

Digital Collecting in Times of Crisis:
2018 LYRASIS Catalyst Fund recipient report

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The University of Virginia Library applied for a 2018 Catalyst Fund grant to help cultural institutions and communities of all sizes be better prepared for and able to implement digital collecting strategies during and after rapidly evolving emergencies and/or community crises (such as controversies, natural disasters and public emergencies). Digital photos, videos, and social media content are major components of these community experiences, and collecting them as well as other materials (posters, ephemera, traditional media reports, etc.) is important to documenting such pivotal events. While some tools exist that can help a library or archives gather information, a range of technical, legal, and infrastructure issues are involved that hamper the ability of an organization to move forward quickly.

This project had two parts:

- Gather information from the cultural community about current practices, policies, planning, and past experiences in emergency digital collecting initiatives
- Solve some of the issue around readily available technologies by adapting default themes and templates in the open source publishing platform Omeka

Part 1: The Survey

In order to gather information from the cultural community regarding current practices, experiences, and needs of institutions related to emergency digital collecting, we decided to create a survey. A preliminary survey was designed and released in the spring of 2018. We reached out to colleagues with experience in emergency digital collecting and, based on their feedback, refined the survey in the late spring. A final version of the survey was released in August and September 2019. We sent the 21-question survey out to listservs, slack channels, social media outlets and made two in-person requests for participation at meetings of the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History. The survey was open for six weeks and 78 libraries, library, archives, museums, historical society and independent scholars responded. Of those 78 respondents, 57% had experienced an event that required a rapid digital collecting response. And of those that had experienced an event, the vast majority, 70%, did not feel prepared to respond effectively. That's a staggering number and indicates that the cultural community has much work to do in order to effectively collect digital content related to emergencies and crises.

Survey Responses



Of those already experienced in such an event:



Some of the key takeaways from the survey include:

- Disasters and other opportunities for rapid collecting are a frequent occurrence. It's not a matter of if but when. If you haven't yet experienced one yet, you will, so you need to be prepared.
- We are not nearly as prepared as we want to be or ought to be. More training and proactive action is needed in order to effectively respond to such rapid collecting events.
- Reaching out to colleagues and community members can be an excellent way to get advice and support as well as build bridges and engage students and stakeholders.
- Building relationships with content creators should be prioritized before, during, and after events.
- Planning before a digital collecting emergency results in a more successful result. Pre-establishing infrastructure, tools, and workflows will make the collecting event go more smoothly.
- There is a human component to successful emergency collecting. Relationship building, networking, and building trust before, during, and after events are important elements of a successful emergency collecting plan.
- No one tool or workflow stood out as a solution that would meet all institutions' needs.
- There are a number of proactive activities that would help institutions respond better in the future, including the creation of guidelines, policies and workflows, as well as a focus on the human side of the response, through training, collaboration, and network building.

The original survey and detailed analysis can be found in the white paper, [*Digital Collecting for Events and Emergencies Survey Analysis*](https://doi.org/10.18130/v3-8p1n-5w09) (<https://doi.org/10.18130/v3-8p1n-5w09>).

The survey accomplished several things. We gathered some important statistics—specifically related to the frequency of events that require rapid collecting responses as well as the lack of preparedness by most institutions to efficiently respond. Many of the questions also provided honest and data rich free text responses elucidating the complexity behind the challenges of responding to collecting in times of crisis. The survey identified community needs, some of which could be filled with the second part of our grant, some of which will require significant additional investments of resources from individual institutions and the cultural community as a whole. We also confirmed what previous work in the area suggested: that there is a great interest from the community in this collecting in times of crisis. More than 90% of respondents indicated that they were interested in participating in future discussions/continuing education on this topic.

Moreover, while the survey emphasized that there was no one action an institution could take or a tool that they could use that would solve all the challenges surrounding emergency digital collecting, the data from the survey did provided an iterative framework for institutions who wish to improve their own level of preparedness and construct an infrastructure to support emergency digital collecting:

- Create a team with experts from within and outside your institution.
- Develop/adapt digital collecting policies and procedures so that your institution can easily determine what to document, as well as when and why.

- Identify tools needed to capture identified formats and advocate for funding if needed to acquire and maintain them.
- Network with community stakeholders before, during, and after events to gain trust, build collaborative relationships, and be aware of activities that might benefit from a quick collecting response.
- Study how others have responded to emergencies in their communities.
- Run training scenarios so that you can assess your level of preparedness and discuss ways to improve upon it before your next crisis hits. For one example, see Kara McClurken and Tom Clareson, “Emergency Collecting Tabletop Exercise,” 27 June 2018 <https://doi.org/10.18130/V3-VZ81-5947>. Or pick a current event to run through the workflow.
- Look for gaps and refine as needed.

The survey was not without its challenges. In an attempt to keep the survey a manageable number of questions, we failed to ask demographic questions related to institution type so we cannot determine if different types of institutions (either by cultural type or size) responded in different ways. Another, more significant failure in the quest for transparency was in the language we used to introduce the survey. Because we did not explicitly state that we would share the raw data, we are unable to release that information except in an aggregated analysis of the results. Also, while the free text answers provided essential insights, mapping the responses for analysis took significantly longer than anticipated, which meant that some of the analysis and the toolkit design were being done at the same time.

Part 2: Digital Collecting Toolkit/Custom Omeka theme and template

With data from the survey, we turned to the second part of the grant: attempting to solve some of the issues uncovered in the survey by adapting default themes and plugins in Omeka and to provide documentation to help less technically-adept users and institutions quickly respond when they experience an emergency collecting event. Although the survey did not reveal a single easy tool or workflow that would solve everyone’s needs, lack of documentation, training, and affordable tools definitely contributed to frustration and challenges among the respondents. By improving some current open source solutions with custom themes, templates and documentation, we hoped to better support institutions that need to quickly collect digital content after an emergency or tragic event.

There were several goals to this part of the project:

- Improve current site to serve as model template
- Virus scanning plug-in
- Build a toolkit with documentation on implementing an emergency response digital collecting strategy

Our [digital collecting site](#) runs on Omeka, an open source collections-based web publishing platform developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. The UVA Library regularly uses Omeka for collections, teaching and assisting in faculty research projects, and so when the need

arose to quickly set up a community collecting site for the August 11 & 12, 2017 “Unite the Right” rally and associated events, we chose the Omeka platform for our site. Due to the rapid nature of our rally site’s implementation, there were a number of things that required improvement. Our review determined a need for a more user-friendly and accessible site design, as well as an update to match the UVA Library’s online branding.

In redesigning the public face of our rally site, we created an Omeka theme that satisfied both the needs of the UVA Library and provided a template anyone can download and use on their own Omeka site. The Omeka theme we developed, [Charlottesville Rally Theme](#), is publicly available on Github, and once installed, can be configured directly from a user’s Omeka Admin Dashboard. The cville-rally-theme provides easy to use settings where users can adjust their public site’s color scheme, logos, and content without any coding skills required. Our rally site uses the Omeka plugin, Contributions, to collect digital items from community members, including photos, short videos, links, and documented stories. The cville-rally-theme also provides settings for the Contribution site pages, so users can quickly and easily include their own instructions and content to these public webpages, that would otherwise require coding knowledge to update. The cville-rally-theme was built with accessibility features in mind and can be accessed using a screen reader.

The updated Omeka theme has made it easy for our site administrators to edit site content and can be implemented at UVA for future community-based collecting, as well as anyone running an Omeka site. A limiting factor of our cville-rally-theme is that it can only be used on the Omeka Classic platform. Omeka also offers Omeka S, which has a module equivalent to the Contributions plugin for collecting community contributions. We hope in the future to develop a custom theme that can be used similarly for Omeka S users.

Our work on a malware scanning plugin for Omeka Classic uncovered some issues that makes it too difficult to develop and release a plugin at the moment. Specifically, after discussing the project with the Omeka Classic team, we learned that there is currently no efficient way, via a plugin hook, to reroute file uploads and forestall the creation of File records before files could pass a malware scan. The only current methods for achieving the result would be to stop the creation of an Item record entirely, but that proved too challenging to do while still maintaining a friendly and useful user experience. The Omeka team is very receptive to exploring possibilities for supporting this work, and our team plans to contribute patches for a future release of Omeka that would enable the development of a malware scanning plugin.

Our next goal was to develop an online toolkit, with easy to use documentation to help others set up a digital collecting site. The [Digital Collecting Toolkit](#) acts as repository for resources and tools that are useful in an emergency response digital collecting event. Currently it includes guides on setting up a community collection site using Omeka Classic, using our site as a template, and on using Documenting the Now’s tool, Twarc, for collecting and archiving twitter data. In addition to documentation on using these tools, we have also provided some basics on creating an emergency digital collecting plan/infrastructure that institutions, organizations, and individuals can use as a starting place for developing their own workflows and policies. Collecting digital items like photos and videos, and social media content from the public requires additional ethical considerations, and our toolkit provides a reading list that others can use to explore these issues.

One critical component that our toolkit provides is a template for a Terms of Service, developed with UVA General Counsel, that those contributing digital content on our site must agree to. Several respondents to our survey indicated that tracking down permissions after the fact was time-consuming and laborious, so we hope that by including these permissions in the term of service, we not only make it easier for institutions to preserve and provide access to the submitted content, but also to provide transparency regarding the potential for use of the content by those outside our institution. Our template can provide a starting place for others to review with their relevant legal parties. Informed consent can be an ethical issue faced in community digital collecting, and to make it easier for users to understand the legal terms, we also include a summary in simpler language that highlights the important points of the full terms. Our intention in this toolkit is to bring some of these ethical considerations to the forefront in community-based digital collecting and make it easier for others to quickly implement similar strategies.

The Digital Collecting toolkit is intended to provide simple, non-technical instructions for quickly implementing a digital collecting site in the event of a rapidly evolving crisis. We also hope that the toolkit can offer a framework for others interested in creating a plan for their institution or organization in advance of an event occurring. The documentation on collection tools is currently limited to Omeka Classic for site implementation, and Twarc for social media collection. These may not work for every case, and we have included links for other possible tools under additional resources. We hope to provide further documentation in the future for options like Omeka S and WebRecorder.

Next steps:

We are excited to share the results of the survey and the digital collecting toolkit with the cultural heritage community. We have developed a two-hour online LYRASIS class, Introduction to Emergency Digital Collecting, which prominently features the data gathered from the survey and the digital collecting toolkit. We will present the toolkit at a program on Tragedy Response: Preparation and Support for Archives and Communities at the Society of American Archivists meeting in Austin, Texas in August. We are currently in the process of developing future workshops and presentations based on our toolkit's contents. We plan to submit proposals to next year's Library Collective gathering, and to ALA's Annual Meeting as well as for a tutorial for the *Programming Historian*.

Two members of the team, Elizabeth Mitchell and Jeremy Boggs, are collaborating with UVA Department of Media Studies Professor Dr. Meredith Clark and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) to provide classroom support and curriculum development using Documenting the Now's tools for social media data collection and archiving. As further documentation and instructional lessons are created in support of this grant, we plan to incorporate this material in our Digital Collecting Toolkit. During the events of August 11 & 12, 2017, we used the twitter data collection tools built by Documenting the Now (DocNow) to capture use of relevant hashtags. That data has since become part of the Library's digital archive on the events. We use the tools developed by DocNow because of their strong commitment to prioritizing ethical practices in collection, use, and preservation of social media content. As our collaboration with

MITH and DocNow continues, we can continue to add content on ethics surrounding community-based digital collection and archiving. DocNow works with activists and archivists interested in creating community-based digital archives, and our collaboration also provides an additional community of users to share our toolkit with and receive feedback.

As noted earlier, we will continue working with the Omeka team to pursue possibilities for a malware scanning plug-in for Omeka-S that would maintain a user-friendly submission experience.

Finally, one of the things that the survey (and our own experiences) made clear is that proactive activities result in a better response than reactive activities. For example, being trained in tools in advance was an important step in efficient capture of content. The last thing you want to be doing is selecting and downloading tools for capture in the midst of an emergency collecting event. 90% of the respondents to the survey said that they were interested in participating in professional development on this topic. We hope to provide that with day-long training sessions where participants will learn:

- Infrastructure (policies, relationships, workflows) to efficiently respond to emergency collecting event
- How to download and use relevant collecting tools
- Assess their individual/institution readiness to collect in an emergency.

We will pursue funding opportunities both by applying for pre-conference workshops for a variety of organizational meetings (Society of American Archivists, American Library Association's Association for Library Collections and Technical Services and/or Association for College and Research Libraries' Rare Book and Manuscript Section, Digital Library Federation, Library Collective, CodeforLib) and through grant programs (e.g. NEH Summer Institute grants).

To learn more:

1. URLs for project materials, website, software repositories, etc.
 - a. Digital Collecting Toolkit: <http://digitalcollecting.lib.virginia.edu/toolkit/>
 - b. UVA Library Aug 11 & 12 rally site: <http://digitalcollecting.lib.virginia.edu/rally/>
 - c. Github repository for Omeka custom theme: https://github.com/scholarslab/cville_rally_theme
 - d. Digital Collecting for Events and Emergencies Survey Analysis: <https://doi.org/10.18130/v3-8p1n-5w09>
2. Descriptions of public relations, presentations, recognition, marketing produced about/for the project
 - a. "Library Received Grant from LYRASIS for Digital Collecting in times of Crisis." <https://news.library.virginia.edu/2018/06/18/library-receives-grant-from-lyrasis-for-digital-collecting-in-times-of-crisis/>
 - b. Presentation at LYRASIS member meeting, October 23, 2018: <http://lyrasisnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Digital-Collecting-in-Times-of-Crisis.pdf>
 - c. Video of presentation at LYRASIS member meeting, October 23, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmLQImbY7AE>