

New Media, Teaching and Learning, Seminar #683
Chair: Ryan Kelsey, Professor Frank Moretti

April 26, 2006
Rapporteur: Veena Vasudevan

Harlem Digital Archive
Presenters: John Frankfurt, Mark Phillipson, Peter B. Kaufman

The Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) gave an interactive seminar on the Harlem Digital Archive project. Currently, the Harlem Digital Archive is a website that houses links to several digital projects created by CCNMTL that center on Harlem's history, culture and contemporary politics. Two educational technologists, John Frankfurt and Mark Phillipson, along with CCNMTL associate director, Peter Kaufman, explained the potential avenues for expansion around the Harlem Digital Archive and the implications of such a project. In particular, the team explained their vision to have the Harlem Digital Archive serve as a portal to an extensive collection of digital assets related to Harlem.

Mark Phillipson began by discussing previous digital projects created by CCNMTL that touch upon Harlem's history including the Multimedia Study Environment on the life of Malcolm X, the e-seminar on W.E.B. DuBois' sociocultural literature and the wiki that uses Langston Hughes' poetry to explore black writing since the Harlem Renaissance. He spoke about how CCNMTL and several other stakeholders have identified a need to reactivate and repurpose existing digital content, like these aforementioned projects. Following this introduction, Phillipson showed a brief CCNMTL-produced video that publicly introduced the idea of the Harlem Digital Archive.

The video was interspersed with short interview clips with professors and librarians from Columbia University discussing the importance of documenting Harlem's heritage and memory. In addition, the promotional video also touched on important historical moments in Harlem's history and featured some of the existing digital projects created by CCNMTL in collaboration with various community partners. The video continually emphasized the expanse of Columbia's library. The extensive collection includes research and information about Harlem including literature, film, photography and print media. Columbia's head librarian, Jim Neal, noted that having a digital archive of all available media for widespread use would be a very appropriate way to sustain the history and culture of Harlem. Moreover, it would prove to be an excellent resource for scholars, students, teachers, artists, filmmakers and anyone else that wanted to experience Harlem via multimedia. This is especially true since Columbia has access to some rare assets that have been digitized, like photographs, old newspapers and magazines. Professor Manning Marable noted "we cannot tell the history of America without telling the story of Harlem."

Phillipson echoed the sentiment in the video by stating that the right digital environment could make existing assets reusable and discoverable by the masses. He explained that the Harlem Digital Archive would be a living archive that would constantly change based on contributions from both the Columbia and Harlem communities. He continued, explaining that the long-term goal is to make the archive accessible to anyone interested in the subject matter including teachers, filmmakers and others. By allowing authorities on Harlem to contribute, regardless of their location or affiliation, Phillipson argued that the archive would continue to evolve and maintain the most current information on Harlem.

Phillipson explained that coalescing existing digital projects, library resources and other media in a central location would result in the construction of the Harlem Digital Archive. For example, the archive might include a digitized paper document or photograph that the library might have found as a way to build up their historical collections. The archive would be multifaceted by giving a range of users access to search digital assets as well as contribute relevant resources to the archive. Phillipson remarked how this group could range from a fifth-grade student writing an essay about Malcolm X to a university professor linking a paper written for an international journal on the same subject.

He then posed several questions to the audience. He asked, “How would such an environment be made available outside of the Columbia community? How can we facilitate the use of assets outside of the archive? How could we promote a culture of use? How can we showcase assignments and projects as available models for new visions?”

John Frankfurt and Mark Phillipson then talked through several user scenarios that highlight the complexities of gearing the archive to a wide range of users. They first focused on University faculty members and explained that the archive would need to be a place where professors could create and evaluate assignments. Next, they discussed how the archive could be a valuable resource for graduate students and researchers because it could provide links to documents, oral histories and other media that might be useful in dissertations or other projects. Then, they considered educators beyond Columbia’s walls including kindergarten to 12th grade teachers and tried to identify how this group would both access and utilize the materials in a more formal classroom setting. Next, they analyzed the potential uses of the archive for a documentary filmmaker. They explained how the archive would allow filmmakers to discover and contribute footage. The final user scenario was a Harlem community member. The presenters asserted that the contribution and support from Harlem community members was very important to the success of the archive. However, how best to engage community members in the verification and production of assets is still an open issue.

Following this, Frankfurt and Phillipson walked through a demo of the Harlem Digital Archive project. They characterized the current demo as an entryway to various digital projects, library collections, events and personal user pages. The demo had several features that allowed each user experience to be unique. For example, they demonstrated

how a professor can create an assignment by collecting various pieces relevant media like video clips, images of newspaper clippings and sample manuscripts. On the other hand, students can view a dashboard page that lists all of their assignments in the archive. They can then navigate to a particular assignment and create narratives to respond to the professor's questions.

The demonstration also emphasized the ease of access to information starting with the search function. For example, when Malcolm X was typed into the search window, several digital assets related to the search topic were returned, including projects, collections, events, user pages and an interactive map with historical links. The robust nature of this search will allow users access to multiple assets by typing in one or two key words or phrases. Users are also able to post information about events that might be related to Harlem. Finally, users can provide feedback on digital assets by way of comments and participate in ranking them.

Peter Kaufman concluded the session by explaining how the Harlem Digital Archive prototype is a result of two years of teaching, learning and studying. He argued that people have significantly changed the way they access information as individuals and organizations, creating several ways to search and gather data. Moreover, an increasing number of people have access to tools for production. Kaufman stated that because tools for production are more available it would be easier to collect contributions for the digital archive. He made a charge to the audience that the production tools, proximity to Harlem, the access to an expanse of digital media are all at Columbia's fingertips. Therefore, creating such an archive would both benefit and contribute to the history and heritage of the Harlem community.

When the presentation concluded, the CCNMTL staff took questions about the project. One audience member asked if CCNMTL had been able to determine whether digital media produces better learning. Ryan Kelsey, CCNMTL's associate director for education and research mentioned that learning through digital media is very much related to how assignments or class materials are framed. He explained how an assignment using the same tools, like a video clip, can vary greatly. For instance, one professor asks a student to review a video clip and asks a student to find a particular behavior, versus another professor asking the class to analyze a segment and provide feedback.

Another audience member asked how the center would filter authoritative versus non-authoritative information, so that a fifth-grader's essay would not be ranked as highly as a published journal article. John Frankfurt responded that the team is thinking carefully of ways to first, organize assets and second, determine how users will access and rank information. Mark Phillipson responded that this issue poses a challenge because the archive would want to filter for high-quality content, but still allow room for discovery.

One speaker asked how users would be authenticated while maintaining the concept of separate spaces based on the type of user. Frankfurt responded that at this point there is not an established framework for how this will be handled, however, this is something

that is under consideration. Phillipson mentioned that CCNMTL does in fact have practice with complicated access, as they had to have a very customized authentication system for the Havel site, which was created last year. However, the archive does pose a new challenge because it potentially involves unauthenticated users that would not be affiliated to the University.

Finally, some audience members wanted to know how CCNMTL would engage the Harlem community and gather their support while also understanding that community members technically have ownership over Harlem material. Moreover, they wanted to know if this project might create conflict with similar resources. Phillipson responded that the rhetoric of giving and taking is not an accurate depiction of what the archive should represent. Instead, the archive is something that should transcend ownership but rather be about creating a source of information to preserve history, for those who are part of the community and for those who want to learn more about the community. Phillipson concluded stating that, “there is an increasing need to build this archive as Harlem is being so aggressively gentrified. A lot of what Harlem is and was will be lost in time, unless someone holds on to this information. This project has a sort of ethical purpose, by collecting these assets that are relevant to the community and preserving them.”