"I WANTED TO BE PART OF NOT FORGETTING": DIGITAL MEDIATION AND MEMORY IN POST-PANDEMIC TIMES

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Introduction

Online efforts to collect and preserve memories of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic point to not only the proliferation and accessibility of 'digital memory' (Hoskins, 2009), but also the nuanced role digital memory has taken on in the lives of individual internet users. Scholars like Assmann (2008) have suggested that this digital *bent* to memory has destabilized top-down approaches to memory that previously relied on material artifacts and tangible archives, making the average person a critical component in the making of memory (Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier, 2020, p.136). Yet, while there has been significant scholarly interest in the role of digital technologies in mediating and archiving the Covid-19 crisis (Acker and Flamm, 2021; Zumthurm and Krebs, 2022) and interest in the scope, makeup, and mandates that instigated the digital pandemic collections (Kim et al., 2022; Kole de Peralta, 2021), there has been less of a focus on how these digital pandemic archives may facilitate creative memory practices in future public Covid-19 commemoration efforts.

Thus this paper asks: how can digital pandemic archives function as critical repositories for memory institutions and consequently lead to a better understanding of the role of digital technologies in mediating memory during future crisis events? To investigate this question, this paper utilizes focus groups to understand how adults from Philadelphia responded to and negotiated between the personal and collective toll of the pandemic after listening to a selection of oral pandemic stories from *Corona Diaries,* a digital crowd-sourced, open-access archive launched in March 2020 (Corona Diaries, 2020).

Method and Methodology

Between March 2021 and July 2022, I collected 153 U.S. based audio diaries from *Corona Diaries*, though due to the fluid temporal nature of the Covid-19 crisis, that number of audio diaries in the digital collection has since risen. Diaries from Puerto Rico are included in that original sample of 153, and it is worth noting that an overwhelming majority of the diaries emerged from the East Coast and the Northeast specifically,

relative to the rest of the country, perhaps because the platform emerged from a collaboration between fellows at Harvard Neiman Foundation and the MIT Media Lab (Carlson, 2020). Two rounds of open and axial inductive coding, closely modeled after Corbin and Straus's (1990) evaluative criteria for qualitative coding resulted in four categories of diaries from the sample. The first three categories of audio diaries revolved around isolation, community, and uncertainty, while the final category of diaries bracketed how the affect imbued in some voices led to a more expansive notion of connection. These categories were not discreet; in many instances, they overlapped. Some diary entries fall into multiple categories, and some were contained in just one. From these four categories, I used purposive sampling to select 10, two-to-seven-minute audio diaries, that reflected one or more of the aforementioned categories.

After the coding and selection process, participants were recruited for three focus groups, using a mix of local ads, snowball sampling, and classroom recruitment. In total, 22 participants were recruited, and each person was given a 50$ gift card for their participation. During each ninety-minute focus group session, the ten selected audio stories from *Corona Diaries* were played in a closed setting for a group of 6-9 adults from the metropolitan area between 2023 and 2024. To guide their listening experience, prior to the start of the session, participants were asked to pay particular attention to audio stories that resonated with them, audio stories that they found provocative or unsettling, and the changes they experienced in their emotional states as they listened. I also encouraged participants to engage with all the sounds they heard in the audio stories, the voices of the archives' respondents and all that entailed: the tremors, the pauses, and the deep sighs that punctuated the recordings as well as the interruptions and background noises. The point of this was to encourage the participants to think about the entirety of the recording, and not just the spoken content. Participants were also asked to write down their initial thoughts after each audio story was played once. After the ten audio stories were played, the participants engaged in a discussion about the listening experience. All three focus groups were recorded, and the notes taken by each participant were collected at the end. The recorded discussions were transcribed using zoom software, manually edited to aid comprehension, then thematically analyzed along with the collected notes by the researcher.

I envision my method as a three-way asynchronous dialogue between the archive, the respondents, and me—the researcher. By 'dialogue,' I mean a discursive space in which the meaning and the impact of these audio diaries are negotiated with openly and frankly from different standpoints (see Clifford, 1983; Back, 2007). This multipronged approach is in part due to my insistence on adopting a post-critique (Felski, 2015; Felski and Anker, 2017) orientation for this conference paper. In the latter's work, they urge researchers to explore "new models and practices […] that are less beholden to suspicion and skepticism [and] more willing to avow the creative, innovative, world-making aspects" of scholarship (Felski and Anker, 2017, p.20). This closely aligns with the assertion that any phenomenon under study "pulls the researcher with it, so that the phenomenon and the researcher unfold, co-produce and emerge with the results *together*" (Østern et al., 2021). This multipronged approach subtly departs from Davis's (2016) vision of focus groups as a gateway to being immersed in peoples' perspectives by "approximating an understanding of communication in vivo [while] in a laboratory

setting," (p.2). I will demonstrate instead, through my discussion and presentation, that research can be bolstered through an acknowledgement of the ways a researcher's presence, participation, and questions shape the study discussion (Rakow, 2011, p.422).

Findings

Findings suggest that engaging with the audio stories from the digital archive, *Corona Diaries,* helped participants process their own pandemic experiences and reflect on the politicization of the pandemic. The content of the recordings also triggered new epiphanies among participants, helping them recalibrate their relationship to illness, loss, and memory. However, the personal dimensions of the digital archive at times fostered, and at other times challenged participants' ability to connect to the stories and digital content, leading to competing opinions about the utility of digital archives in mediating future crises.

In showcasing how digital archives can be used to facilitate creative memory practices, I argue that the role of digital pandemic archives in post-pandemic times can move us away from thinking about archives as 'institutions' of memory and towards an understanding of archives as 'tools' of memory (Appadurai, 2003), particularly when we engage with them as relational, discursive, and dialogical instruments. I also argue for thinking about crisis moments as conjunctural openings or ruptures (Hall, 2013) for researchers to work with fresh, collaborative, and creative methods for understanding the individual and collective experiences of a given crisis beyond its unfolding. As memory culture becomes increasingly digitized and globalized, meaningful ways of concretizing local groups' connections to collective traumatic crises should be prioritized within commemoration practices.

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