarship Group and Archives and Special Collections, now that active collection and curation work on the project has concluded and long-term preservation work has begun. McGrath and other collaborators remain in touch about potential opportunities to re-open the project around the five and ten-year anniversaries of these events. More recently, the project's lessons have been useful in initiatives like the gathering of Boston-area protest signs used at the 2017 Women's March on Boston Common: faculty project organizers (in Northeastern's College of Art and Media Design) and library staff have variously cited *Our Marathon* work as a useful context when deciding how to approach the curation and preservation of these materials.

Creating and fostering an environment where librarians, archivists, graduate students, faculty members, community representatives, and desired project audiences have a voice in the proceedings and can clearly see their expertise and



backgrounds acknowledged is difficult but essential in this work. Digital projects may seem sleek and singular on the surface, but beneath them reside many forms of labor, collaboration, and experience. This variety can and should be more visible.

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