

# #BostonStrong/ BostonStrong?: A Personal Essay on Digital Community Engagement

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April 15, 2013 started out as a beautiful spring day in Boston. It was Patriots Day, a local holiday and a day reserved for the world's oldest marathon. I was at my mom's house, an hour away from the finish line, when a friend messaged me about explosions. The message came with a link to a local news station. I turned on the tv and sent the link to another friend in California. "One of the reports says two explosions," my friend would respond. "If that's correct, it's definitely an attack."

It was an attack. On April 15, 2013, two homemade pressure-cooker bombs were detonated at the finish line of the Boston Marathon with intent to harm many people. The city shut down. On local broadcasts, images of maps concerning the threat of multiple bombings were interjected with real-time updates on the suspected identities of the bombers. Quicker updates came through Twitter. Links to police scanners

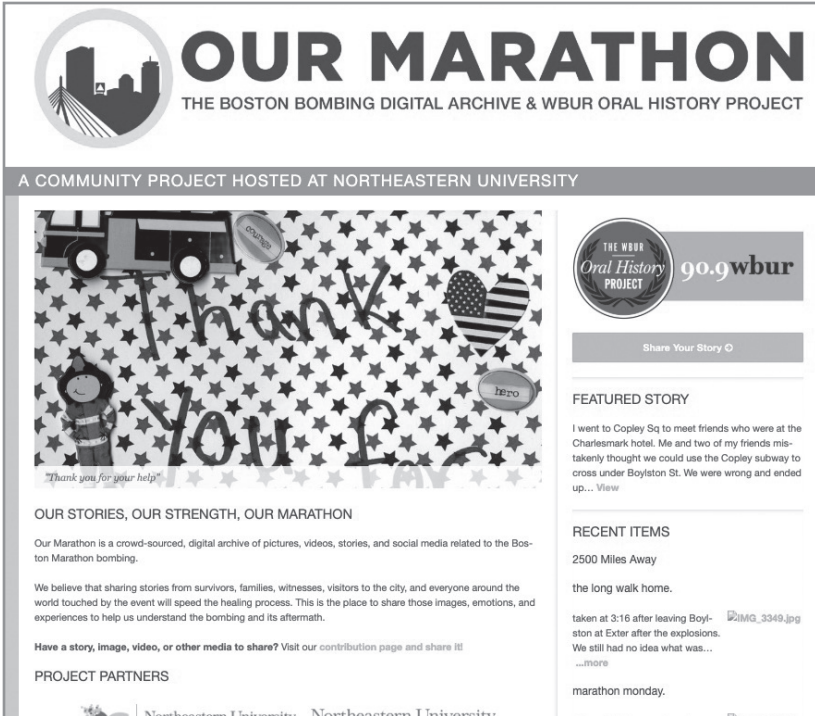
were shared. Eerie images of people-less streets among Boston landmarks popped up on BuzzFeed.

2013 reminded me that it could “happen here”—it could happen anywhere, and it happened here. Almost exactly four months earlier, a massacre took place in Newtown, Connecticut; victims’ family members were cheering in the grandstands at the end of the race that day. Another child was killed near them. I felt deflated. When the bombers were caught—each with their own cinematic renderings spilling out the tv—I felt no relief. Multiple people were dead, even more were recovering from injuries, and the terror psychologically impacted us all. This is what some people live with daily, but not us here in Boston, Massachusetts: a place where we lift each other up, a place with gun laws, a place you send your wicked smart kids to walk the Freedom Trail. What’s our narrative again?

Within two weeks of the bombing, a group of Humanities professors and graduate students at Northeastern University, including myself, obtained seed money to build an archive of all the stories, pictures, videos, and ephemera from the events. As an institution invested in the Digital Humanities, we had already been having conversations about various digital tools, methods, and archives; moreover, as an institution approximately one mile away from the finish line, we felt compelled to capture the stories swirling around us in real time.

This meant speed. Our first staff meeting took place on May 9<sup>th</sup>, the first version of our website went live on May 16<sup>th</sup>, and the first crowdsourced artifact—a beautiful story someone had written about her experience in a laundromat following the violence—was submitted on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. We moved quickly with our motto—“No story too small”—and we figured we’d just try to capture as many stories and other artifacts as possible, which also included an oral history component that I would manage.

The speediness was a strange thing for me. We were so “in it” and focused on gathering as many voices as possible in the archive that I barely processed my own story. There was the physical distance from the bombing that morning, but there were levels of intimacy with the events and their ripples that I didn’t quite reflect on at the time



*The above screenshot shows the Our Marathon website when it was “live” and soliciting crowdsourced material.*



*This is what the permanent website looks like now, located at <https://marathon.library.northeastern.edu/>.*



*Sample artifact: "B Strong poster from the Copley Square Memorial" from the Boston Marathon Temporary Memorial Collection (Boston City Archives 2014).*

because I was steeped in others' stories. For example, immediately following the bombing, my mom didn't want me to go back to the city. She worried about me, which resulted in texts telling me to be careful because they were showing images of "two very Indian-looking guys" on the news, implying that my own Indian-colored skin may be in danger ("I don't know, Mom," I would respond. "They looked pretty light on my phone."). She worried in a way an immigrant does, in a way someone born in central Massachusetts doesn't. She worried in a very real, post 9/11 way. Maybe there was touch of tender rebellion in her daughter's mask of nonchalance, though I can't remember if that was a part of my 9/11 experience as a teenager.

That summer I was teaching an online class, trudging through the woods with five-year-olds at a nature camp, and collecting stories of people who actually felt a lot of pride. The phrase "Boston Strong" popped up everywhere: painted on the side of an overpass, screen printed across t-shirts, used to promote various community events supporting survivors and victims' families. In the artifacts we were collecting for the archive, we saw the phrase in images of notes left at makeshift memorials, displayed across the front of a public bus, and even tattooed on skin. And, of course, it was hashtagged on Twitter.

Interestingly enough, those hashtags found their way into the written stories some people shared with the archive. Whether a

direct reflection on the hashtag or a detail in a story, this grammar of the internet was so entrenched in some community members' minds that, upon sitting down in their homes or at a Share Your Story event we hosted at a local library, it became part of their stories. It was a part of *our* story.

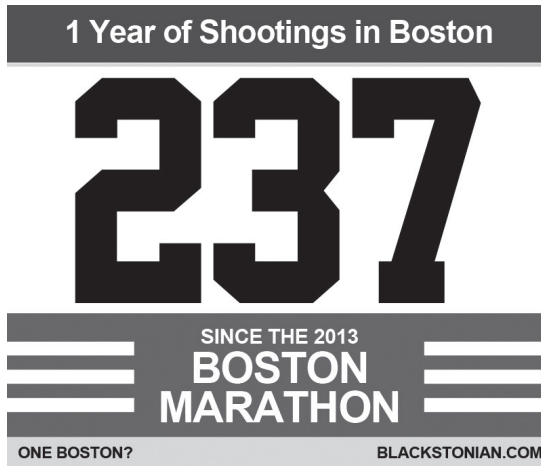
Though it must have been lingering in the background like a mental note to drink more water, I didn't outwardly recognize my discomfort with the phrase until I received an email from one of my research participants much later in my dissertation process. I was interested in understanding why people wrote their stories down and shared them with the archive, and so I followed up and asked questions about their decisions and experiences. One afternoon I received an email reply that ended with the words "Boston Strong" the way someone might use "Best" or "Sincerely." I read it as a note of solidarity—this was someone volunteering their time for me because they believed in the work I was doing—but it brought me into a realm of which I didn't feel a part.

Although I sat with elderly people as they carefully typed their stories on public computers, although I was invited to people's homes to listen about events that permanently altered their lives, although I saw how the phrase seemed to connect others, "Boston Strong" was not a way for me to hold hands with the community. It was more than just the distance I felt as an amateur academic engaging in the last examination before obtaining the degree. It was more than some personal resistance to the commodification of trauma. The Boston Marathon bombing became a "raced" tragedy. "Boston Strong" took up a privileged space. And I wasn't the only one who felt this way. In fact, people much more aware than me at the time were questioning this phrase and others like it in our community. As a historical repository, Our Marathon meant to offer a snapshot of what Boston was like during this time period. With 10,000 artifacts, the archive certainly does offer a snapshot; however, while the archive promoted that everyone's story mattered, participation was not as diverse as we had hoped it would be. As an academic archive concerned with the democratic potential of digital crowdsourcing, could we have missed whole swaths of stories important to Boston's overall history? Did we create something that invited certain people and silenced others?

Archival silencing is often thought of in relation to power and oppression in the creation of the archive (Carter 2006; Cushman 2013), and in his influential book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) reminds us that silencing happens in all stages of the archive: who creates the archive and the choices they make, what the sources are/where they come from, and the stories/details people choose to share or are requested to share. In the end, not every story is deemed as important to the collection at the time. This archive in particular offers an interesting case study of silences because it was both a historical and memorial effort. We absolutely chose to silence inappropriate artifacts.

To be an academic archive, we were interested in collecting a lot of material; however, as a community project, we were very cautious about the material we could ethically put into the archive. For example, there were people who made memes that were making fun of victims or that were praising the actions of the bombers. Historically, those things are part of what happened. If you want to think about the events, you cannot only think about the narrative of memorial, remembrance, mourning, and celebration. But what would happen if a family member of one of the victims pulled up our site, and the first thing that appeared was a meme making fun of the victims? That would be a horrifying scenario. It would just increase the trauma.

While that ethical consideration led to an intentional silencing, there was unintentional silencing as well. For example, after the Boston Marathon bombings, there was criticism of the attention the victims received in relation to the violence that regularly takes place in lower-income areas of the city (Bidgood 2013; Crawford 2014; Jonas 2013). *Blackstonian*, a newspaper dedicated to issues related to Black, Latino, Cape Verdean, and other Peoples of Color in Boston, kept a tally of how many shootings occurred in the city in critique of the “One Boston” mentality that permeated and prompted the One Fund—an organization that raised millions of dollars for those most impacted by the bombings (Leidolf 2014).



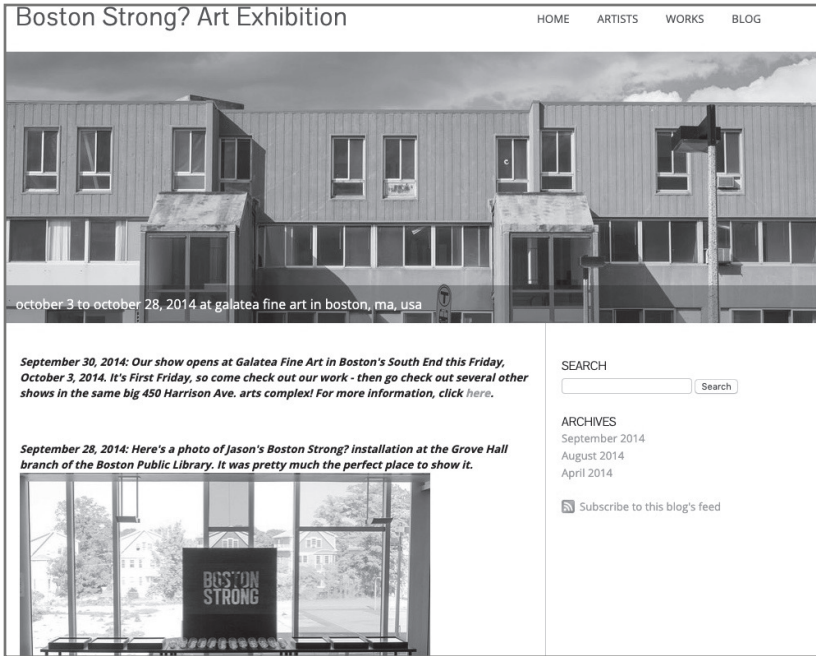
*There were 237 shootings in Boston in the year following the 2013 marathon. The above image gives this information along with the question "One Boston?" (Leidolf 2014).*

While understanding of the tragedy, many community members were angry that so much could be done so quickly for this tragedy while children in their communities were dying from violence not too far away.

Like One Boston, Boston Strong was not without critique, as publicly evidenced by the Boston Strong? Art Exhibition that took place one year after the bombings (Pramas 2014). Boston Strong? exhibited collage, drawing, and conceptual practices from artists Darrell Ann Gane-McCalla, Shea Justice, and Jason Pramas to weigh the community's response to the marathon bombings as opposed to overall violence in the city in the year that followed and asked provocative, discomfoting questions about media, corporations, race, and poverty (Bergeron 2014).

Tina Chéry, a mother who lost her son (an innocent bystander) to gun violence, attended a Boston Strong? Show, and she commented that she has felt what many of "those" people felt in regards to the worthiness of life and remained hopeful that work can be done to erase the question mark of the show and move forward in a truly united way for all community members (Eisenstadter 2014).





*A screenshot of the "Question Boston Strong" website (Pramas 2014).*

In looking at the historical context of Boston in 2013–2014, these stories are hugely important, but you will not find them in the archive. Just building a digital, crowdsourced archive does not mean that people will want to contribute or feel invited to contribute, particularly when the common dialogue around an event does not match their experiences. Crowdsourcing artifacts theoretically allows for a distribution of power, as participants can contribute their own artifacts on their own terms, contextualized with their own words. That being said, when the trauma is fresh (i.e. the closer you are to the event one is archiving), the more the archive is positioned as memorial. To be a memorial indicates a collective experience, and one thing human beings do in places of loss is try to fill voids with *stuff*, right? Likewise, the archive itself was preemptively filling a void by permanently housing all of the *stuff* that was out there. Attempting to quickly fill that void, however, led to issues. What happens to our communal history when certain voices and types of stories become privileged, intentionally or not?



In Our Marathon's aim to represent communities affected by the marathon bombings, the archive also created a community of its own—one that we now see may have unintentionally silenced people. This is an important truth of the "historial" archive—a portmanteau I use to signify historical/memorial archives (Girdharry 2019)—but it is not a hopeless one; rather, as time moves us further away from such traumatic events, the historial archive not only offers a peek into one representation of an historical moment, but it offers rich opportunities to contextualize what stories remain silenced and discover what stories can perhaps become un-silenced with more work.

What does un-silencing actually look like? Writing this in 2019, I would simply say look to the advocates literally and figuratively making noise: Black Lives Matter and the Women's March, to name a couple. But we don't always need grand gestures and huge organizational capacities to notice inequality and decide to do something about it. I wish I could say there was some grand moment that inspired this reflection and caused me to act. But there was no big moment. There was a small moment.

On April 23, 2018—just a little over five years after the bombings—I spoke on a panel with a few of my fellow Our Marathon colleagues. I don't really remember what I spoke about, but I do remember seeing Joanna Shea-O'Brien in the audience. Joanna was one of the professional oral historians I worked closely with on the project. She was one of the people I stressed with and cried with as we post-processed other people's stressing and crying. When she asked if I wanted to work on another project together, I immediately said yes. While our first conversations swirled around the words "mothers," "loss," and "gun violence," there was no pressure of time to commit to a project idea right away. We thought about our networks, we talked to smart people with expertise in areas like Public Health, Criminal Justice, and Oral History, and we discussed many *why* questions: why mothers? why loss? why guns? why oral history? why try to preserve these stories? why us?

In the meantime, we started attending community events. Chaplain Tina Chéry, whose insights I cited earlier in regards to the Boston Strong? exhibit, was clearly a social justice leader in the community.

She founded the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in memory of her son in 1994. The organization continues to give incredible support to those impacted by homicide, which includes their annual Mother's Day Walk for Peace—a seven-mile walk from the Town Field neighborhood of Dorchester to Boston's City Hall Plaza. We volunteered at the Walk, we showed up for community listening sessions, and we met with LDB Peace Institute staff members to talk about collaborating on a potential project.

In short, it took months of trust building and conversation. Our slowness—a tenet of the oral history methodology itself—was a result of our mindfulness, and today (a year-and-a-half later) we have completed one oral history interview for our project: Community Resilience and Homicide in Boston. We are using this pilot experience to further develop our guidelines and parameters before we approach grants and institutions. The speed doesn't automatically alleviate all of the concerns of preserving stories, but we are trying to build a structure that uplifts voices that may be overshadowed in the media and lets community members preserve their own histories on their own terms.

When I was working on a dissertation that ended up examining Our Marathon, I had always thought that I would submit something to *Reflections*. Watching people write their stories down in public was inspiring and thought provoking. I was compelled to think about literacy sponsorship and the challenges and successes of university-community partnerships. But there are risks of taking on community projects on academic timelines. In contexts of shared trauma, stories matter for healing and creating a communal space, but the public nature of the archive may cause certain artifacts to be intentionally silenced. However, the further away from the trauma temporally, the more the archive becomes positioned as history, so, as I continue thinking through these issues, I caution researchers to be mindful of what is present for historical purposes but might be missing for memorial purposes. If you're interested in this kind of work, how might you contend with silencing?

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**Kristi Girdharry** is the Director of the Writing Center and a lecturer at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Much of her scholarly and pedagogical interests come from work with community sites and partners. Stemming from her role in the creation of an oral history project and digital archive built to capture the ephemera following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, her dissertation—“Composing Digital Community Spaces: Design and Literacy Practices in/of the Archive”—offered a case study of a crowdsourced archive meant to simultaneously memorialize and historicize the events. She is currently working on a new oral history project that aims to safely uplift the voices of people who feel unheard in the media and to offer an historical record of communities’ responses to violence in and around Boston. In addition to also working on scholarship related to teaching and tutoring, she is a co-editor for the *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition Series*, which offers a current snapshot of the exigent themes, trends, and ideas within Writing Studies and also contextualizes each piece with activities and discussion questions to help aid in professional development conversations for instructors who may not have the means or time to attend the conferences and keep up with all recent scholarship. Relatedly, she is on the board of the Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network (BRAWN), which continues to offer free professional development opportunities for area writing instructors.

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