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Archiving Catholic Faith on the Web During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ARCHIVING
Catholic Faith
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COVID In the middle of March 2020, an undergraduate English class from the University of Dayton visited the Marian Library for hands-on learning with primary source materials related to miraculous cures at the Lourdes shrine in France. Students in the upper-level seminar course that focused on narrative, rhetoric, and medicine prepared for the visit by reading an article about the baths at Lourdes, where thousands of pilgrims have traveled annually since the 1870s for a chance to be cured by the holy water from a spring.[1] As students examined photographs, copies of case files, and historical narrative accounts, several of them discussed what might happen at a site like Lourdes with the emerging COVID-19 pandemic that had been making headlines in other parts of the world, but hadn't yet impacted their daily lives in Dayton, Ohio. That evening, online news outlets reported that for the first time in its history, the Lourdes shrine would temporarily close to the public, and that the healing baths had already been closed since the end of February.[2] This was just one of the many ways that the Catholic faith, practices, and acts of devotion would adapt and change in the coming months due to COVID-19. At the University of Dayton, two archivists developed web archiving projects to document these changes, so that future generations would be able to study this tumultuous time period, similar to how the undergraduate students had analyzed Lourdes.

The University of Dayton is a medium-sized, private, and Marianist institution located in Dayton, Ohio. There are three special collections areas within the University Libraries, encompassing the University Archives and Special Collections, the U.S. Catholic Special Collection, and the Marian Library. The Marian Library is both a department library serving the International Marian Research Institute and its own special library, founded in 1943 by Marianists at the University of Dayton to celebrate several important milestone anniversaries.[3] The Marian Library is a direct expression of the university's Marianist heritage, and serves as a center of scholarship on the Blessed Virgin Mary while also documenting diverse expressions of popular Marian devotion. The collections include circulating materials such as books and AV materials, as well as non-circulating archival collections, artifacts, periodicals, and artwork. The U.S. Catholic Special Collection is a unit within the University Libraries that collects and preserves materials that document the history and culture of Catholics in the United States. The collections support the university's programs in religious studies, which demonstrate the commitment of the University of Dayton to the history and heritage of the Catholic Church in the United States and its intellectual and popular traditions.[4] The materials include a mix of circulating and non-circulating items such as books, journals, periodicals, archival collections, artifacts, ephemera, and websites. Although administratively separate, the similar scope of the Marian Library and the U.S. Catholic Special Collection fosters collaboration on a variety of projects relating broadly to the Catholic faith.

The Importance of Web Archiving

Web archiving is the process of collecting, preserving, and providing enduring access to web content.[5] Content on the Internet can disappear for a variety of reasons, such as being overwritten or purposefully deleted, for example, unless it is actively saved and managed. As Megan Sapnar Ankerson succinctly summarizes, "It is far easier to find an example of a film from 1924 than a website from 1994."[6]

The Internet Archive is a non-profit institution that has been archiving websites since 1996 as part of its mission to provide universal access to all knowledge.[7] It is the pioneer in the field of web archiving and provides access to more than twenty years of archived web content through the Wayback Machine.[8] It also partners with more than six hundred cultural heritage institutions including libraries, archives, and museums using Archive-It. Archive-It is a paid, subscription-based tool that institutions use not only to capture web content, but also to curate the content into collections and add descriptive metadata.[9]

The University of Dayton has been using Archive-It since 2015 to capture web content for each of the three special collection areas in the University Libraries. A subscription was originally purchased for the University Archives and Special Collections to be able to accurately archive the University of Dayton website and other institutional content, such as social media. Since that time, it has been used by the Marian Library and the U.S. Catholic Special Collection to complement existing physical collections, as well as to collect relevant themes or topics that aren't as well represented in the physical materials. For example, other Archive-It collections include the American Catholic Blogs collection that archives blogs written by American Catholics with different viewpoints and perspectives, or the Marian Shrines collection that archives websites of Marian shrines not well-represented in the physical Marian Library materials.[10]

There are other ways to document ephemeral web content of value without a subscription to Archive-It, including the "Save Page Now" function on the Wayback Machine's homepage. This allows any interested individual to archive a single webpage (with a few minor exceptions such as web pages that prohibit web archiving crawlers). Other archivists have used this as an entry point to archiving content relevant to their communities of users. There is also a tool called Conifer, previously known as Webrecorder, where individuals can create their own free account with a set storage limit for web archiving.[11]

Literature Review

Collecting archival material related to a specific, unfolding event is not a new idea and the concept has been referred to in the literature under several terms, such as "emergency digital collecting," "spontaneous collecting," or "rapid digital collecting," among other phrases.[12] After the University of Virginia (UVA) Library began collecting material related to a white supremacist rally and counter-protests in 2017, they saw the need for institutions to be better prepared for digital collecting in emergency situations. As part of a LYRASIS Catalyst Fund grant, UVA librarians gathered information from other cultural heritage institutions to assess community needs, and also created a digital collecting toolkit to aid institutions in implementing their own effective emergency digital collecting strategies.[13]

Specifically for web archiving, Archive-It has Spontaneous Event Collections that are created by the Archive-It team in partnership with other organizations to capture at-risk web content related to a specific event. The program began when Archive-It partnered with Virginia Tech University to archive web content related to the April 16, 2007, shooting on that campus.[14] Other collections grouped in this category include for example, material related to the 2013 Boston marathon bombing, the Occupy Movement from 2011 to 2012, and the 2017 total solar eclipse.[15]

Many cultural heritage institutions launched projects to document the effects of COVID-19 on their specific communities using a variety of methods. Some of these projects focused on collecting physical or digital artifacts, such as photographs of closed buildings or notices of cancellations. Several academic institutions collaborated on an initiative from the Arizona State University School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies called Journal of the Plague Year, to preserve the stories of the ways the pandemic has affected life in extraordinary and mundane ways. The webpage accepts submissions of digital objects including images, videos, interviews, social media posts, memes, emails, and news articles that "describes the pandemic and speaks to paradoxes of the moment."[16]

There have also been many institutions choosing to document the pandemic through web archiving. The Society of American Archivists Web Archiving Section compiled a spreadsheet of different pandemic-related collections, using a variety of archiving tools and organizational approaches.[17] Highlights from this crowdsourced effort were then shared in a Society of American Archivists news release, emphasizing that it is part of the archivists' professional responsibility to document history as it happens for future generations.[18] Some of these projects focused on institutional responses to the pandemic, others looked more broadly in the community, and several focused on a specific theme or topic. The University of Dayton was the only project, so far as the authors know, to focus on web archiving Catholic and Marian devotion during the pandemic.

Marian Devotion

One of the Marian Library's lesser-known physical collections is an extensive news clipping file referred to as the Sutton File.[19] Compiled primarily by a long-serving Marian Library volunteer, Mildred Sutton, the collection includes stories of Mary in the news from a variety of religious and secular sources. Each individual article, brochure, or flyer is then indexed with keywords to aid in searching. Although the Sutton File is no longer accruing new additions, it is still frequently used to answer reference questions, in instruction, and as an invaluable resource for researchers since much of the information cannot be found anywhere else. Now, with many of these same types of items being produced online, and sometimes only online, the Marian Library began a collection in Archive-It, the Marian Library Web Clippings Collection, to capture Mary's global presence on the Internet.

This project was already underway in early spring 2020, capturing stories related to a variety of topics, from LGBTQ+ protests in Poland that used Marian icons, to articles discussing the history behind the styles celebrities wore at the 2018 Met Gala themed "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination."[20]

Mildred Sutton, Marian Library volunteer, indexing Marian newspaper clippings in approximately 1980.
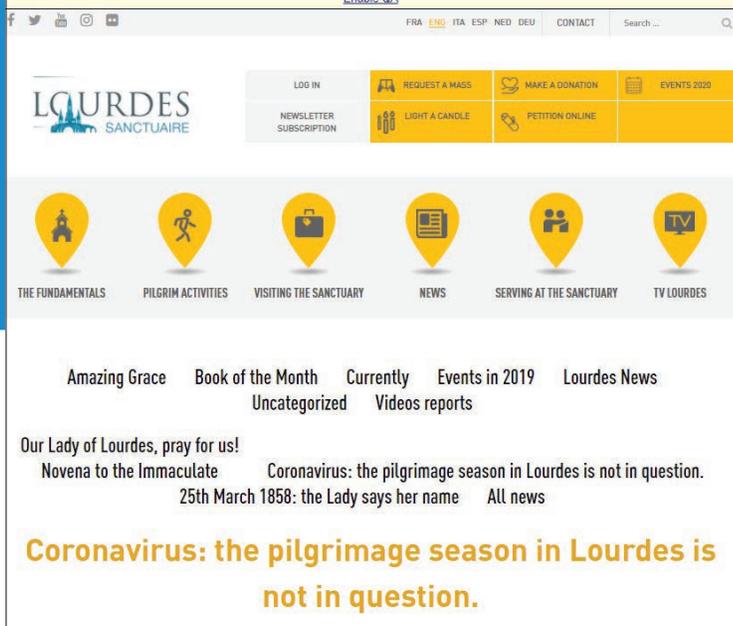
Image from the Marian Library photograph collection.

The scope of this collection was not intended to be as exhaustive as Mildred Sutton had been with her clipping file. Individual web pages were crawled upon recommendations by colleagues from the Marian Library and the International Marian Research Institute, or based on information that the archivist found.

When employees at the University of Dayton made the transition to remote work in March 2020, a web archiving project to capture instances of Marian devotion during COVID-19 was a natural fit, since it could be completed remotely and was time sensitive given how rapidly the situation evolved at the beginning. For instance, to return to the case of the class studying Lourdes, although the shrine's official website announced that the shrine would temporarily close, a capture of the shrine's homepage on March 12, 2020, displayed a headline reading, "Coronavirus: the pilgrimage season in Lourdes is not in question."[21] At the time, there was still the belief that closures would be very temporary and that activities like pilgrimages would be able to resume shortly. Later, that headline was overwritten as closures extended and many events drawing large crowds were canceled indefinitely. This one example illustrates how content online can be lost quickly, overwritten with more up-to-date information for potential visitors, and be gone for future researchers unless it is actively archived.

To keep up with the project in a remote environment, the Marian Library used a Google spreadsheet to track potential new seeds (individual URLs) and track the dates of when they had been crawled and metadata completed. This was done to keep the project manageable, since at the beginning of the pandemic there were many websites of potential interest to crawl. Adding descriptive metadata to each seed is important since it will aid in discovery of these resources; however, it is also very time consuming, and so has

Archive-It

FRA ENG ITA ESP NED DEU   CONTACT   Search …

LOURDES SANCTUAIRE

LOG IN   REQUEST A MASS   MAKE A DONATION   EVENTS 2020

NEWSLETTER   LIGHT A CANDLE   PETITION ONLINE
SUBSCRIPTION

THE FUNDAMENTALS   PILGRIM ACTIVITIES   VISITING THE SANCTUARY   NEWS   SERVING AT THE SANCTUARY   TV LOURDES

Amazing Grace   Book of the Month   Currently   Events in 2019   Lourdes News
Uncategorized   Videos reports

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us!
Novena to the Immaculate   Coronavirus: the pilgrimage season in Lourdes is not in question.
25th March 1858: the Lady says her name   All news

Coronavirus: the pilgrimage season in Lourdes is not in question.

Screenshot of the Archive-It capture of the homepage for the Lourdes shrine website in France, indicating that the "pilgrimage season is not in question," archived March 12, 2020.

been done on an ongoing basis when time is available. There were several different ways that the Marian Library found relevant websites to crawl. In addition to colleague recommendations, a Google alert was set to search for *(coronavirus OR covid-19) AND "Virgin Mary."* Google alerts allows users to receive these alerts as a single daily e-mail in digest form and users can even specify the time of day that they would like the e-mail delivered. This was helpful to learn of news stories across the Internet and one way to give a more inclusive look at Marian devotion during the pandemic across the world.

A wide variety of material, though by no means exhaustive, has been collected about Marian devotion during the COVID-19 pandemic in this ongoing project. For example, in spring 2020 there were news reports of statues of the Virgin Mary being flown over countries as protection from the coronavirus.[22] Later stories illustrated some of the ways that individuals and institutions began to adapt to new restrictions, such as a story of a North Dakota teen who made Marian sidewalk art to inspire her neighborhood.[23] All of these combined together into one collection tell a compelling story for both present and future researchers.

COVID-19 and the US Church

At the start of the pandemic, the U.S. Catholic Special Collection began a web archive that focused on the response of the Catholic Church in the United States to COVID-19. In order to narrow the scope of the project and make it more manageable, the archivist decided to focus on collecting archdiocesan websites, including their announcements related to the pandemic. The announcements ranged from early advisories encouraging people to stay home if they felt sick,[24] to the eventual complete cancellation of public Masses and church closures.[25] Archdioceses were selected as a starting point for the web archive so that the project had clear boundaries; however, as the pandemic continued, the archivist was able to add a selection of archived web pages from smaller dioceses. The web archive continued to collect the evolving restrictions as churches and schools began to reopen across the United States in later months of the pandemic. It has also saved both official archdiocesan and diocesan announcements, and news articles talking about these restrictions.

The archivist is also working to ensure that diverse community voices are represented in the web archive, especially since the pandemic has disproportionately affected particular populations in so many ways. This includes actively seeking news articles, press releases, and other web content that specifically describes how the pandemic has affected underrepresented and underserved communities of Catholics. A small amount of social media, such as blogs and YouTube videos, has also been collected. These items show the perspectives of individual Catholics, both clergy and laity, on the pandemic. They give a glimpse of how the pandemic has affected the faith and religious practice of "ordinary" Catholics. To find these sites, a Google Alert was created for the searches *(coronavirus OR covid-19) AND "catholic church" AND "United States"* that emails the results of these queries directly to the archivist.

Challenges and the Future of the Collections

As of January 2021, the two web collections include 202 seeds and have captured about 2.7 GB of data. Metadata creation is in progress for the two collections, as new seeds continue to be added. The University of Dayton's Archive-It collections appear in the library's EBSCO discovery layer to make them more findable and accessible for researchers.[26] The archivists therefore decided to standardize the Archive-It metadata, so that researchers discovering these collections from the discovery layer would better be able to understand the catalog records. Each web archiving seed receives ten metadata fields, including *title, creator, description, subject, source, language, type, date, rights,* and *collector.* These fields were collectively decided within the University Libraries and are reflected in a local data dictionary that was created using an OCLC report on descriptive metadata for web archiving as a guideline.[27] Writing the metadata has been fairly time intensive, but has made the collections much more findable and provides greater context for each seed when browsing the collections in their entirety.

The COVID-19 web collections do present some challenges, both ones that are similar to what archivists face with physical archival collections and some new ones that are unique to the format. The size of these collections, both in number of seeds and the amount of data used from the subscription allocation, requires careful monitoring. These collections represent significant investments of time and resources. The University Libraries' Archive-It subscription has a defined data limit per year and purchasing additional space may not be a budget priority. It is possible that with these collections, the subscription could run out of space. The needs of the COVID-19 collections cannot supersede the libraries' other existing web archiving priorities, such as documenting the university's institutional website and social media. In hindsight, adding news stories related to Marian devotion and COVID-19 to the existing Marian Library Web Clippings Collection may not have created the best user experience. Once a collection is created within Archive-It, the archivist does not have the ability to move the individual seeds to a different collection. This means that seeds about COVID-19 are presented alongside the other content collected. Since there was a large amount of material archived about COVID-19, these seeds have overshadowed the others in this collection. Users on the Archive-It website can narrow the content by a group tag of "COVID-19" but it would have been clearer if the content on COVID-19 had been presented separately in a new collection, similar to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the U.S. Church collection.

Additionally, the archivists continue to seek out websites that will document the voices and experiences of underserved communities. Within the United States there is a history of removing archival records from communities for the sake of preservation. As Hannah Alpert-Abrams explains in a blog post for the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), "These acts of preservation have often been paralleled by an effort to erase, silence, or control the people whose histories we have relocated."[28] It is therefore critical that documentation efforts be balanced with sensitivity, and it is worth noting that the original creators of any archived web content retain ownership and copyright of their materials. There has been limited success in finding more inclusive sources, especially those that are actually written by members of these communities, so the work is ongoing. One idea for a future initiative is offering educational training on the value of web archiving to community members, utilizing the free web archiving tools mentioned previously. Expanding these efforts to be inclusive is critical to the mission and values of both the University Libraries and the University of Dayton.

Finally, this project can be quite time consuming, and at times, emotionally consuming, especially in light of the feelings of urgency that come when trying to capture and preserve very ephemeral websites. The archivists must balance the demands of this project with their other work responsibilities at a time when there is already added stress in dealing with the pandemic, personally and professionally.

The Marian Library and the US Catholic Special Collection plan to continue adding seeds and expanding their COVID-19 web collections. There is not a clear end-date to the pandemic, and even after it is officially over, the implications will be long lasting so there will continue to be a great deal of web content to document and preserve. Despite the challenges, these two web archiving projects have provided the archivists with a sense of purpose as they contribute to a larger historical narrative about this pandemic. It has also been an enjoyable project, and often inspiring to see the ways in which individuals and communities have adapted and continued to practice their Catholic faith. ∎

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Stephanie Shreffler is the Collections Librarian/Archivist for the U.S. Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton. She earned a Master of Science in Information from the University of Michigan and is a Certified Archivist. She is interested in web archiving and the use of special collections in the classroom.

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