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Mirror and Shadow:
Social Media in the Burning Man Community

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Library and Information Science

by

Dawn Ellen Aveline

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Mirror and Shadow:
Social Media in the Burning Man Community

by

Dawn Ellen Aveline

Master of Library and Information Science
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Anne J. Gilliland, Chair

Social media forms a mirror for the present and casts a shadow to the future. This exploratory case study focuses on the social media documents created by participants and organizers of the Burning Man festival, a temporary city of 50,000 inhabitants constructed annually in a remote Nevada desert. This ephemeral community develops through the collaborative, volunteer efforts of its citizens. Attendees generate all the content of the event, including large-scale sculptures, performances, and urban spaces. Event participants employ a spectrum of social media throughout the year to launch collaborations, develop and fund event projects, and maintain connections within their communities. This paper explores the role social media plays in the Burning Man community through a qualitative analysis of survey and interview data. The results suggest that social media serves as a documentary mirror and archival shadow which constructs and maintains the Burning Man festival, its culture, and its participant community. In view of this complex interplay between communities, documentation, and performance, the research advocates the expansion of archives to include social media documentation.

The thesis of Dawn Ellen Aveline is approved.

Michelle Caswell

Leah Lievrouw

Anne J. Gilliland, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Each year, during late summer, 50,000 people from around the world congregate to build a temporary city on an ancient lakebed in the remote Black Rock desert of northwestern Nevada. The city, built almost entirely through the volunteer efforts of its citizens, contains hundreds of creative encampments taking the form of fully-equipped dance clubs, bars, restaurants, a hotel, working post offices, a number of radio stations, two or more daily newspapers, the occasional ballet troupe, a big-tent circus, public transportation, and an airport recognized, albeit temporarily, by the Federal Aviation Administration. For one week each year, the site, known as Black Rock City, becomes the third most populous municipality in Nevada, after Las Vegas and Reno.

This temporary community or “ephemeropolis” embodies the annual arts festival called Burning Man.¹ The event originated in San Francisco, among a small group of friends who gathered on the beach during the summer solstice of 1986 to burn a wooden sculpture, a stick-figure effigy of a man, for no publicly articulated reason. This burning was re-enacted over the next several years, eventually pulling in crowds large enough to attract the attention of the local authorities, spurring the move to its Nevada location in 1990. Since then, Burning Man has undergone a dramatic transformation from an inchoate collection of nonconformists, to a well-ordered yearly festival of music, performance, ritual, and art of all imaginable varieties.

Among similar art and music festivals, Burning Man stands out as unique in several ways. Within the event, commerce is prohibited; the city operates on the basis of a gift economy.² All of

1. Coinage of the term “ephemeropolis” is attributed to D.S. Black. It is instructive that current online

2. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Cohen & West, 1966.

the content—the art, performance, music, and more—is created by event participants; the city abides none of the headlining acts featured in most music festivals. Participants practice a “leave no trace” environmental ethic, just as they also provide for all their own survival needs for the week or so they spend in inhospitable desert conditions. Other distinguishing characteristics of the event and community are found in the “Ten Principles,” guidelines articulated to promote the values embodied by the event. The principles include radical inclusivity, radical self-expression, civic responsibility, participation, and immediacy.³

Throughout the event’s existence, new media and social media have exerted an increasing influence on the community of Burning Man participants. Attendees are widely viewed as early adopters of technology, and the event’s origins in the Bay Area almost certainly encouraged involvement among denizens of Silicon Valley.⁴ As early as 1998, organizers noticed the popularity of the event climbing sharply along with the florescence of Web pages created by participants.⁵ More recently, in the age of YouTube and Facebook, and with attendance topping 50,000, social media has been pegged as both exalting the event and heralding its demise. For the first time in its 25-year history, Burning Man tickets sold out in 2011, sparking a flurry of media attention. Ticket scarcity spawned ticket scalpers, a practice running counter to the event’s core ethic of gifting and de commodification. Subsequently, the organizers attempted a remedy for the 2012 event involving registering for a random drawing allowing ticket purchase. This set off

3. “Burning Man: What Is Burning Man?: Ten Principles,” *Burning Man*, accessed October 12, 2012, http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html.

4. David A. Vise and Mark Malseed, “Google at Burning Man,” in *The Google Story* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2005) 70–81; Fred Turner, “Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production,” *New Media & Society* 11, no. 1–2 (February 2009): 73–94.

5. “Larry Harvey’s 1998 Speech,” *Burning Man*, http://burningman.com/whatisburningman/1998/98_speech_1.html, and also “Burning Man and Cyberspace,” <http://burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/cyber.html>. Both accessed October 12, 2012.

controversy among longtime participants that, unsurprisingly, played out on social media, particularly Facebook and in the comments section on the official Burning Man blog (blog.burningman.com). For some, the ticket scarcity and its aftermath marked a point of transformation in the event's twenty-five-year history.

With so much of our everyday lives and culture unspooling on the Web and the commercial platforms of social media, how will archives preserve these ephemeral traces? In a 2001 essay, archives historian and theorist Terry Cook issued a call for a revised paradigm for archival theory, one that could account for the very issues at stake in our online culture:

Process rather than product, becoming rather than being, dynamic rather than static, context rather than text, reflecting time and place rather than universal absolutes—these have become the postmodern watchwords for analyzing and understanding science, society, organizations, and business activity, among others. They should likewise become the watchwords for archival science in the new century, and thus the foundation for a new conceptual paradigm for the profession.⁶

Since then, as we have seen, developments in new media and online culture have rendered this call more compelling than ever. Much of the recent discussion of Web archiving or preservation, at least in the library and archives realm, concerns itself with the idea of preserving individual websites or collections of websites, even vast swaths of the Internet, whereas current manifestations of social media create a related but different set of problems. Social media increasingly affords individuals the ability to add their voices to the historical record by creating and publishing more and more material every minute. Paradoxically, this exponential increase in content serves to render more complex and problematic the appraisal and preservation of such materials, while exerting more pressure on the meaning of the archive.

6. Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2001): 24.

The specific aims of this study are twofold. Foremost, this case study explores how social media is used by and influences the community of participants in the annual Burning Man arts festival, including generating increased awareness of the phenomenon, disseminating and maintaining community values, and acculturating newcomers. The study employs qualitative analysis of survey and interview data to elucidate the community's attitudes toward social media and identify broad themes relating to its effects. Drawing on this analysis, the study contributes to emerging archival discussions of social media and the particular problems it presents to the field. As an active site of cultural production, social media plays a significant role in shaping community identity and collective memory. Upon these ephemeral digital strata, we are co-constructing our history, culture, and collective memory. Understanding the role of social media in a community leads to a clearer appreciation of the need for archives to consider it in collections.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

This study develops from an interdisciplinary matrix of perspectives from archival theory, new media studies, and performance studies. Recent appraisals of archival theory, developed in light of our culture's reliance on electronic communications and Web 2.0 technologies, urge practitioners to reinterpret the fundamental forms of archives, to encompass nontraditional records and participatory or community archives. Such an expansion of archival borders holds the potential to incorporate a wider variety of voices into the archival record. The literature of new media studies contributes to the understanding of social media technologies and their role in society. Scholars studying the Web and new media sometimes characterize these affordances in an archival frame, while at the same time recognizing their essential ephemerality. Together with new archival approaches and communication technologies, the discipline of performance studies offers a framework for situating the function of social media in communal and collective memory. Such interdisciplinary grounding reveals how social media documents, extends, and performs community.

Deconstructing archives

Social media holds the potential to preserve a more inclusive documentary record, especially to capture emergent phenomena and the perspectives of young people, than other traditionally archived material. Social media's unique structure—arising from multiple creators, its cultural and corporate functions, and its ephemeral nature—demands, however, that archival theory orient itself toward a new model. This model moves centrifugally away from a more-or-less static physicality of records of known provenance and authority, toward a model of engaging the process of records creation and contextualization.

One of the most eloquent proponents of this reorientation, Terry Cook, proposes the development of a new paradigm for archival practice in his 2001 essay “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts.”⁷ Cook’s call for a paradigmatic shift anticipates many of the challenges that social media represents to archivists. He and others remark that archival thinking arrived relatively late to postmodernism, being strongly rooted in a tradition of reverence for the physical document.⁸ He argues that postmodernism must inform a re-envisioning of archival theory, in part to take into account the intellectual milieu in which archives are being constructed, but also to accommodate the changes in the nature of the record brought on by the advent of electronic communication and the Internet. Similarly, social media, in its ephemeral yet textual (and thus seemingly fixed) nature, challenges received notions of archival construction.

Jacques Derrida’s seminal *Archive Fever* ushered postmodernism into the archival discourse (and, perhaps, archives into cultural theory).⁹ Since then, many archivists have explored the implications of postmodernism on the archive, the record, and the practice of archives. Among archivists exploring postmodernist impacts on the archive, and Derrida’s ideas in particular, is South African Verne Harris.¹⁰ Harris brings to the fore Derrida’s notion of the archive, not as a storehouse of memory, but rather as a “house of forgetting,” where the performance of preservation becomes simultaneously an act of destruction. Derrida’s conception of the archive as

7. Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2001): 17.

8. Brien Brothman, “Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction*,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 64–88.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

10. Verne Harris, “‘Something Is Happening Here and You Don’t Know What It Is’: Jacques Derrida Unplugged,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 26, no. 1 (April 2005): 136.

an exteriorization or manifestation of memory reveals the vulnerability of archival memory to destruction. Harris elucidates Derrida's suggestion, then, that to archive equates forgetting. The more fully-formed the archive, the more complete the forgetting.¹¹ These binary forces recall the tensions inherent in social media. Social media forms a seemingly enduring repository of memory due to a widespread perception that documents shared on social media will exist indefinitely somewhere on the Web. Meanwhile, these records undergo a continual and simultaneous process of erasure, due to many factors such as the physical instability of electronic storage media, the underlying structures of that revise and rewrite content on the fly, or even simply due to the short-lived character of the corporations that create them.¹²

Archival scholar Tom Nesmith points out that the postmodern outlook troubles the existence of absolute truth, and by extension troubles the truths that might be represented by the archive: "[...] Assumptions about social, religious, and political truths and objectives are always in question. They are provisional constructs we make with the mediations we have, rather than certainties to seek or grasp." Nesmith explores how Derrida's process of *archivization*—the act of choosing to save—serves to shape perceptions of reality. The very effort of archiving creates the archive and shapes memory.¹³ For archivists, then, their role can no longer be understood in

11. Ibid., 138. Beyond his claims for an antithetical archive which pre-conditions its own destruction, in *Archive Fever* Derrida touches on the manner in which the morphology or structure of the archive determines what might be archivable. He observes: "The archivization produces as much as it records the event." Following on this, he contemplates the development of psychoanalysis had Freud used email to communicate with his colleagues and acolytes rather than the post: "A handwritten letter takes so many days to arrive in another European city, and nothing is ever independent of this delay. Everything remains on its scale." (*Archive Fever*, 16–17). The compression of time informs the idea of the *mirror* of social media. The instantaneity of communication means that it forms more a reflection (if refracted, or bent) of the moment, than a representation of a past.

12. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 35, Autumn (2008): 154.

13. Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 31.

terms of neutrality or passivity. The archivist assumes a new level of responsibility in selecting archival materials, expanding or even “celebrating” her role in the shaping of memory as expressed in the archive.¹⁴

Beyond a recognition of the archivist’s centrality to the construction of archives, the destabilizing and decentralizing project of postmodernism opens the door to documents in all formats which lie outside a bureaucratic Jenkinsonian structure, allowing them recognition as suitable for archival attention.¹⁵ Even within modern bureaucratic organizations, the onslaught of electronic records and Internet communications have compelled archivists to see the need to engage in the construction of the archive and selection of records much earlier in the records-creation process than before.¹⁶ Records created by means of social media technologies pose similar challenges. In particular, the temporal character of the Web and social media clearly demands that archivists adopt a documentarian stance, one more akin to that of a researcher, in order to perform archival roles.

More than a decade on, Terry Cook sees the need to continue to articulate his call for a revised paradigm among archivists. He outlines four major shifts in archival practice, from Jenkinson’s evidence, through cultural memory-shaping, to archives and archivists as active mediators in the formulation of identity. He contends: “Now a fourth archival mindset is on the horizon, one not yet a fully formed paradigm to be sure, but certainly there is a sense of changing

14. Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 28.

15. H.W. Samuels, George Orwell, and A.C. Clarke. “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–124.

16. Sue McKemmish, “Are Records Ever Actual?” *Monash University*, 1998, accessed October 19, 2012, <http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/smcktrc.html>.

direction once again being felt by our profession in the Western world.”¹⁷ This new direction points away from the central and centralizing authority of the traditional, institution-based archive to discover the varied—and relative—documentary perspective offered by the community-based archive.

Community archives and collective memory

Burning Man’s configuration as an intentional community naturally lends itself to consideration within the developing discussion around community archives. The Burning Man Project, the entity responsible for organizing the festival, maintains its own archives, and these archives closely resemble those of the typical business organization.¹⁸ At the same time, Burning Man participants—who both form the community and provide the content for the event—actively generate and share documents surrounding the event. These documents overwhelmingly take the form of digital photographs, videos, blog posts, electronic bulletin boards, and listservs, but also include tangible artifacts. These shared documents and cultural artifacts form the basis for an archive reflective of and created by the Burning Man community.

The term “community” resists most attempts at precise definition. Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens,¹⁹ who study community-based archives in the United Kingdom, define it as an affiliation based on any number of factors, including ethnicity, geography, religious affiliation, workplace or profession, and even quite simply a shared leisure pursuit. Emma Waterton and

17. Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* (June 28, 2012): n.p., DOI: 10.1007/s10502-012-9180-7.

18. Email communication with Andie Grace, March 2011. Note that throughout this study I will refer to the staff of the Burning Man Project as the organizers, and the entity as the organization.

19. Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, “It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri. Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, eds. Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander (London, Facet Publishing: 2009), 5.

Laurajane Smith emphasize the fluid nature of the boundaries of communities and characterize them as processes in motion and social experiences.²⁰ The boundary of any given community is continually redefined, depending on the situation in which a definition becomes useful.²¹ Within the realm of archives, one of the salient characteristics of “community” derives from its distinctiveness from the institutional, centralized locus of power; for example, the government centralizes records about its citizens, whereas community archives distributes the creation and preservation of its members’ records. The community archives movement seeks to activate and preserve voices from outside institutions of power and, in this way, empower communities.²²

Building on and expanding the potential multiplicity of views offered by community archives, Jeannette Bastian, in *Owning Memory*, explores how the geographically dislocated archives of US Virgin Islanders, combined with their longstanding traditions of storytelling, ritual, and celebration, form what Bastian terms a “community of records.” The community of records develops through interactions—interactions between and among records, and between records and the individuals or society that created them. Further, Bastian shows how records themselves generate other records as they are used or entwined within the archival context.²³ Social media interacts similarly, as when someone comments on a blog post or status update,

20. Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith, “The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (January 2010): 8–9. The community archives Stevens, et al., have described in their work include materials not normally collected by institutional archive organizations, notably printed ephemera such as flyers and leaflets. Waterton and Smith also emphasize that communities develop through social, shared experiences and are independent of geography.

21. Elizabeth Crooke, “The Politics of Community Heritage: Motivations, Authority and Control,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 17.

22. Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (2009): 81–82.

23. Jeannette Allis Bastian, “A Community of Records,” in *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, ix–xi, 1–17. (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003): 5.

provides the backstory of a photo, responds to a video post with a new video, and so on. In this way, social media produces a collaborative contextual environment in which records communicate, or record, social memory.²⁴ Eric Ketelaar amplifies Bastian's position by adding the concept of *sharing* in the formation of collective memory, or as he rephrases it, "collected memories." Sharing operates in several senses: in the sense of finding a commonality between two different groups, sharing a purpose or value, or sharing ownership or creator-ship of records. In the realm of social media, shared photographs, videos, blog posts, and comments also build collective memories and shared identities.²⁵

Some of Bastian's other work interrogates accepted definitions of what constitutes a record in the traditional archival sense. In her 2009 discussion of Carnival in the Virgin Islands, Bastian applies conventional archival theories to determine if the cultural practice and ritual of Carnival can constitute an archive. Bastian proposes that performance and oral tradition may be understood as documents and evidence in their own right, as "embodied archives." In addition, she questions whether the archive can "identify, represent, and preserve a dynamic event without changing the nature of that event?" Bastian further argues that the archivist plays a key role in whether the archives can indeed encompass the ephemeral cultural event and suggests that the profession needs to expand the meaning of context. These tensions, between the written and the archival versus the performative and ephemeral, return in the intersection of literature of performance studies, and social media and archives.

24. Eric Ketelaar, "Records Out and Archives In: Early Modern Cities as Creators of Records and as Communities of Archives," *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (July 22, 2010): 207.

25. Eric Ketelaar, "Sharing: Collected Memories in Communities of Records," *Archives and Manuscripts* 33, no. 1 (2005): 5 (page numbers differ from print version), accessed October 15, 2012, at <http://infotech.monash.edu/research/about/centres/cosi/projects/mct/prato2006/ketelaar.pdf>.

Social media

Further extending the potential meanings of archive and record, sociologist and cultural theorist Mike Featherstone proposes the possibility of enlarging the walls of the archive to encompass the city. Parallel or coterminous with this city-archive, Featherstone envisions our modern “database society” being monitored by a “super-panopticon,” an archive made by our technology, filled with the dispersed fragments of identity. The archival store of information controls the individual, and in this framework, the surveilled body is enclosed in an archive constructed in large part by our own increasing ability and willingness to present into this archive the details of everyday life. From the city-space of the archive, Featherstone draws an equivocal path to the electronic spaces of social media, where we share all the details of our lives through text, photographs, video, and other electronic traces.²⁶

For the purposes of this study, the term “social media” encompasses the computer-mediated technologies that afford many-to-many communication. Thus, email and email lists, YouTube, and Twitter fall within the domain of social media, along with Facebook, Flickr, and other social networking sites. In their influential work, boyd and Ellison define social networking sites as “Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”²⁷ Social networking sites and other types of social media are fundamental to “Web 2.0,” a mode of Web technologies defined by user participation and user-generated content.²⁸

26. Mike Featherstone, “Archiving Cultures,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (January 2000): 173.

27. danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison. “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (October 2008): 211.

28. Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle, “Web Squared: Web 2.0 Five Years On,” *Web2Summit.com*, October 2009. Accessed October 12, 2012.

Social media and social networking sites afford easy communication and connection between individuals using the Internet. Barriers to entry are relatively low, merely requiring the hardware and an Internet connection. In the comparatively short timespan that Web 2.0 technology has been in common usage, it has exhibited a very high adoption rate; as Emil Protalinski noted on *The Next Web* site on October 4, 2012, Facebook recently surpassed one billion active users per month. As researchers boyd and Ellison observe, social media plays a significant role in users' everyday experience, providing social connections, support systems, access to informational resources, and the formation of communities.²⁹

Media scholars in the last decade have investigated countless aspects of social media, much more than can be included here. Quantitative methodologies tend to be the preferred route for researchers studying social media, because they offer such rich and abundant data sets. Kwak used data-mining techniques to analyze the diffusion of information on Twitter.³⁰ Likewise, Lotan gathered large data sets from Twitter to visualize information flows during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt.³¹ However, boyd and Crawford have criticized the exploitation and extrapolation of meanings from such large data sets, pointing out that users and accounts are not equivalent and interpretations of activity remain inconsistent. "The very meanings of 'user' and 'participation' and 'active' need to be critically examined."³²

29. boyd and Ellison, 221.

30. Haewoon Kwak, Changhyun Lee, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon, "What is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media? Categories and Subject Descriptors," In *International World Wide Web Conference*, (Raleigh, North Carolina, 2010): 592.

31. Gilad Lotan, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, and danah boyd, "The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *International Journal of Communications* 5 (2011): 1381.

32. danah boyd and Kate Crawford, "Critical Questions for Big Data," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 669.

Vitak and Ellison used qualitative research methods to gain insight into the support interactions and information-seeking behavior among Facebook users.³³ Christophe Aguiton and Dominique Cardon, French telecommunications analysts, view applications such as blogs and social media as being public spaces of personal production that encourage collaborative creation.³⁴ Others further examine the role of social media in the Arab Spring, searching for the intermediate ground between what they term “digital evangelists” and “techno-realists.”³⁵

However, social media as an archival object has received scant attention so far. Most literature published in the cross-section of archival studies and social media tends to offer advice on how to implement a social media campaign on behalf of the archive. Some, like Elizabeth Yakel’s work, are making space for archives users to insert their comments and reflections on finding aids or digital materials. Their approaches to making the archive more participatory, while laudatory and essential, still leave the job of appraisal and preservation of the content with the archivist.³⁶ Meanwhile, Leisa Gibbons is working to apply the continuum model to the YouTube phenomenon. In an overview of her ongoing research, she describes the collecting activity of three Australian institutions that are collecting material from YouTube and adding it to their collections in different ways. She asserts that the collection of YouTube material by these

33. Jessica Vitak and Nicole B. Ellison, “‘There’s a Network Out There You Might as Well Tap’: Exploring the Benefits of and Barriers to Exchanging Informational and Support-based Resources on Facebook,” *New Media & Society* (July 23, 2012), n.p., DOI: 10.1177/1461444812451566.

34. Christophe Aguiton and Dominique Cardon, “The Strength of Weak Cooperation: An Attempt to Understand the Meaning of Web 2.0,” *Communications and Strategies* no. 65 (2007): 51–65.

35. Francesca Comunello and Giuseppe Anzera, “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted? A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Social Media and the Arab Spring,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–18.

36. A model involving the participation of communities in selection, appraisal, and description is proposed in Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,” *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 87–101.

heritage institutions grants YouTube legitimacy, making it a location of political, cultural, and broadcasting significance. Others, like Daniel Caron and Richard Brown,³⁷ observe the shortening of the “documentary moment” in archives creation and propose that the increasing prevalence and ephemerality of online cultural production drastically reduces the time frame in which memory institutions can act to preserve these materials.

Often, scholars outside archival science imprecisely conceptualize social media as an “archive.” One author, Robert Gehl, labels YouTube an archival repository due to its centralized server structure (versus peer-to-peer) and the fact that the content is created by others and gathered together. He likens YouTube to a local historical museum that will one day accession local community members’ “attic treasures.”³⁸ In another exploration, Gehl characterizes Web 2.0 sites as “archives of affect.” Thanks to widespread corporate hegemony, site owners hold users’ data hostage in order to monetize their information.³⁹ Marketing scholar Robert Kozinets, in his textbook on online ethnographic research, suggests that social communications on the Internet are “instantaneously archived” and form a nearly complete record for study.⁴⁰ Collector Rick Prelinger dissects the reasons so many people tend to think of

37. Daniel J. Caron and Richard Brown. “The Documentary Moment in the Digital Age: Establishing New Value Propositions for Public Memory,” *Archivaria* 71 (Spring 2011): 9.

38. Robert Gehl, “YouTube as Archive: Who Will Curate This Digital Wunderkammer?” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 45. Also Snickars’ “The Archival Cloud” in *The YouTube Reader* equates “storage” of digital media as “archival” conflating storage with archive. The archive is, rather, storage and access. Social media offer, in the main, access to materials, but not archival (enduring) preservation.

39. Robert W. Gehl, “The Archive and the Processor: The Internal Logic of Web 2.0,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 8 (May 13, 2011): 1239. “Thus, what social media site users are interacting with is an archive of affect, digital objects that have meaning within the context of social connections. They are processing this digital archive; sorting their contacts into lists, liking this status update, commenting on that photograph, sharing a virtual gift.”

40. Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, (Sage, 2009), 7.

YouTube as an archive, in his chapter of *The YouTube Reader*, “The Appearance of Archives.”⁴¹ YouTube provides access to an immense and diverse collection of audio-visual material that is collectively curated by users in the style of Wikipedia; in addition, it offers social networking features. Prelinger argues that as a result of these affordances, YouTube has permanently altered user expectations for moving-image archives. Increased public awareness of archives, while beneficial, also means that definitions of archives and the role of the archivist are changing.

In their work delineating Web sphere analysis, Schneider and Foot propose that materials on the Web exist in a kind of permanent impermanence that must be actively preserved.⁴² They suggest that the Web may be “re-performed” exactly as it appeared at any point in the past by means of mechanisms such as the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. Searching for the earliest Web presence of the Burning Man website, the Wayback Machine could provide textual data, but links to other sites, to the earliest instance of the participant forum, and to most images, were non-functioning. A true “re-performance” of basic Web pages could not be summoned.

On the other hand, researchers recognize that material on the Web faces a short lifespan and forms a realm of “digital ephemera.” A recent Canadian online news piece highlights Canada’s Deputy Archivist Daniel Caron’s awareness of the fleeting existence of online discourse and the difficulty faced by institutional archivists in attempts to preserve it. Web researchers Hany Salaheldeen and Michael Nelson studied tweets from six different global news events occurring during the second half of 2009. They followed links embedded in the tweets to

41. Rick Prelinger, “The Appearance of Archives,” In *The YouTube Reader*, edited by Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, (National Library of Sweden, 2009), 268–274.

42. Steven M. Schneider and Kirsten A. Foot, “Web Sphere Analysis: An Approach to Studying Online Action,” in *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, edited by Christine Hine (New York: Berg, 2005), 166.

determine if the linked content was still retrievable on either the live Web, or archived using the Memento system, and calculated that after one year, 11% of the links in their data sets were no longer available.⁴³ Numerous studies published during the last decade have demonstrated the impermanence of web pages and links.⁴⁴ Social media may prove even more ephemeral.

Performance and social media

Scholarship in the realm of performance studies provides a basis for conceptualizing the difficulties in archiving online culture by complicating the distinctions between speech and writing, and by recognizing that the performed and the recorded have always existed together and interactively produced what is known.⁴⁵ The documentary moment exists at this liminal border. Eric Ketelaar, referencing Derrida's archivization, produced the term "archivalisation: the conscious or unconscious choice to consider something worth archiving."⁴⁶ The ephemerality of the present, of the live performance, troubles this choice of archivalisation. Some performance theorists suggest that the essential characteristic of the live performance rests in its very ephemerality and the impossibility of fully documenting it.⁴⁷ Clearly, even with advances in technology, documenting every aspect of a moment of lived experience will remain impossible,

43. Hany M. Salaheldeen and Michael L. Nelson, "Losing My Revolution," in *Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries*, 1–12, Paphos, Cyprus, 23–27 September 2012. Memento is a technical framework that permits browsing of Web resources as they appeared at a specified time in the past. See Herbert Van de Sompel et. al., "Memento: Time Travel for the Web," accessed October 19, 2012, <http://arxiv.org/abs/0911.1112>.

44. Research addressing web ephemerality includes Michael Day, "Preserving the Fabric of Our Lives: A Survey of Web Preservation Initiatives," *Research and Advanced Technology for Digital Libraries* (2004): 461–472; Robert P. Dellavalle et al., "Going, Going, Gone: Lost Internet References," *Science* 302 no. 5646 (2003): 787–788; Catherine O'Sullivan, "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," *American Archivist* 68 no.1 (2005): 53–73; and Edmund Russell and Jennifer Kane, "The Missing Link: Assessing the Reliability of Internet Citations in History Journals," *Technology and Culture* 49 no. 2 (2008): 420–429.

45. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, (Columbia University: New York, 1996), 11.

46. Eric Ketelaar, "Archivalisation and Archiving," *Archives and Manuscripts* 26, no. 1 (1998): 57.

47. Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 14.

with each refinement in measurement or documentation approaching true representation asymptotically but never reaching that point. With the “liveness” of social media, where every “friend feed,” status update, tweet, photo, blog, and video post receiving comments and thus accreting further meaning as it continues to exist and be accessible online, the goal of fully archiving the online culture of any community cannot be achieved. Still, archivalisation should and does occur in these spaces of interaction and culture-making.

Performance theorist Diana Taylor proposes that a rift exists between archival or enduring materials and the ephemeral, termed the repertoire, expressed as a set of “embodied practice/knowledge” that encompasses the spoken, the played, and the performed.⁴⁸ Others traversing the theoretical regions between archive and performance have explored this borderline between the recorded and recordable and the ephemeral-live. Sarah Jones draws on Taylor to pose questions about how an archive can effectively capture live performance. The work suggests an approach or a set of approaches to reconcile the archive and the repertoire by recognizing the variability and change that already exists in the archive (the whole of the archive experiences flux and change in content, arrangement, perceptions) and also incorporating the archive into the performance—the use of records in the archive essentially performs and re-performs the archive.⁴⁹

The documentation of performance art and performative documentation also lie at the center of Philip Auslander’s 2006 essay “The Performativity of Performance Art

48. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 2003), 19.

49. Sarah Jones, Daisy Abbott, and Seamus Ross, “Redefining the Performing Arts Archive,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 3–4 (2009): 169.

Documentation.”⁵⁰ Auslander discerns two categories of documentation at play in the world of performance art, theatrical or documentary. Documentary photography operates as evidence of the performance and provides an “access point” to the work. Theatrical photography encompasses works that are staged in order to be documented, as “performed photography.” Auslander proposes that differences between the two derive from ideological perspectives based on whether the first live performance occurs with an intentional audience. Auslander goes on to trouble this distinction, pointing out that the act of documenting (photographing) constitutes a performance in itself and, further, the documentation produces and not just describes the event.⁵¹

Engaging in the activity of social media presents opportunities for performance as well. In his memoir, *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold recounts his experiences as a key member of the community that grew up and around the Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link (WELL), one of the first publicly accessible online bulletin board systems. Rheingold describes the community bonds afforded and mediated by the personal computer and Internet connection, and challenges conceptions that online relationships and communities are less authentic than face-to-face experiences.⁵² His experiences on the WELL led Rheingold to observe that writing becomes a type of performance as a result of these near-synchronous online interactions. Other scholars have since suggested the idea that the creation of a text in an online environment, such as an electronic bulletin board or other social media, might constitute a performative activity. Niels

50. Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 84 (2006): 1–10.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.

52. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Revised edition. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 25.

Brügger, while considering the website as a discrete area of study, contemplates the physical and semantic performativity of navigating the Web.⁵³

Where Brügger for the most part considers the physical performance of Web action, such as navigating between browser windows, media scholar Bernie Hogan explores the performance of identity by employing Erving Goffman's theories of interaction and impression management. Hogan seeks to differentiate between actor and artifact in the social media environment. He notes: "The actor performs in real time for an audience that monitors the actor. The artifact is the result of a past performance and lives on for others to view on their time."⁵⁴ For Hogan, online social spaces accommodate both performance and exhibition, but with social media constituting exhibition. "Can all content be considered a performance? To address this issue, it is useful to distinguish between performance as ephemeral act and performance as recorded act." Hogan gives performance two different aspects, the live and the recorded, based on the change in audience for the performance. "It no longer necessarily bounds the specific audience who were present when the performance took place."⁵⁵ For Hogan, performance can be either ephemeral or recorded (enduring), whereas Jones et al. suggest the antipodal, that the archive can be performed and mutable as well as fixed.

In view of the above four intersections of discourse—postmodernism, community archives, studies of the web and social media, and performance studies—I situate the documents created and shared via social media as ephemeral performances of community. The web is

53. Niels Brügger, "Website History and the Website as an Object of Study," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2009): 122.

54. Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, no. 6 (November 1, 2010): 377.

55. *Ibid.*, 380.

ephemeral. Social media can be likened to a performance, where the performance equates the production of the documentary trace necessary for the construction of the archive. The archive as traditionally conceived embodies permanence, and this is at odds with the cultural production of social media, which is ever changing and difficult (for now) to fix in an archive. Archives, though, need to concern themselves with social media, if they hope to preserve a record of current socio-cultural and political activity. These performance/documents, the photographs, video, textual commentary and blogs, reflect the community's reality—its actions and values—in almost real-time. Social media, as “user-generated” documents, forms a complex of records that both serves and reflects its community of creators.

Chapter 3: Context

*What is the secret to Burning Man?
Burning Man is a transformation engine. It transforms the way that people see reality.*⁵⁶

The Burning Man context

The Burning Man festival takes place each year during the week leading up to the Labor Day holiday, opening during the last days of August. The event occupies a seven-square-mile section of the expansive Black Rock Desert in northwestern Nevada, 120 miles northeast of Reno. The vast, blank playa (Spanish for “beach”) fills 400 square miles of flat alkali saltpan, framed at distant horizons by the dusky blue mountains of the Black Rock range. The desert offers no natural water and no natural shade. On this high plateau, 4,000 feet above sea level, late summer temperatures routinely soar to above 100 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and sometimes dip near freezing at night. Dust storms generating whiteout conditions can occur at all hours. The forbidding climate notwithstanding, in 2011 the event attracted almost 54,000 participants.⁵⁷

56. Michael Mikel, interview with the author, June 14, 2012.

57. “Afterburn Report 2011,” *Burning Man*, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://afterburn.burningman.com/11>. Official population figures for the 2012 event remain unavailable as of this writing.

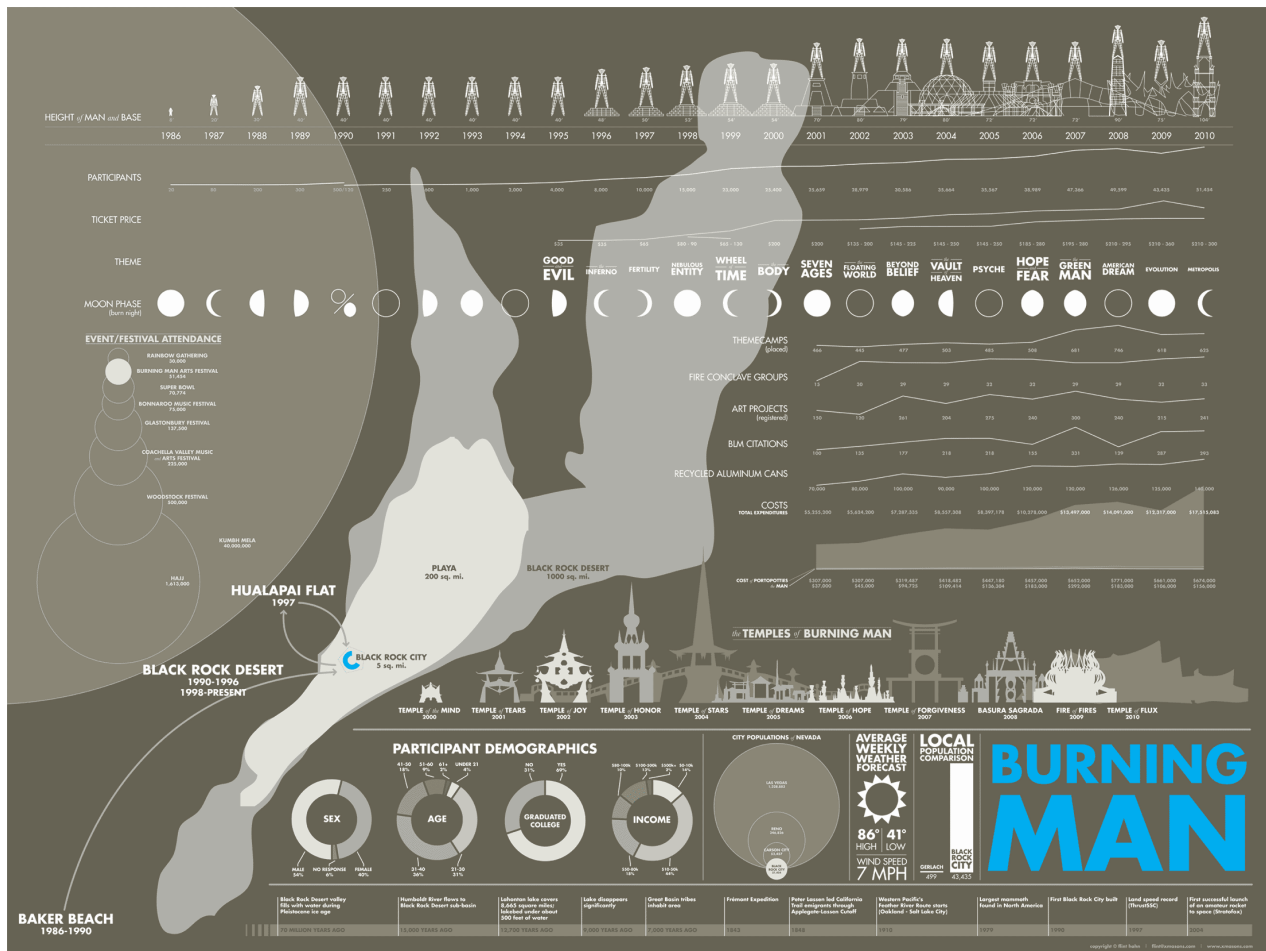


Figure 1: Participant-created infographic posted to Flickr. Courtesy of designer Flint Hahn (2010).

The Burning Man event originated in San Francisco among a group of friends who gathered on Baker Beach during the summer solstice of 1986 to burn a wooden sculpture, a stick-figure effigy of a man, for no publicly stated reason. Over the ensuing years, the central founders, Larry Harvey and Jerry James, and a growing group of friends and attendees, repeated the ritual at Baker Beach.⁵⁸ Eventually, the gathering became large enough to attract the attention of the local authorities. When they quashed the 1990 burning of the effigy at the beach site, the group sought and found another, more fitting venue in the Nevada desert, burning the Man over Labor

58. "What is Burning Man?," *Burning Man*, accessed October 12, 2012, www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1986_1996/index.html.

Day weekend of that year. Since its move to the desert, Burning Man has undergone dramatic transformations, from an inchoate collection of nonconformists, into a well-ordered yearly festival of music, performance, ritual, and art of all imaginable varieties.

The conceptual origins of Burning Man can be traced along a genealogy through the works of anarchist Hakim Bey (in particular, his concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, or ‘TAZ’), situationist Guy Debord, the Dadaists, and surrealism.⁵⁹ By the late 1980s, the San Francisco Cacophony Society, known for hosting elaborate urban adventures such as formal dinners on the Golden Gate Bridge, discovered the annual beach gathering. They were instrumental in finding the new desert location, 350 miles east of San Francisco. In a flyer for the event, these early co-creators called it “Zone Trip #4,”⁶⁰ in reference to Bey’s reconception of pirate utopias from eras past. Bey asks: “Are we who live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom?”⁶¹

Upon this conceptual foundation, attendees (more precisely described as participants), co-create the Burning Man event. Unlike most art and music festivals, Burning Man presents no headlining acts and engages in no paid advertising. Participants, self-identified as “burners,” create all the art, perform the music, become the spectacle, and build or support much of the infrastructure, including construction and staffing of the airport. Participants actively create the event, rather than passively consume it. As journalist Brian Doherty observes, “Burning Man’s

59. Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture*, second ed., (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 197. For a further exploration of the heritage of surrealism in art at Burning Man, see also Marc van Proyen’s essay, “A Tale of Two Surrealities,” in *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man*, ed. Lee Gilmore and Marc Van Proyen (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2005), 173–193.

60. Scott Beale “Bad Day At Black Rock (Cacophony Society Zone Trip #4)” *LaughingSquid* (blog), January 18, 2007, accessed October 09, 2012, <http://laughingsquid.com/bad-day-at-black-rock-cacophony-society-zone-trip-4>.

61. Hakim Bey, “Part 3: T. A. Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism,” *Hermetic.com*, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html#labelTAZ>.

unique [...] insistence on active creative participation [...] in a consciously grim and unwelcoming blankness that becomes a canvas for the largest act of ephemeral collective creativity man has ever known [...] has no real parallel.”⁶² The chance to join a group of friends in creating art in an alien environment has drawn my participation in the event eight times between 2004 and 2012.

Weeks before the festival opens each year, event organizers and crews of volunteers trace out the boundaries of the event location, pounding metal stakes by hand to erect a pentagonal perimeter of several miles of orange plastic netting, known as the trash fence. Within this perimeter, the city’s curving streets are surveyed and laid out concentrically around the focal point of the event, the Man. Within the embrace of the city’s streets, encircling the Man, a wide expanse of open playa is dotted with participant-created art installations of all sizes, from monumental open cathedrals, to intimate arrays of tiny figures molded from mud.

62. Brian Doherty, *This Is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground*. (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), 4.



Figure 2: *Burning Man 2012 – Kokopelli*. Photo courtesy of Flickr user extramatic (James Addison). In the foreground, a CORE (Circle of Regional Effigies) project from the New Mexico Regional group. In the background, the Man stands atop an architectural base designed by Andrew Johnstone. The design of the Man’s base changes each year.

The central ritual, the ceremonial burning of the wood and neon Man, occurs on Saturday, two days before the event’s conclusion. Participants and organizers eschew official interpretations and participants bring their own meanings to the ritual. An operatic spectacle accompanies the burning of the Man, which begins with an elaborate choreographic display of fireworks. Thousands of participants gather near the Man to revel in the celebration. At the base of the Man, crowds of fire-spinners perform to amplified music emanating from the sound systems of “mutant vehicles,” art cars that have been sufficiently altered to no longer resemble normal vehicular transport.

Other monumental “burns” are regularly performed at Burning Man. Artists frequently create enormous sculptures meant to be consumed by fire during the week. In 2007, artists

constructed a 100-foot tall oil derrick that exploded in a roiling mushroom cloud. 2011 saw the spectacular destruction of a giant Trojan horse that was towed by rope into the playa and ignited by a flaming arrow. One recurring structure meant for conflagration is the Temple. The ritual of the Temple originated in 2000, when artist David Best installed “The Temple of the Mind,” a 20-foot-tall structure composed of the excess plywood remaining after the manufacture of children’s dinosaur puzzles. A close friend of the artist had died in an accident a shortly before the event that year, and Best’s installation took on the quality of a memorial. Since then, various participant groups have repeated the Temple installation each year, in different forms and sizes. Throughout the week of the event, participants install altars of small artifacts and mementos, write personal memorials on its walls, and attach photographs of loved ones to the Temple’s structure (Figure 3). Most, though not all, of the sentiments expressed on the Temple walls are testaments of grief and loss. On Sunday, the day after the Man burns, the Temple, too, is ignited. This ritual occurs in an aura of expectant solemnity, contrasting with the previous night’s celebratory conflagration.⁶³

63. Sarah M. Pike, “No Novenas for the Dead,” in *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, ed. Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2005): 195–213.



Figure 3: *Inside the Temple*, 2012. Photo courtesy of LadyBee (Christine Kristen).

Ethos

Over the course of the event's history, the traditions and values of the community of participants have gelled into a list of tenets called the Ten Principles. The Ten Principles establish the foundational ethos of all Burning Man events. Although they arose organically out of community practices, founder Larry Harvey first articulated the principles in 2004 as part of the expansion of the Regional events. The "Regionals" are events based on Burning Man and organized outside of Nevada in the home localities of burners. In order to organize a regional burn and use the Burning Man name, regional organizers are required to agree to a contract that stipulates adherence to the Ten Principles. Combined together, the principles serve to differentiate Burning

Man-affiliated events from other similar musical or artistic gatherings. Promoted on the Burning Man website, through emailed communications, and the printed event guide mailed each year and distributed upon arrival to ticket holders, the principles codify the values of the Burning Man community.⁶⁴

The first tenet holds that Burning Man is *radically inclusive*: “Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.” The next two principles are intertwined. Burning Man operates on a *gift* economy, in which resources are shared freely between participants, promotes social interaction that is unmediated by commodification: “The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.” Commercial vending is prohibited, unlike the pervasive hawking found at other similar gatherings; in the Burning Man context, *decommodification* allows for interactions between attendees that are not predicated on the exchange of money or “commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising.”⁶⁵ Next, Burning Man espouses *radical self-reliance*: all attendees must plan for and bring with them everything—water, food, shelter—required for their own survival and comfort in the harsh and remote desert environment.

Radical self-expression encourages attendees to let loose their own creative impulses and share the results with the community. In the language of the Ten Principles, this correlates to the giving of a gift. *Communal effort* recognizes the importance of collaboration in building Black Rock City and filling its confines with the art, performance, and civic amenities at the heart of its

64. “Ten Principles,” *Burning Man*, accessed October 12, 2012, http://burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html.

65. Robert V. Kozinets, “Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, no. 1 (2002): 20–38.

appeal. The next principle, *civic responsibility*, promotes assumption of responsibility with regard to public welfare and existing laws.

Burning Man adheres to a ‘*leave no trace*’ policy at all of its events, a rule developed out of its history of holding the event on Federal wilderness lands. After the end of the event, hundreds of volunteers remain at the desert site to comb it for any leftover debris known as MOOP, or “matter out of place,” ranging from nut shells to glitter to forgotten tent spikes. Volunteerism is incorporated in the next principle, *participation*, or “no spectators”: “We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.”

In some ways the most challenging to define, the tenth value, *immediacy*, incorporates essential elements of previous principles, such as de commodification and radical self-reliance. The notion of immediacy represents an intentional engagement with the present moment and experience—a split from the “mediated-ness of our everyday lives.” Immediacy encourages participants to live in the moment and recognize the importance of unfiltered personal experience.

Expansion of the culture of Burning Man

Beyond the main Burning Man event, several offshoot organizations continue to carry the Burning Man ethos into other communities. First, a network of Burning Man-based gatherings, known as the “Regionals,” began to grow in the late 1990s. In 2004, the Regionals structure became more methodically documented with the institution of agreements between the organization and representatives in local areas. Now, hundreds of local groups host Burning Man

events around the world, including Africa, throughout Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. Next and also on a global scale, the nonprofit Black Rock Arts Foundation distributes hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants each year to artists and public art foundations to support interactive public art. Another charitable organization, Burners Without Borders (BWB), formed spontaneously in 2005 after participants had learned of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. They formed an ad-hoc volunteer organization to help victims rebuild a Vietnamese temple in Biloxi, Mississippi. BWB engages in civic and community-building projects worldwide, and also distributes grant money. Finally, the nonprofit Black Rock Solar “provides low-cost, high-quality clean energy services to clients in the nonprofit, public, low-income and educational sectors, with a focus on rural and tribal clients.”⁶⁶

Inflection point

On July 24, 2011, for the first time in its 25-year history, tickets to Burning Man sold out.⁶⁷ The occasion precipitated a flurry of coverage in the mainstream media and posts in social media, along with a rash of ticket scalping. Tickets—even *used* tickets to previous years’ events—began to appear for sale in online auction systems, often at many times their face value. The situation forced Burning Man organizers to redesign their online first-come, first-serve ticketing process for the 2012 event. Late in 2011, the organizers settled on a “lottery” system that allotted tickets to a randomly drawn portion of the many thousands of people who wanted to purchase

66. “Burning Man: Regional Contacts,” *Burning Man*, <http://regionals.burningman.com>; “Black Rock Arts Foundation,” <http://blackrockarts.org>; “Black Rock Solar: Mission and Vision,” <http://blackrocksolar.org/about/mission-and-vision>. All pages accessed October 12, 2012.

67. Tickets for 2011 cost between \$210 and \$320 in tiered pricing, (<http://tickets2.burningman.com/events/134667/Burning-Man-2011>). Tickets for 2012 cost between \$240 and \$390 for the main sale (<http://tickets.burningman.com>). Both pages accessed October 12, 2012.

them. Unfortunately, the ticket system received far more registrations than expected, by some reports surpassing the number of available tickets by a factor of three.

The unforeseen demand and the environment of scarcity meant that many long-time participants were unable to obtain a ticket. By some estimates, only a quarter of some larger participant groups were successful in the lottery system. Because participants not only attend but also construct, perform, and populate Black Rock City, distributing tickets at random threatened to disrupt the fabric of the event and the ability of artist groups to plan and coordinate the large, complex projects that make the event so vibrantly unique. In the resulting confusion, participants took to social media to voice their complaints, especially in the comments of the official “Burning Blog” where the organization posted updates about the situation.⁶⁸

In a blog post about the ticket fiasco, Andie Grace, at that time the Communications Manager for the Burning Man organization, referred to the significant influence of social media in creating such a huge impact on the community. In particular, she identified a participant-created video as having inspired the unparalleled spikes in interest by newcomers. The video, “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!,” depicts dozens of participants (who self-identify as “burners”) at the event, reciting the Dr. Seuss story in their typically colorful playa costumes while interacting with the art and their surroundings.⁶⁹ This is not to say that the actual sellout of tickets for the previous year’s event and all the press that it generated did not raise Burning Man’s presence in the public’s consciousness. But these two factors appear to have snowballed, such that tens of thousands more would-be ticket purchasers registered during the main sale registration period

68. Marian Goodell, “Burning Man Addresses 2012 Ticket Situation,” *Burning Blog*, February 3, 2012, <http://blog.burningman.com/2012/02/news/burning-man-addresses-2012-ticket-situation>.

69. “Oh, the Places You’ll Go at Burning Man! (OFFICIAL),” YouTube video, 7:09, January 6, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahv_1IS7SiE.

than could be accommodated. The 2012 ticket debacle promised to impose a historic transformation, or as Andie Grace termed it, an “inflection point,” in the culture of Burning Man.⁷⁰

Burning Man has been the subject of numerous in-depth scholarly studies and journal articles. Religious studies scholar Lee Gilmore’s 2005 work *Theatre in a Crowded Fire* contemplates Burning Man culture and community vis-à-vis the aspects of contemporary expressions of spirituality, ritual and performance. Ritual features prominently in the work of Rachel Bowditch as well, who explores the many guises of performance to be found at the event. Jeremy Hockett formulated an ethnography of the self in his work on the event, providing insights into the way media shape and deform identities. Sociologist Katherine Chen has published prolifically and rigorously about the Burning Man organization. Her book *Enabling Creative Chaos* recounts and analyzes the organization’s development from a small ad-hoc group into a more professionalized staff. In a recent published work Chen examines the importance of storytelling — in person, via web fora and documents — in the creation of meaning within the organization.⁷¹

From the earliest point in the event’s existence Burning Man participants and organizers have used Web-based technologies to communicate with each other, to share their culture and values, and to engage in debates about what the community represents and its place within larger society. In that way, the vociferous complaints surrounding the ticketing problem represent nothing new or surprising. Several pages of comments left on an early version of the Burning

70. Andie Grace, in discussion with the author, Oakland, California, June 14, 2012.

71. Rachel Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man*, (London: Seagull Books, 2010); Jeremy Todd Hockett, “Reckoning Ritual and Counterculture in the Burning Man Community: Communication, Ethnography, and the Self in Reflexive Modernism,” University of New Mexico, 2004; Katherine Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. 1st ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2009); idem, “Charismatizing the Routine: Storytelling for Meaning and Agency in the Burning Man Organization,” *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 3 (June 6, 2012): 311–334.

Man website, following the 1997 event, can be retrieved via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, and demonstrate the community's long history of debate, negotiation and self-reflection. The comments from that time fill in details and corroborate stories told and recorded elsewhere, by journalists and scholars, that influence the way the event is created and experienced today. What will remain though in fifteen years of today's interactions, observations, and criticisms occurring on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr?

Chapter 4: Methods

This study employs a case study framework consisting of an online survey and semi-structured interviews to explore the role social media plays in facilitating, creating, or documenting the Burning Man community. According to Robert K. Yin, an expert in case study research, a study that “asks a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question about a contemporary set of events and over which the investigator has little or no control” is best approached using the case study methodology.⁷² Case studies serve to address areas of inquiry where the topic under examination meshes neatly with the context in which it appears.⁷³ While similar in this way to a historical study, this form of research best suits the study of contemporary events, processes, groups, or other similar topics or situations. Multiple data sources, gleaned from either quantitative evidence, qualitative material, or some combination of both, combine to help researchers using the case study method to triangulate answers to their questions. Within the context of Burning Man, as an event, a community, and a cultural movement, this research seeks to investigate the role of social media, in order to inform archival practice and broaden the paradigm of archives.

Selecting the Burning Man event and community as boundary for the study provides a natural scope limitation for the exploration of such a wide topic as social media. In addition, the event’s participant-created content foregrounds the notion of user-generated cultural expression, also an important characteristic of social media. Moreover, the Burning Man event exhibits a longevity of more than 25 years with steady growth, allowing us to look at how the effects of new media technologies may have influenced the event over time, while providing an abundance of

72. Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (SAGE, 2009) 13.

73. *Ibid.*, 18.

documentation on which to base the analysis. Finally, a case study of social media in a community setting like Burning Man can be related to other social movements and communities where a large component of activity is found on the Web and in social media sites, for example, the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring of 2011. Lack of entrée into either of these movements (and cultural and language barriers in the case of the Arab Spring) preclude my engagement in comparative studies of these phenomena, but clearly provide fertile ground for future research.

Survey data and open-ended, semi-structured interviewing techniques supplement the case study approach. Because the study focuses on social media, its specific role in the community, and the community's attitudes toward it, I sought to incorporate the views of participants in the research. A survey offered an efficient means to reach many participants. The survey sought to establish whether, how, and why Burning Man participants engage with social media, what types of social media technologies are most important to them, and what their attitudes are towards social media.

I piloted the survey two times via a link sent to a small set of trusted friends familiar with the Burning Man context. A finalized link to the online questionnaire was distributed by the Burning Man organization in their regular informational emails to participants who voluntarily subscribe. This newsletter always contains a variety of content supplied by Burning Man participants along with official communications from the organizers, and has previously presented opportunities to participate in other similar academic surveys. The survey took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Respondents could choose to exit the survey at any time. As with any voluntary survey, self-selecting participants typically show stronger opinions

toward the topic of study, either positive or negative. This form of response bias is mitigated with the use of open-text questions and using qualitative coding methods to evaluate the data.

I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to explore the open-text responses, using tools such as word-frequency analysis and keyword search. All open-text survey responses were coded to allow for categorization of content and to track emerging themes. Coding the textual data allowed for themes to emerge organically, building from simple classifications of answers to broader themes throughout the data.

Along with the survey, I conducted four interviews to enhance the depth of detail and insight. The survey questions provided an outline for the interview format. I invited informants to be interviewed based on my entrée into the culture of Burning Man. I hoped to include viewpoints reflecting the Burning Man organization as well as participants using social media. To present the organization's perspectives, I requested and was granted interviews with three members of the organization: Andie Grace, at the time Communications Manager/Regional Network Manager; Will Chase, Communications Specialist; and Michael Mikel, aka Danger Ranger, Director of Genetic Programming and member of the board. To enrich description from a participant standpoint, I interviewed the creator of the "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" video that had been released on YouTube on the eve of the launch of the new ticket lottery system in early 2012. The interviews were semi-structured, beginning with a discussion of the interviewee's personal history and involvement with Burning Man and moving organically to topics relating to social media, the Web, and the community. The interviews were recorded and transcribed from audio recordings, and coded using qualitative data analysis software.

Because the goal of the study is to explore and expose the role of social media in this community rather than identify quantitative measures of use, I primarily employed qualitative

methodologies. This project does not attempt to perform network analysis or to retrieve “big data” sets from social networking sites. Indeed, boyd and Crawford suggest that the aura of validity claimed by “big” social networking data should be more critically evaluated and potentially combined or contrasted with the insights gained from studies relying on more limited data sets, even down to one individual. “The size of data should fit the research question being asked; in some cases, small is best.”⁷⁴

74. danah boyd and Kate Crawford, “Critical Questions for Big Data,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 670.

Chapter 5: Survey and Interview Data

The online survey yielded 210 respondents; of these, 180 elected to answer some or all of the questions, proceeding through the end of the survey and clicking “done.” Responses were recorded anonymously. Empty responses from those who agreed to begin the survey but did not answer any questions were not included in the analysis. Respondents could choose to answer or not answer any question; therefore, responses were analyzed based on total responses for each question. In view of the approximate number of recipients on the newsletter subscription list (166,000), 210 respondents represents about 0.1% of potential respondents—that is, if every email address on the distribution list is active. Although the relative response rate was small, the survey included 19 open-text fields. Of those, 6-8 fields sought more lengthy, thoughtful, and descriptive responses. The roughly 200 completed responses provided a rich data set, in particular with regard to these qualitative responses.

The commercial online provider, SurveyMonkey.com, hosted the survey tool. Once the survey received approval from the Institutional Review Board, I forwarded the survey link to Burning Man organizers for inclusion in a forthcoming issue of the newsletter, “The Jack Rabbit Speaks.” According to organizers, subscribers to the newsletter represent “core” Burning Man attendees, as compared to “fans” of the official Burning Man Facebook page or followers of its official Twitter stream. In addition to voluntarily subscribing via the Burning Man website, those who purchase tickets to the event are automatically added to the distribution list.⁷⁵ The active link to the survey was included in the newsletter distributed to subscribers on June 29, 2012. The

75. Interview with Will Chase, Burning Man offices, San Francisco, June 15, 2012.

call for participants and survey can be found in Appendix A. The survey remained active until August 4, 2012, for a total of 37 days.

Survey questions were framed to build an understanding of which social media platforms were most commonly used and how they were used in the Burning Man community. The survey contained around 30 questions, beginning with basic demographic information such as respondent's location and age group and the number of times the respondent had attended the event. Subsequent questions asked about the types of social media or online information outlets they utilized, whether they followed official Burning Man accounts, or the social media streams of other burners. Other questions asked what objects—digital or physical—burners had collected or whether they felt social media had affected their experience of the event. Response types included multiple choice allowing more than one selection, open-text, drop-down menus, and five-level Likert-type ratings. To avoid the primacy effect in multiple-choice selections, the response choices were randomized by the survey provider's software for each participant.

While I knew I wanted to find out how my fellow burners felt about social media, especially in light of the ticketing imbroglio, I tried to formulate a survey that would neither take too long to complete nor bore respondents. For the most part, I believe the survey achieves these goals. I was also concerned that the language and tone of the survey should ring true to the community, despite the rather imposing informed-consent language placed at the beginning. Prompting further self-reflexivity on my part, I recognized that the survey link would be sent to everyone on the email newsletter list, including many friends and acquaintances. Hindsight, together with the resulting pool of responses, stimulate ideas for more and better questions to ask of the community, should future research opportunities in this area arise for myself or others.

Demographic information

The age range distribution of survey respondents corresponds roughly with the most recently available data gathered through the voluntary on-playa census, as shown in Figures 4 and 5 below.⁷⁶ To visualize the global nature of the Burning Man culture, the survey requested geographical region, country, and, if applicable, U.S. state. One hundred-eighty of 207 (87%) were from the United States, 14 (6.8%) from Europe, 10 (4.8%) from Canada, and less than 1% of respondents from Asia, Australia, or New Zealand. Census data posted on the BurningMan.com website does not provide information about the numbers of burners worldwide who attend the event in Nevada.

Survey Respondents

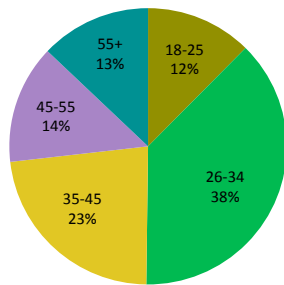


Figure 4: Age ranges of respondents

2011 census

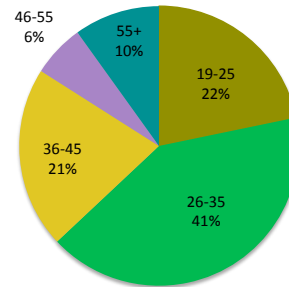


Figure 5: Age ranges, on-site census, 2011.

76. "Afterburn Report 2011: Census," *Burning Man*, accessed October 11, 2012, <http://afterburn.burningman.com/11/census/index.html>.

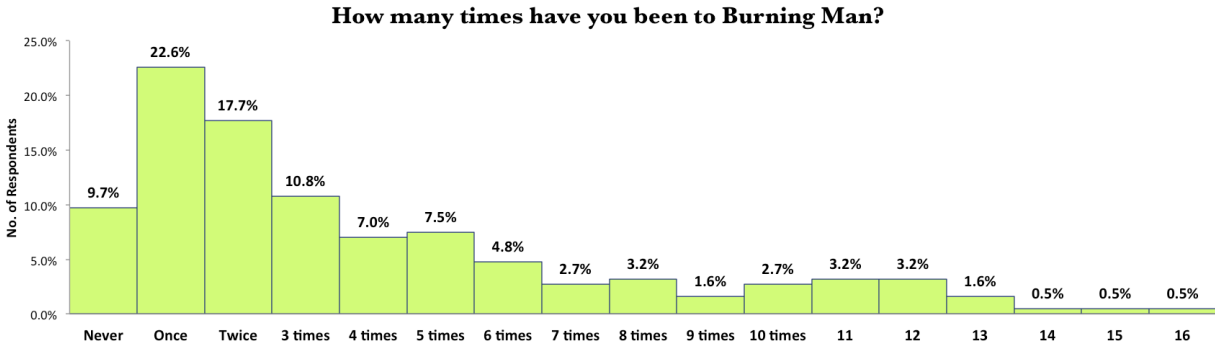


Figure 6: Event attendance by respondents

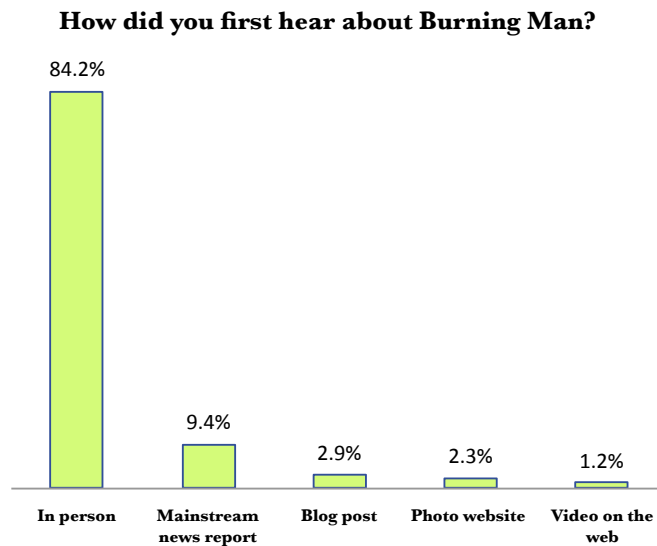


Figure 7: How did you first hear about Burning Man?

Participation

Survey respondents attended the event between zero and 16 times: 23% of respondents attended once before, 18% twice, and 11% three times, as shown in Figure 6, above. Burning Man does not advertise the event, and correspondingly 84% of those who participated in the survey indicated that they heard about the event first-hand from a friend, family member, neighbor, or coworker (Figure 7). Although I am wary of extrapolating these survey results to the reported 120,000 who registered to buy tickets via the lottery, the indication that most

respondents heard about the event from first-hand sources tends to contradict the impression in the community that the spike in interest is entirely attributable to social media.

One hundred eighty-four people described in open-text fields how they participate at Burning Man. A few replied simply: “partying,” “heartily,” or “massage.” Often, respondents mentioned multiple forms of participation in their answer instead of just one. The majority of respondents indicated that they either lead or support a theme camp. The next most frequent form of participation was volunteering with one of the Burning Man departments, such as Gate, Department of Public Works (DPW), the Café, the Department of Mutant Vehicles (DMV), Black Rock Rangers, or Greeters (a glossary of these and other terms specific to Burning Man can be found in Appendix B). Bringing or working on an art installation represented the third most reported type of participation, followed by what could be loosely described as intentional social interaction, or, as one response put it, “Roaming around, making new friends, applauding, smiling, hugging, monitoring fires, dancing, making and trading outfits, climbing.” The next most frequently mentioned form of participation involved some sort of performance, including fire performance, performance art, “guerrilla performance,” leading workshops, such as “teaching a dance/movement class at a camp,” “performance, Fire Conclave, circus performances, teaching acro in center camp, taking classes and workshops,” and being “part of the Playa Choir.” The remaining most frequent responses included the distribution (“gifting” in Burning Man vernacular) of handmade items or food and drink, bringing or working on an art car, and wearing costumes.

Collecting and keeping

The principle of gifting operates on many levels at the Burning Man event. On the one hand, it helps to keep out commercial vending. According to lore, gifting arose out of the event’s first few

years, when it was small enough that virtually everyone who attended knew everyone else. In such circumstances, the thought of charging someone for a sandwich would have been out of place.⁷⁷ Gifts received during the event take many different forms, many of them collectible. My own collecting impulses informed the survey questions concerning the types of objects—physical or digital—participants collect that relate to their Burning Man experience. The survey asked respondents to identify the types of objects they collect and then to describe what they do with the items. The survey then asked respondents to identify an item whether physical or digital that they prized above all others, and to describe how they came to collect this object. The questions in this category elicited the most richly detailed and sometimes heartfelt responses, discussed below.

Observation and my own experience indicate that burners collect a variety of materials connected to the event. By far the most frequently collected physical objects are playa gifts, as indicated by 78% of respondents. Typically, playa gifts are bespoke tokens, frequently handmade, that participants share with each other as remembrances. Most of these playa gifts take the form of necklaces and medallions to be worn around the neck. Other popular items include bracelets, embroidered patches and stickers, fabricated to custom design. Figure 8 and Figure 9 depict a few playa gifts; more images of material culture can be found on the Burning Man website. Other physical objects collected by participants include the official city map for that year and the “What-Where-When” guide, both of which are distributed to participants upon arrival. Other physical mementos include non-gift artifacts such as small amounts of playa dust; bits of melted neon from the Man sculpture gathered from the embers after the burn; or

77. “Burning Man Newsletter, Building Burning Man: 1999...A Desert Civilization,” accessed October 10, 2012, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991007121010/http://burningman.com/project/newsletter/desert.html>

remnants of the Temple after its incineration. In response to, “What do you do with the physical materials you collect?” a word frequency analysis of the open-text responses revealed that participants keep them stashed in boxes, display them in their homes or offices, wear them (often year-round), save them for next year to be re-used or worn, give as gifts to others, or place them in files or binders.



Figure 8: Selection of playa gifts. Collection of the author.



Figure 9: Pendants fabricated from melted neon glass from the Man, by Elizabeth Monson. Photo courtesy the artist.

Regarding digital objects, 93% of survey respondents indicated that they collect photographs, 60% videos, and 50% music. Other valued digital resources include websites, blogs, and social media posts, text, and audio recordings. Digital items are shared, stored on the computer, archived, bookmarked, reviewed, replayed, and re-watched. One answer in this category bemoaned the fact that Second Life, the online 3-D virtual world, had not been included among the answer choices:

I'm also involved in the BURN2 regional (www.burn2.org), Burning Man's ONLY digital regional that takes place in the virtual world of Second Life. It's curious that your survey doesn't mention this, especially since our regional is one of the largest with tens of thousands of visitors every year, holding events year round, and a week-long event every October.

While it remains undetermined as to how this online event might best be collected, this response evokes the variety of social media platforms connecting burners.⁷⁸

The survey asked respondents to describe their most treasured item, be it in a tangible, physical form, or in the form of a digital object. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that they prized an object in a physical form, rather than digital. Of those physical items, most were necklaces. Of the 21% who treasure an intangible object, 57% refer to photographs and 35% to videos (with almost half of those specifically mentioning the video “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!”). One response seemed to encompass elements from all categories—tangible, intangible, photo, video, memory:

1. Photos, videos, and memories lodged in my head and heart. The dreams and nightmares and wonderment of it all.

2. I have a tiny “man” necklace made of twine and two nails that were found in the Temple ashes and welded together. Given to me by a camp mate, he had brought his mother’s ashes to the Temple to burn and after the fire, he took the remnants—the nails—and made necklaces for friends and camp mates as a symbolic way to keep her spirit alive and to signal re-birth.

3. A nice warm hoodie. It was gifted to me. Probably in appreciation of contributions made (pre-playa) to an awesome art car.

4. A framed and mounted photo of the fantastic Giant Cock Car—a reward from a fundraiser. I cherish it because it’s my favorite art car. There is no way to articulate how that car in particular just fills my head and heart with pure and simple JOY. It probably has to do with the fact that I raised chickens as a kid.⁷⁹

The thing I prize above all others is the experience and wonder and inspiration that is born from it all. (35-45 year old, 4x attendee, California)

Another shared this poignant note about cherished photographs:

78. The problem of preserving Second Life has been the subject of research by M.D. Antonescu, M. Guttenbrunner, & A. Rauber in “Documenting a Virtual World – A Case Study in Preserving Scenes from Second Life,” *International Web Archiving Workshop* (2009): 5–9, and in Jerome McDonough, et al., “When Strategies Fail: The Case of Second Life,” *Preserving Virtual Worlds Final Report* (2010): 89–96.

79. The Giant Cock Car (giantcockcar.com/about) resembles an enormous wire basket rooster of the type used to store eggs, mounted on a Cadillac and brightly illuminated with LEDs.

Pictures of me & my mom (1945-2009) from the 4 years I took her to BRC. =)
Also, pictures she took—she loved the art cars... (26-34 year old, 8x attendee,
Montana)

The following anecdote of receiving a gifted necklace describes not one but three gift exchanges in succession:

My wife and I were delivering mail on Saturday and came across two stragglers heading towards Center Camp. They stopped us for directions and we got to talking and I gave them a pair of funky shoes that had been just gifted to me a block back by another bloke. They in turn asked if we would like a necklace. We said Sure! and they handed us two wrapped items and we both continued on our merry way. We put their gift in our pack and it wasn't until we got *home*, home, that we unwrapped them to find a beautiful wire/bead necklace with the Man logo. They are very well crafted and our pride and joy of our first year on the playa. I mean, really, where else can you have such a serendipitous meeting and exchange? Fantastic. (45-55 year old, 1x attendee, Idaho)

Perhaps because the question asked participants to recall and relate the story behind their prized object, a third of the responses describe in detail moments of emotional or spiritual significance. Gifts given on the playa remind the recipient of the moment of the gifting and the giver. “Friend” and related terms appeared near the top of a word frequency search on this set of responses, after “burning,” “man,” and “year.” While one respondent, a 15-time burner from Colorado, observed, “[...] they are just memory triggers... the memories and personal growth are the big deal, not objects,” the above stories demonstrate how the ethos of gifting contributes to the experiences of Burning Man participants both during and after the event. Many other, similar responses in the survey articulate the powerful ties to the event and community that their treasured item symbolizes.

Use of social media by respondents

The next set of questions asked survey participants about the type of social media they use. In response to the question, “Do you post to any of the following social media sites?” 92%

said they posted to Facebook (Figure 10). In “other,” Google+ was mentioned seven times and Tumblr four times. Five respondents indicated that they did not post to social media, as one comment noted: “No I don’t. My time at home is for myself. I don’t share it on the net.”

Do you post to any of the following social media sites?

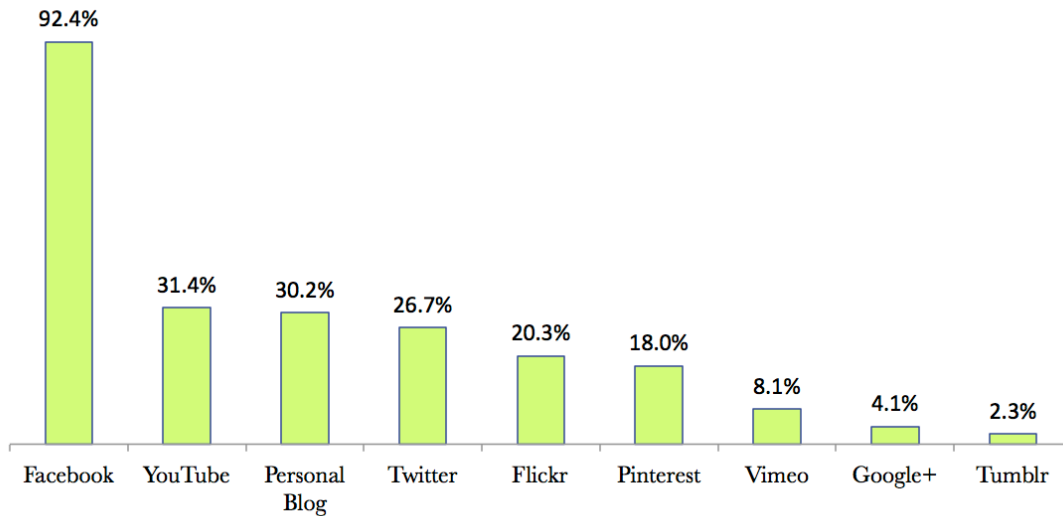


Figure 10: Social media used by survey respondents.

With regard to keeping up with social media accounts of the Burning Man organization, 53% follow the Burning Man Facebook page. 15 respondents used the “other” field to report using the ePlaya online forum, several different official email lists, certain theme-camp Facebook pages, Regional websites, and Danger Ranger’s Twitter feed. Almost three-quarters of respondents say they follow the social media of other burners, of whom 88% follow other burners on Facebook.

Overwhelmingly (192 out of 196), respondents use the Web and social media to seek out information about Burning Man. As expected, those respondents value Web-based media as an informational and inspirational resource in preparing for their Burning Man experience. “Social media sites are my first option when I need information about all things Burnery,” observed one

respondent. Visual inspiration (pictures and video) was the most reported type of resource, claiming 86% of responses. With regard to the frequency of online search activity, 25% of respondents indicated that they searched for Burning Man-related information on a weekly basis throughout the year, with slightly fewer (22%) reporting searching on a 2-3 times per month basis; monthly searches were reported by 20% respectively. 12% searched for material daily and 19% searched 3-4 times per week. In the time period just *before* the event, 82% of respondents say they search more often. Just *after* the event, 43% indicate increasing their online information searches, while 28% search less often and 30% search with the same frequency. Attending the event, as previously noted, requires substantial preparation and financial resources, whether or not one is planning an interactive theme camp or art installation. To facilitate planning, organizing, and funding of projects, survey respondents use email (86%) as their primary organizational tool, followed by Facebook (68%), as shown in Figure 11, below.

Do you use any of the following to plan, coordinate or find funding for Burning Man-related projects?

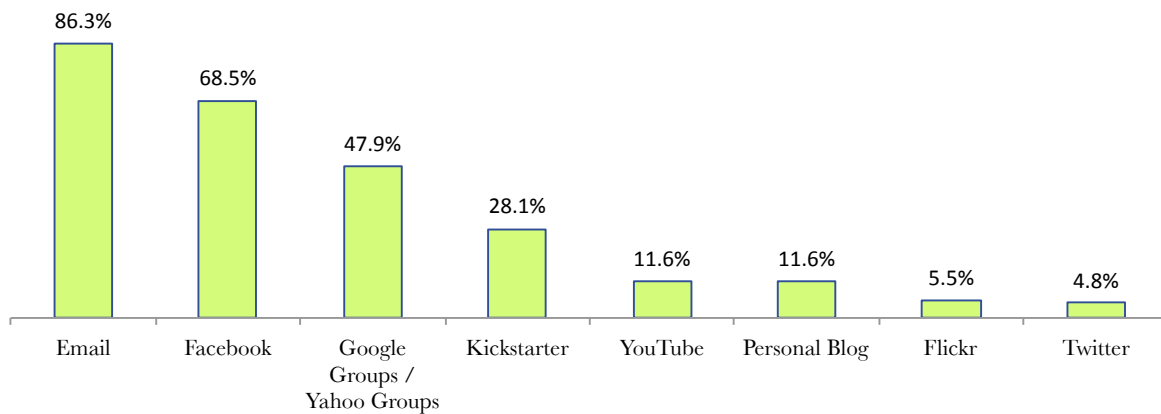


Figure 11: Social media used to plan, coordinate or fund projects

To save online information, 78% say they retrieve materials by bookmarking links; 68% save the emails they receive, 36% download copies, 15% say they do screen captures, and almost

14% indicate that they print out the information. The 26 “other” responses included simply remembering, writing down notes, and copying and pasting into other documents. One remarked:

While I do view A/V pre and post burn, it doesn't mean I save it. I just remember it. As for things like grey water management, I just remember that [stuff]. I don't need to print it out. If my memory fails me on A/V, that's fine. It's a transient society. Inspiration is not static. If it's text, I just look it up again.”

Such responses, including bookmarking, indicate that many rely on the perceived permanence of Web-based materials.

Do you follow any "official" Burning Man social media accounts? If yes, select all that apply:

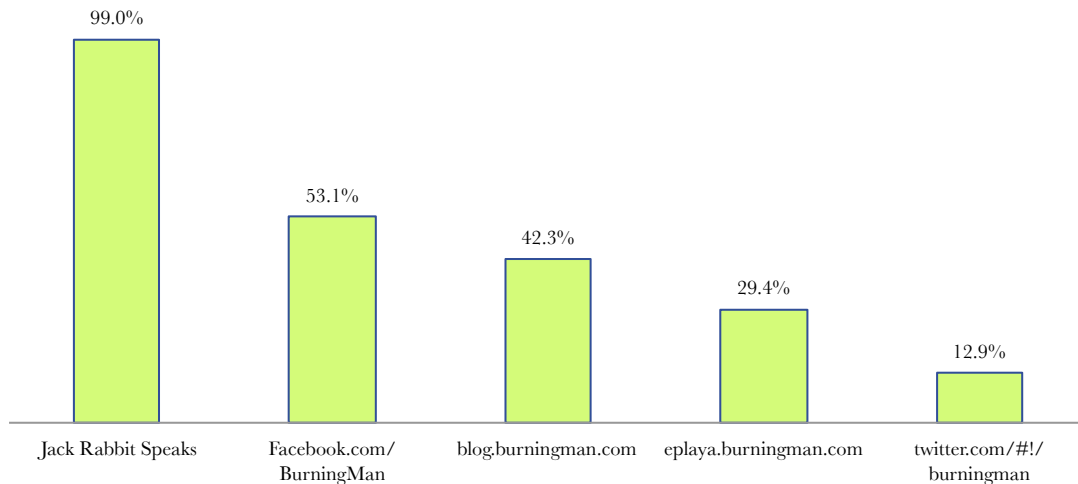


Figure 12: Official Burning Man social media accounts.

Which social media sites do you think are the MOST VALUABLE to you in relation to Burning Man?

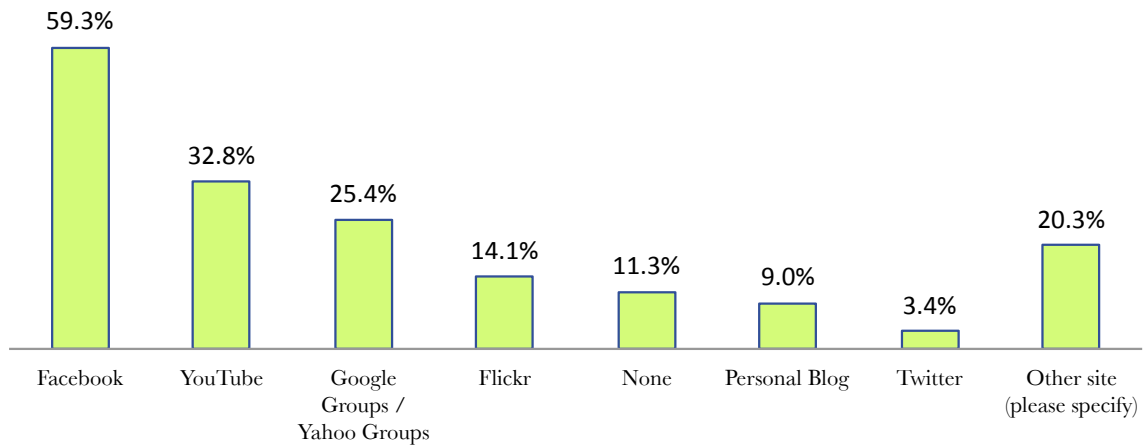


Figure 13: Most valuable social media.

Value of social media

The final portion of the survey, questions 28 through 34, sought to discover which sites respondents felt were valuable and why, and to describe specific examples of this value. The survey questions also addressed whether or not participants felt social media had affected their own experience of Burning Man, and whether there was a difference between the effects of the Web versus social media. The last question of the survey asked respondents to share a memorable experience that had been influenced by social media. Responses to these questions tended to display similar broad themes relating to creating social connections, organizing projects for the Burning Man event, and reflecting the event back to the community. Often several themes could be found in a single response.

Overall, responses brought to light several different effects of social media in and on the community of Burning Man participants, with three effects or uses in the forefront. First, social media keeps burners connected throughout the year and across geographical distances. This

social connectivity sometimes involves a strong emotional aspect suggested by several responses. Next, the responses frequently showed how it afforded community members an efficient means of planning the complex, collaborative art installations, theme camps, art cars, and civic infrastructure that make up Black Rock City. In a very concrete way, Internet-based communications and in particular social media are tools used to construct the community. Third, social media engenders in-person connections at the event, as well as permits those not present to experience the event vicariously via the Web.

When asked to identify the most valuable social media sites in the Burning Man context, the majority of responses (59%) selected Facebook as most valuable, followed next by YouTube (33%), Google or Yahoo Groups (25%), as shown in Figure 13. Twenty percent of respondents chose to indicate a different site in the open-text field; there, the most frequently mentioned was the BurningMan.com website. Because the question structure allowed for multiple selections, some respondents selected a combination of sites. Survey participants were then asked to describe in their own words why they felt the sites they selected were valuable. The responses here indicate that for a large majority, social media supports connections that foster community between Burning Man participants. For one seven-time burner, social media is valuable at “keeping communities connected all year around, easing the pressure on the one week of the year when Burning Man takes place and distributing the Burner experience to a wider audience and timeline.”

The main Burning Man website and its associated discussion forum, the “ePlaya,” (eplaya.burningman.com) are valued for providing accurate or official information. Google or Yahoo groups are mainly used to plan collaborative projects. Facebook makes it easy for burners to connect with other burners, to plan and coordinate activities, and to keep the excitement going

between events. Several respondents indicated that they joined Facebook because their friends already use the site.

Community building

The survey specifically asked whether respondents felt that social media had affected the way they experience Burning Man, and to describe how or why (question 31). A large majority, 129 of 177 respondents, indicated that they perceived an effect while 48 had not. Of those two groups, 155 chose to further describe their selection in the open-text field. Around two-thirds of the descriptive statements expressed a positive sentiment about the effect of social media on Burning Man. Just over one in five indicated that it had no real effect on their experience; among those, many emphasized their appreciation of being in the present moment during the event, in contrast to what social media represents to them. Ten percent of responses professed a strong negative view of social media.

Social connection

Frequently, respondents emphasized the ability to be connected with other burners throughout the year. They note that it “keeps the excitement alive all year,” and “it keeps me interested and excited thru out the year and eager to return,” and “Facebook helps me stay connected and excited for the Burn year-round.” A participant from Wisconsin notes of the effect of social media that they “feel more connected to the burner community throughout the year.”

One person, part of a (self-described) high-profile art project, offered the following about the use of social media:

To make and keep connections with others outside of my geographic community [...] I can network and build community without social media but I can network and build community a lot more effectively and with less effort using these tools.
(45-55 year old, 4x attendee, Oregon)

While previous Burning Man census data suggests that a majority of participants in the annual Burning Man event come from urban northern California, several responses show how social media serves to unite those in areas with few other burners. One two-time participant from California says: “I live on a rural ranch hours away from any active Burning Man community and I relied 100% on social media to connect me with burners and a theme camp my first year. 95% of my current planning happens via email and Facebook.” Another notes: “[it’s an] efficient way to organize with fellow camp members who don’t live in close proximity.”

Planning and coordinating projects

Many theme camps and art projects require the efforts of hundreds of people who often travel from different parts of the country or the world to participate in the event. A five-time burner from California states, “planning is much easier with social media (private groups though) because a lot of times there are people coming from all over the world.” A respondent from the Netherlands wrote:

I got into a Facebook-group through a friend (Mr. P, who got to know Ms. A when travelling), and Ms. A had a camp that I was immediately included in. I travel with 3 friends (in which we all 4 live in different countries), so we all were all of a sudden included in a very established camp (with people from the USA) through connections on Facebook and through being able to write to all of the burners and share some info about ourselves. This, just because I knew Mr. P, who got to know Ms. A. It feels secure to talk to someone from USA about how to deal with renting of camper etc etc.

Beyond geographic dispersal, social media allows for collaboration between larger groups: “Without it, it would be MUCH tougher to plan a 250-person camp that serves 20,000 people over the course of the Burn.” Another respondent notes, “Coordinating 100 odd people. Travel, meetings points, information etc.”

The survey asked participants to provide details of an example of the importance of social media (question 30, Appendix A). This query generated 127 open-text responses, many of them highly descriptive. The most frequent response type reflected the power of building and maintaining community connections, as above. Providing the ability to plan projects with dispersed and large groups of people was the next most commonly reported value. The responses echoed answers to the “why” is a particular site or set of sites valuable, but this collection of answers included many more descriptions expressing an emotion. Positive emotional reflections on examples of the value of social media seemed to outweigh negative ones, as in the following:

For me personally, I feel that social media provides an excellent venue for educating burners and non-burners that the event is not simply a giant party in the desert, that it is also about personal freedom, creativity, and responsibility.
(45-55, 6x, California)

Web versus social media

The next two questions addressed participants’ views on the spread of information about Burning Man and whether a difference could be detected between the Web generally, and social media specifically. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of the Web and social media on Likert scales, followed by an open-text field to provide more detail of the reasons for their ranking. In both cases, survey participants indicated that both the Web and social media play a big role in disseminating information about Burning Man, with social media appearing less important than the Web, as shown in Figure 14, below.

**Importance of Web v. Social Media
in sharing or spreading information about Burning Man**

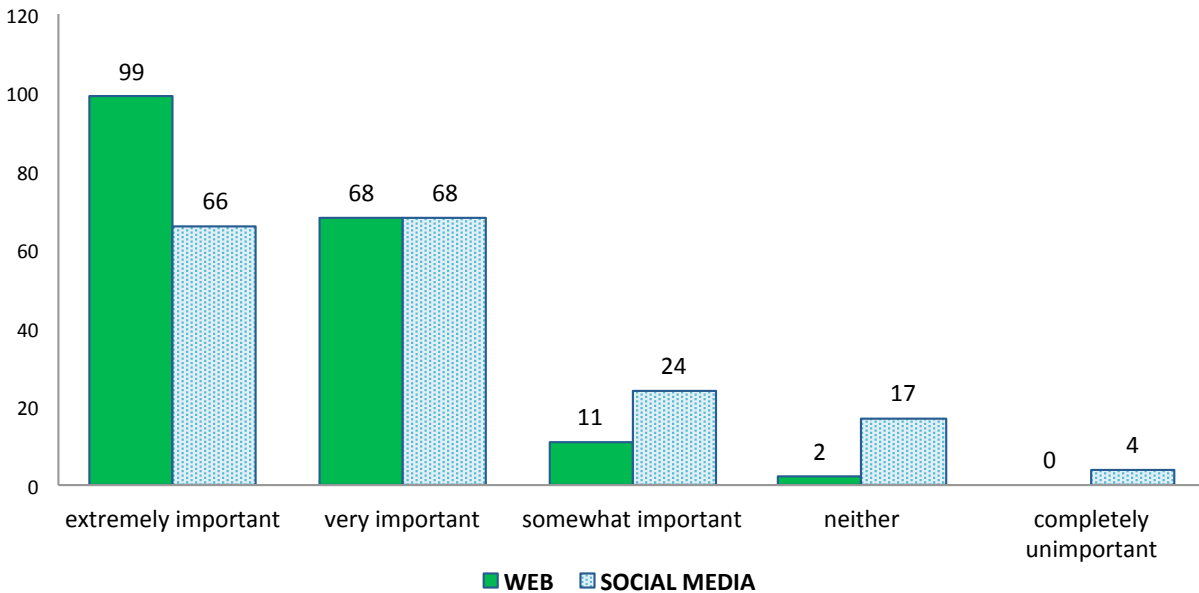


Figure 14: Importance of Web v. Social Media in information dissemination

Most responses describing how the Web is important simply emphasized the aspect of information dissemination about Burning Man to a wider audience beyond the community. The following selection of comments demonstrates the ambivalence toward the results of this dissemination:

It has had a tremendous effect, regardless of whether you feel the effect is positive or negative. It has allowed people to connect, and create larger camps and art installations by gaining wider support throughout the community, however it has also spread the word to the public domain, and many ‘festival goers’ are being attracted to Burning Man who may have otherwise never heard of it. (26-34, 1x, Canada)

The increased use of the web, and the ability to share information to otherwise isolated areas for the U.S./world, has of course exponentially increased the awareness of Burning Man. Google has done more for Burning Man in the past 5 years than Burning Man did for itself in its first 10 years; the jury is still out on if that’s good or bad. (26-34, 0x, Colorado)

Other comments suggest a more plainly positive attitude surrounding the wider dissemination of information about the event. One seven-time participant from California notes, “the subculture has greater impact on culture at large.” A respondent from Canada observes, “I can view someone’s video/pic from across the world and spark interest in BM.” Another respondent remarks that social media expedites the process of dissemination:

The internet allows a community to share ideas across a broad geographic space which has allowed it to grow much bigger and more efficiently than it otherwise could. (26-34, 1x, California)

Expressions of community and staying connected with other burners were the most prevalent themes in responses to the specific question about the importance of social media versus the Web in sharing or spreading information about Burning Man, as the following comments illustrate:

[...] Participating in the virtual communities represented in social media reminds me of participation in the Burning Man community year-round. We can be self-selecting, self-directed and choose how much or how little, and how, we want to participate. Also like Burning Man, you’d become socially lopsided if you never got out of it and continued to interact with other people in reality/the default world. (45-55, 4x, Oregon)

Social media serves to connect people already on the same page. It’s a tool to be closer to “birds of a feather.” As far as event planning, it allows easier coordination. It might spark some interest among friends of burners who are curious about the event. (26-34, 1x, Colorado)

Beyond spreading information to those who may be outside the community, documents shared through social media allow burners to see Burning Man from another insider’s perspective, or to see the parts that they missed while there:

Most valuable aspect is posting public pics/videos. There is no way to convey what Burning Man is like without actually going, but pics/videos come closest, for those who haven’t been. For those who have been, we can re-connect visually

and audibly (whatever that relevant word is) with experiences we had there, and get glimpses of the part we missed. (35-45, 4x, Nevada)

Regarding Flickr/YouTube. I think it's great when burners skilled with photography and video share through YouTube/Flickr. Looking at my own crappy pictures does not inspire me the way that looking at BM as captured by some other sometimes does. It is sort of like living the experience over again with new eyes. (35-45, 2x, California)

With hundreds of theme camps and art installations spread out over several square miles of open playa, participants remark on the impossibility of being able to see everything on offer at the event. "I see things on YouTube I didn't get to see on my own," remarked one twelve-time participant from Washington state. In this way, social media acts as a mirror for participants to view the event and the community.

Memorable experiences

Finally, the survey asked if social media use had resulted in a memorable experience and if respondents would relate that story. Details were offered by 109 respondents. Four of these answers were oblique: "Friends viewed us and could not understand. We were looked down at because of [it being] out of context and then not understanding Burning Man." Twenty-two responses indicated that they did not have an experience of that type that they remembered or chose to share. Many responses reflected the social connection afforded by social media. The ability to connect with local Regional communities was reflected in this response:

Primarily, connecting with people at Regional events. Because I am so far from the nearest Regional, social media and the Web gives me a personal connection with people even before I meet them. I can friend them on Facebook, see what they look like, find out a little about them, and then when we meet, it's like I've always known that person. It's great! And I can keep those relationships active in between events, which keeps me feeling like I'm part of the family. (45-55, 3x, Washington)

Several responses conveyed how the community connections made through Burning Man and carried out by social media have influenced life outside of the event. One respondent noted how social media afforded the experience of “hosting a guy we’d never met for a few nights, solely on the basis that he was a [Black Rock] Ranger and therefore probably good company (and not an axe-murderer), after he posted on the Irish burners mailing list that he was looking for somewhere to stay in Dublin.” Two responses in this category mentioned a prominent video blogger in the community, one noting: “Here is a man I consider a spiritual teacher of mine, yet I’ve never met him. That’s the power of burners connecting online.”⁸⁰ Eleven responses reported similar occurrences.

Some emphasized that social media does not affect them while at Burning Man, such as one respondent who wrote, “not really. I’m busy being at the event,” or, “during the week of the festival I lived in the ‘Here and Now.’ The virtual world of social media was non-existent during the festival. Simply because there was no Internet or Wi-Fi.”⁸¹ Others remarked that they were able to feel connected to the event, even when they could not physically attend, thanks to a webcam streaming from Center Camp. One respondent noted, “the one year I couldn’t make it out to the playa in the last five I could log into the live web feed and see the city! It was awesome I felt like I wasn’t so far from my family!”

80. Several responses made reference to a Los Angeles-based video blogger (who also writes for the Burning Man Blog), John “Halcyon” Styn, a longtime Web personality and flamboyant burner. Styn’s videos generally promote Burning Man principles and often help to acculturate new community members, along with advancing Styn’s “Hug Nation” worldview (hugnation.com).

81. Two other responses remarked on the value of the absence of Internet access or cell phone connectivity at the event. However, in the Center Camp area Wi-Fi Internet access can be achieved; in addition, a participant theme camp called Papa Legba (<http://papalegba2012.wikispaces.com/FAQ>) has set up a cell phone network at the event over the past few years, mainly to permit text messaging between participants.

For many, being able to view others' photos and videos after the event extends and enhances their experience. "I really enjoy looking at photos online after the burn...usually Flickr has some awesome albums," notes one response. Several other responses mention videos, some providing the links to the specific videos they appreciate the most. As a three-time participant from Connecticut relates, respondents shared how social media had reflected experiences back to them from another's point of view:

I was a miserable [person] to everyone in camp last year (in my mind). I got home from the playa and read in more than one person's blog that I had saved their Burn. That was pretty cool.

Another, a six-time burner, shared the following personal anecdote:

At my 2nd Burn (2004), I searched the ashes of the Man fire for ceramic discs, reputed to be a gift. I never found one but took a cinder from the Man fire and used it on the Temple to write, "Dad, I wish you were alive to see this." I never thought to take a photo of it; it was just a spontaneous expression of what I was thinking and feeling at the time. When I got home, I was looking through other people's photos, through social media and the web, only to discover that my message had touched someone else enough that they photographed and shared it online. It made my experience and my loss feel more precious and valuable, to know that my words touched someone else that much. Without the web, I would never have known...

The documents created by participants and shared among them on social media reflect the community back to itself. At the same time each participant, in sharing his or her photos, videos, blogs, or comments, provides an individual view on the event that augments the perception of the event by others in the community.

Negative views of social media

A handful of responses expressed a negative view of social media, such as this two-time burner from New York: "Social media is strangling American society while creating new generations of helpless individuals who can not survive without the digital infrastructure. Our decisions will end poorly." Another seemed defensive of the culture at Burning Man and how it is presented outside

the community: “I personally do not find it valuable. Burning Man is not something to be exploited by the media. Events such as these should be shared amongst your closest friends. [...] Typically anything with a freedom of expression is given negative connotation.” A third response found a lack of authentic self-expression inherent in social media: “They are all antithetical - the burn is about being YOU, and in my observation, social media is about image and hyperbolic self-aggrandizing. No thanks.”

Several of the negative views relate specifically to how photography is used by participants. The use of photography at Burning Man has been a contentious issue over the years, as comments on the Burning Man website following the 1997 burn attest.⁸² With the quality and convenience of digital image-making technologies, and the ability to share these images with a wide audience even easier thanks to social media, the issue of photography at the event continues to cause tension, with privacy concerns at the forefront. One participant says, “I don’t like being photographed unless I am asked and receive the picture. I feel like this used to happen at bman but now it is much more laid back, which makes me uptight :(.” Another, a three-time burner from Oregon, opined:

I think very, very carefully about which BM photos I want to share on Facebook. I do not like Facebook. In my opinion, it is a data mining scheme that promotes narcissism and voyeuristic snooping, that totally undermines the meaning of “friendship”, and violates all rights to privacy (despite account settings), and yet because it is so popular I have an account so that I can keep in some sort of contact with burner friends.

82. “Events: Retrospective –1997:1997 Experiences Bulletin Board,” <http://web.archive.org/web/19980203103525/http://www.burningman.com/events/1997retrospective/1997bbs.html>. While tangential to this discussion, the terms under which participants may share images and video taken at the event were challenged in 2009 by the Electronic Frontier Foundation in a public dispute. Participants joined in the fray in the comments of several blogs and likely in direct communication with the Burning Man organization, resulting in a revision of the terms in late 2010. Several EFF board members are known to be Burning Man participants.

The following survey response regarding a memorable experience, from an Oregon burner, blends many of the issues that arise out of the use of photography and social media in the community, but highlights some of the concerns about representation of burners and privacy:

Afrika Burn 2011—the regional in South Africa—went there, had a blast, started to check online after for photos people might have caught me and my friends in. One guy via Facebook of all things, 75% of his photos were distasteful pictures of the dozen or so naked people in just very unflattering positions, as if he just snapped them because they were naked and he had never seen that before.

On top of telling all the involved people in the photos that they were exposed on the web this way, my South African friends and I posted things to his wall/photo album that expressed our anger/frustration with his horrible representation of what Burning Man culture is, and reported a few pics via FB, I never went back to check on them later to see if they'd been taken down. I consider it a reality check for myself, and also a reminder to keep everyone in the scene on the same page with the greater culture, and find this my duty as a part of the tribe. (26-34, 3x, Oregon)

Another burner regretted that it seemed more people learn about Burning Man from social media than being introduced by an individual, noting: “I don’t like that it has become ‘advertised’ on social media. I made a point to not share my photos there. I liked when Burning Man was spread by word of mouth, like [how] I found out about it.”

Commodification and commercialization⁸³

One 11-time burner suggests that social media in the Burning Man community operates the same as in any other:

The value of social media in relation to Burning Man would be similar to the value of social media in relation to any other event that combines a set of ideas/values, a fixed time frame and a community of participants. I would be very cautious of ascribing a “special” or “notable” value to the intersection of social media and Burning Man without putting it through the filter of “but

83. Commercialization and commodification are distinct according to Will Chase, and others at the Burning Man organization. The principle of non-commodification seeks to remove the mediation of a monetized transaction between individuals, and in this way draws also on the principle of immediacy. However, I see a greater connection between commercialization of the event and the commodification of our experiences as we share them on social media.

doesn't social media impact pretty much all community/event type things—say, Comic-Con—in a similar way?

Burning Man differs from events like the annual Comic-Con, a convention featuring comic books and other entertainments in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Beyond the pragmatic, such as the fact that Comic-Con attendees do not need to bring all their own food and water for survival, a significant difference between Burning Man and Comic-Con lies in the former's principle of *decommodification*. The primary activity at a trade show like Comic-Con centers on commerce, rather than individual creativity or self-expression, although those things may be present. The Comic-Con organization relies on the presence of commercial entities, which exhibit because they want convention visitors to know about their products. At Burning Man, the event happens because participants bring the content: “[...] anyone who builds an interesting theme camp or works on a piece of attractive art is also essentially volunteering to create the ambience that makes someone eager to buy a ticket to Burning Man.”⁸⁴ While Burning Man very often has the feel of a World's Fair, it is the fair-goers who make the exhibits what they are.

Burning Man's core principle of operating on a gift economy also means that the event, the city, would not exist without participants. The Coachella Music Festival, for example, sells tickets and attracts attendees by putting together a line-up of commercially appealing musical acts. The organizers of tradeshow or commercial concert series generate a buzz by using social media in order to sell tickets to their events. In contrast, Burning Man boasts no line-ups, and participants themselves generate anticipation for the event, in part through sharing their

84. Doherty, 262.

upcoming projects for the year through online images, Kickstarter campaigns, and Facebook postings. A four-time participant from Oregon notes:

This technology has provided a way for multiple people to access resources and information and to tell their own stories and share visual media simultaneously without any editorial direction and without requiring a great deal of money. The web is intrinsically similar to the construct of Burning Man in that it depends upon participation by many in order to create a greater whole. (45-55 year old, 4x attendee, Oregon)

Aficionados of Comic-Con likely also feel a part of a community, but they are not the star attractions. The underlying audience/spectator relationship remains untroubled. As the above comment underlines, the Web and social media technologies similarly rely on content provided by users to create its presence or product. On Facebook, especially, the user becomes the content and the attraction. The audience and consumer are one with the performer and product.

Commercialization of the Burning Man event and its culture constitutes the biggest threat to their existence, according to Andie Grace. “Commercial use is everyday. Camps trying to have a fundraiser and using an image of the Man. That’s not what we want.” The Burning Man organization and, in particular, the team responsible for media relations, protect the image and logo of the Man to prevent its use to sell products. When groups of participants step into the territory of commercializing of the logo, the issue can be quite complicated. Grace continues:

The fact is, as this culture springs up around this thing, it’s not just this *week* anymore. People are taking it out into their lives; they’re trying to make businesses out of it, to connect with each other’s businesses around it. That ought to be okay. In fact, it’s a very good outgrowth—let’s change the world using their tools, not just partying in the desert—while still retaining the autonomous zone that exists at the event that’s free of the daily cues of a marketing society. I mean, that’s why it’s special. But [...] the Media team is often called in along with the Rangers when there’s a violation on the playa of commercial display of logos or things like that. And it’s well-meaning participants! It’s not like ‘Evil Corporation’ came in and wants to set up ‘Heineken Camp’, it’s like: “We’re a theme camp and Heineken gave us this beer donation, it was really generous, we didn’t ask for anything, you know, yeah, we have a sign back here. I guess that’s not okay, huh?”

This story illustrates the ongoing struggle to maintain the principle of decommodification during the event and at the same time protect the culture from being appropriated by commercial interests outside of Burning Man. On the one hand, participants sometimes inadvertently advertise products as in the example above; but when a corporation attempts to use Burning Man as a venue for their product advertisement, the affront to community values can be much greater. Indeed, just after the ticket problem of 2012, the Burning Man community discovered that an international wine company had flouted the rules of media coverage and staged a large, exclusive dinner party during the 2011 event. Through a public relations firm, the offending corporation had hired professional photographers to capture the party with the company's product in pride of place; the photos subsequently became part of a national campaign to advertise their luxury brand in more than one glossy magazine, despite the best efforts of the Burning Man organization to prevent it.⁸⁵ This occurrence provoked outrage from participants, who again registered their vitriolic comments across social media—in this case, at least, they were no longer directed at Burning Man organizers.

The Places You'll Go

From the point of view of Will Chase, Burning Man's Communications Specialist, social media was responsible for the ticket sell-out in 2011: "It's what created that catalyst for the acceleration in population and interest, beyond what our normal standard going rate was, which was [an increase of] somewhere between 3-5,000 a year in population." Reporting on the

85. Evil Pippi, "How not to Burn: Commodifying Burning Man," *Burning Blog*, May 16, 2012, <http://blog.burningman.com/2012/05/tenprinciples/how-not-to-burn-commodifying-burning-man>; Scott Beale, "Krug Champagne Exploits Burning Man Event With Publicity Stunt Featuring Staged Photoshoot of an Elaborate Dinner Party," *Laughing Squid* (blog), May 16, 2012, <http://laughingsquid.com/krug-champagne-exploits-burning-man-event-with-staged-photoshoot>. Bret Bernhoft has posted a detailed look at the event and the Internet aftermath in "Investigative Web Analysis Case Study and Timeline: Krug Champagne Burning Man PR Meltdown," at <http://www.bretevan.com/investigative-web-analysis-case-study-and-timeline-krug-champagne-burning-man-pr-meltdown>. All pages accessed October 16, 2012.

overwhelming number of registrations for the 2012 ticket lottery, the Financial Times' website noted: "If social media is truly behind the oversubscription of Burning Man tickets, it will become a legendary case study in digital marketing."⁸⁶ That article cites Andie Grace's blog post on the Burning Man site implicating a video recorded at the event, "Oh, the Places You'll Go," whose popularity reached peak virality the day before ticket registrations began. Grace's blog post points out that social media played one part in a much larger combination of effects, from the effect of scarcity on behavior, to the freakishly mild weather at the two previous events, all of which led to unprecedented demand for tickets.⁸⁷

Many survey respondents mentioned specific YouTube videos that influenced them directly or that they perceived as having had some palpable effect on the Burning Man community—primarily, the effect of spreading the word about Burning Man beyond one's immediate social network. As part of the community and immersed in the flow of information via social media, email newsletters, and direct links from friends, I could not help but be conscious of the fact that one particular video seemed to have seized the imagination of the community and beyond. Survey responses suggest that I was not alone. Among the 23 direct references to the "Oh, the Places You'll Go" video, one response summarizes several similar opinions: "The effect of 'the places you'll go' has already been stated all over the community. Positive or negative, a little YouTube video has probably contributed to an explosion of interest in the Burn that may not have ignited had the Web not been available."

A respondent from California who attended Burning Man once writes:

86. April Dembosky, "No Burning Man ticket? Blame Facebook," *Tech Blog, Financial Times*, February 11, 2012, <http://blogs.ft.com/tech-blog/2012/02/no-burning-man-ticket-blame-facebook>, accessed October 10, 2012.

87. Andie Grace, "Ticket Update: Radical Inclusion, Meet the Other Nine," *Burning Blog*, February 9, 2012, <http://blog.burningman.com/2012/02/news/ticket-update-radical-inclusion-meet-the-other-nine>, accessed October 12, 2012.

I feel like Burning Man BLEW up this year because of social media. So many people “like” the Facebook page—exponentially more since the sellout. Things in today’s society can burn through the grapevine, so to speak, because of the immediacy of social media. Once that “Oh, The Places You’ll Go” went viral, social media singlehandedly changed the face of Burning Man forever. So many burners didn’t get tickets this year because virgins who were inspired by the internet randomly won out over them. 120,000+ people vying for 40,000 tickets...wow. Social media is definitely responsible for a lot of that. Not in a negative way. Times are always changing. Burning Man has changed a lot every year since 1986. We just have to adapt and evolve to fit the technology of the times.

In early January 2012, two days before the opening of the ticket lottery registration for the main sale of Burning Man tickets, Teddy Saunders uploaded the finished and fully polished version of the video he and two friends had produced during the 2011 event.⁸⁸ The video depicts vibrantly costumed participants playfully narrating the text of the 1990 Dr. Seuss children’s book, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*, accompanied by an original musical score. The video beckons viewers on a romp around the playa, as the interpreters, many of them enlisted at random during the event, dangle from interactive sculptures, race down dusty streets on bikes, perform with fire, and otherwise appear overjoyed, serene, or just earnestly happy. Typically, videos shot on-playa do not display such high-quality levels of composition, editing, or an original soundtrack. This video stood out.

Saunders says he spent nearly every day at the 2011 event shooting the video, cajoling friends and strangers alike to spend up to two hours to capture each scene. He edited the final piece in the span of two weeks, but settling on the musical score and setting the right mood took much longer. Eventually Saunders, after many revisions and tweaks to video effects and audio tracks, felt it was ready for release. He uploaded the video to YouTube on a Friday night. Within the first hour, the video received 300 views. By Sunday evening it had garnered 600,000 views.

88. Teddy Saunders, in discussion with the author, Los Angeles, California, July 14, 2012.

Recalling its viral spread, Saunders evinced a degree of surprise. “I was like whoa, this is an exponential thing. It was all over Facebook, it made it to Reddit’s front page on the first day, that Saturday. That’s what helped boost it.” Links from the Huffington Post and other blogs followed. The video had reached over one million views by the end of the month.

The video, for some survey respondents, realistically captures the feeling of being at Burning Man: “I watch it at least once per week. It was shared with me in an email and it’s the best way to describe what I experienced and understood last year at BM.” Other responses remarked that “[the video] struck an emotional chord,” or “it fueled the ticket storm.” One respondent, an 11-time burner from California, stated: “I am always trying to impart the wonder that is Burning Man to new people and the Web has been helpful for that. I think the Dr. Seuss video is the example that perhaps sold Burning Man TOO well!”

Saunders, a professional photographer, did not at first use the YouTube advertisement feature, which grants original content creators the ability to collect money from their work by allowing Google ads to appear over the beginning of a video. “People [asked] are you monetizing this, are you putting ads in the video? And I said no, I’m afraid to. Number one it’s my gift to Burning Man. Burning Man’s about giving, and this is my gift to them.” He was also concerned that the Dr. Seuss estate might not warm to the idea of the author’s work being re-interpreted and generating revenue for others. In fact, Saunders did later contact the estate and obtain permission to both place the work on YouTube and to enter it into short-film festivals. He amended his video to add a copyright statement acknowledging the Dr. Seuss estate. Then he

started monetizing it. The video made about \$1,000 over a couple of months.⁸⁹ Saunders' video does not sell a product per se; it promotes and celebrates the culture and the event and was produced in the spirit of gifting. Still, the risks of this sort of widespread promotion became glaringly apparent in the subsequent ticket lottery debacle.

When asked about commodification of Burning Man through social media, Andie Grace contends, "it's a fuzzy line." The organization's terms of use, assigned upon ticket purchase and printed on the tickets themselves, were revised a few years ago to allow for sharing on social media still and video images shot at the event, within certain Creative Commons license arrangements. Saunders said that he had contacted the organization to find out if he needed to obtain a special media agreement. Since he planned to film without any commercial intent, none was required. Grace observes: "It's kind of tricky, because we say 'okay' so long as there's no commercial use of those images. Facebook takes the right to use your images in a commercial way, and so far [...] we haven't seen the day that the ad pops up with an image from Burning Man that we have to go after. I don't know what'll happen if we do. Facebook ads—it's this whole evolution that we're running to keep up with."

Nonetheless, Grace remarks that the organization *wants* to share the story of Burning Man. "We think that the story is inspiring. It's not that we want more people to come to Burning Man but we would love more people to become inspired by it. It inspires change in humans and they do good things outside of the event with that experience." Will Chase agrees: "These things, the viral videos, like the Dr. Seuss one, went completely bonkers, and are a great example of 'it's

89. The day of my interview with Saunders he divulged that his next project at the Burning Man event would be a custom-designed, enclosed structure housing an automatic video recording booth. Participants at the event would be able to enter and video-record a 15-second description of one of their dreams. The project would cost \$30,000 to build and transport to the desert; he was launching his Kickstarter campaign later that day. "I have 28 days to do it, and I haven't started yet. But I have to do it." The campaign and project were successfully completed.

the best ad for Burning Man I've ever seen!' And it was created by some dude, you know? Had nothing to do with us, we don't promote this stuff, but that [stuff] goes VIRAL through the network. And suddenly everyone goes, my god, there's a different way to live my life."

Chapter 6: Discussion

*In universities, people know through studies. In businesses and bureaucracies, people know by reports. In communities, people know by stories.*⁹⁰

Community of stories, community of records

Sociologist Katherine Chen has studied the Burning Man organization for more than a decade, and recently she looked at the way storytelling worked among its members. She included storytelling in all its forms, such as websites, email discussion lists, and field observation. In her analysis, storytelling enables the development of individual meaning and accountability within a larger collective activity or purpose.⁹¹ Likewise, social media, through the exchange of stories, contributes to the creation of collective memory and meaning within the Burning Man community. It plays a complex role, as illustrated by the preceding survey responses and interview discussions. Social media technology sustains social connections between participants, no matter how far flung their home locations. It affords extensive collaboration, enabling groups to build art on a startling scale, or to coordinate very large groups to camp together in a remote, desolate wilderness. Social media and the Web serve as platforms for disseminating the culture and values of the Burning Man community, introducing newcomers to its ethos and encouraging their creative participation. In effect, social media acts as a mirror to the community, in which it recognizes itself.

90. John L. McKnight, "Regenerating Community," *Social Policy* (Winter 1987):54. This quotation appears uncited in the print and digital versions of the Burning Man Survival Guide, <http://survival.burningman.com/culture>, accessed October 12, 2012.

91. Katherine K. Chen, "Charismatizing the Routine: Storytelling for Meaning and Agency in the Burning Man Organization," *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 3 (June 6, 2012): 329.

In our conversation, Michael Mikel, a co-founder of Burning Man, noted that “the Burning Man experience is now so multiplied, in so many minds, so many people have had the experience, the sheer volume is just overwhelming. And each person experiences Burning Man differently from their own point of view.”⁹² The widespread use of social media in the community allows more of those experiences, with their own unique perspectives, to be shared and exchanged with the wider world. Many survey respondents noted that the documents shared by other participants contribute to their own experience of the event, such as “I can see things I missed,” or that they are able “to just experience a bit more than what you could physically during one burn, you being one person is multiplied to all burner’s via their media.” Others noted that social media, in addition to more mundane uses, built their anticipation for the different art projects that would appear at the upcoming event: “I enjoy seeing Facebook posts about art and other projects on the playa—I see more links where I can learn more or contribute and I feel more invested in the city when I can be supporting or at least looking forward to what I will see/do when I get there.” After the event, the shared images and video and stories serve to remind participants of their own experiences, as memory triggers. One wrote simply, “I look at the pictures and cry.”

Social media in the community does more than facilitate social connections, acculturate newcomers, or help in organizing projects. Social media in its various permutations *performs* the Burning Man community. Participants demonstrate through their postings of photographs, or comments on blog or Facebook pages, their identification as part of the community. These postings generate a kinetic stream of activity, articulating the “liveness” of social media performances. The flow of user-generated media pushes onward continually, and each performer

92. Michael Mikel, in discussion with the author, Burning Man offices, San Francisco, June 14, 2012.

in this stream contributes to the community's identity. Saunders' Dr. Seuss video became a touchstone for many survey respondents who said they would watch it over and over again. As Rick Prelinger observed, "we construct our identity through active expression. We cannot rely on third parties to do this on our behalf. Look at the explosion of user-generated media. We are pushing the bounds the gatekeepers have imposed."⁹³ The socially-shared document both embodies and records the performance. Taken together, social media forms the mirror and shadow of the community.

Social media documents the activity and history of the community and in turn represents the community, to itself and to others. Jeannette Bastian's concept of the "community of records" transposes the notion of the records of a community—the aggregate traces of a culture—and in so doing allows archives to encompass more varied forms of records that can then become part of the larger archival record, beyond records made by governments and other bureaucracies.⁹⁴ Taken together with the emergent field of community archives, the community of records succeeds in shifting the subjectivity of records-creation away from the institution toward the object of such records, those whom the records document.

Further, the concept of communities of records recognizes the ability records possess of interacting with other records, thus to embody the community and its ongoing changes and interactions. The act of sharing through social media technologies generates the community. In the case of the community of Burning Man participants, documents shared through social media comprise both the records of the community, as well as the community of records. A photograph, posted to social media, depicts a respondent's message to their deceased father scrawled on the

93. Rick Prelinger, presentation "Lost Landscapes," delivered at Screening the Future 2012, University of Southern California, May 22, 2012.

94. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, 5.

Temple in charcoal. The photograph reflects the experience back to the original writer of the message. Fans of the Burning Man Facebook page post links to their images of Regional events on other continents. Comments and conversations form layers within the posts, enhancing contextual information and extending viewpoints. Records in communication with records simultaneously shape and document the community.

Many of the effects of social media exist in tension with the very values of the Burning Man culture. Although these tensions did not arise because of social media, they have been in many ways exacerbated by it. Because of the rapid dissemination of information and popular representations of the event, interest in Burning Man continues to increase at a steep rate. This effect puts pressure on the availability of tickets and subsequently the ability of some groups to create their theme camps, art installations, and other collaborative projects. The proliferation of images of the event inspires new and regular participants, while also generating more nebulous intentions on the part of advertisers or others seeking a commercial benefit from its imagery. Social media allows participants to be more prepared to see or support the thousands of art projects that are built, but it also mitigates against the principle of immediacy, of being in the moment without too much worry for what to do next. User-generated content keeps people together, but their documents become potential fodder for advertising campaigns.

Problems with social media sites

“Without historical documents can communities build reliable and durable memory?” asks Bastian in her preface to *Owning Memory*.⁹⁵ Because Burning Man grew up along with the development of the Web, much of its history intertwines with early Web-based media. Some of this Web history remains accessible through services like the Internet Archive, although in a

95. *Ibid.*, ix.

somewhat truncated form, lacking images or linking to non-existent sites. The current records of the community exist across multiple social media platforms, commercial enterprises that pose special kinds of risks to the community that previous forms of Web media did not.

Social media, as roped-off sectors of the Web, pose particular challenges that render the likelihood of their long-term availability even more tenuous. First, sites like Facebook, as Robert Gehl points out, lay copyright claims to users' posts, photographs, and videos—everything that they share—in perpetuity.⁹⁶ If the document has been shared (which is, after all, an essential component in the business model for social networking sites), then the user who originated the material loses his or her rights over its control. Additionally, the site's robots.txt file disallows crawling by automated Web archiving harvesters, effectively preventing the automatic preservation of the material on the site by any entity—except for Facebook. The fact that almost 70% of survey participants indicated that they used Facebook to plan, coordinate or fund their Burning Man projects suggests that a significant portion of the community's records are under threat of loss.

Setting aside ownership of one's own contributions to sites like Facebook, currently contributions by friends or contacts or others permitted to leave comments on posts generally cannot be captured in a download of the post. In a community-archival setting, this decreases the value of sharing. For example, Michael Mikel posts regularly to Flickr, sharing old photographs that he has digitized from the early days of the event. Other early participants, upon discovering these images then contribute to the identification of individuals in the photographs, or add descriptions of the activities depicted. This rich descriptive detail cannot be captured even if

96. R. W. Gehl, "The Archive and the Processor: The Internal Logic of Web 2.0," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 8 (May 13, 2011): 1240.

Mikel digitally preserves the photographs he has thus far posted to the site. Without the interactions documented by the comments on status updates as in Facebook, images posted on Flickr, or videos on YouTube, the community of records becomes diminished.

That Web-based materials possess a limited longevity continues to be studied. Internet researchers Catherine Marshall, Frank McCown and Michael Nelson articulate the perception of many that Web-based materials possess a certain kind of permanence. According to their research most consumers believe that Internet services such as Flickr and online email providers offer more security for their personal digital materials than they can claim for their own hardware and backup practices.⁹⁷ This research supports impressions garnered from the survey, where respondents' method of choice for saving information is to bookmark links, or to save emails. Other research indicates that discoverable "surface web" pages may have archived manifestations in 35-90% of cases depending on a number of factors including transparency to search engines and human selection of links.⁹⁸ Such a perception of long-term stability and access of Web-stored materials could be especially destructive for community and personal documents. The records of US Virgin Islanders that Jeanette Bastian described were physically and geographically removed from the community they documented and should have served. Likewise, the Burning Man community risks losing access to its communal history through either the erosion of the Internet—broken links, for example—or as a result of the dispossession and dislocation of records by corporations such as Facebook.

97. Catherine C. Marshall, Frank McCown, and Michael L. Nelson, "Evaluating Personal Archiving Strategies for Internet-based Information," *Proceedings of Archiving 2007*, (Arlington, Virginia, May 21–24, 2007), Society for Imaging Science and Technology, Springfield, VA, 2007: 151.

98. Scott G. Ainsworth, Ahmed Alsum, Hany Salaheldeen, Michele C. Weigle, and Michael L. Nelson, "How Much of the Web Is Archived?" in *JCDL '11*, (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: ACM, 2011): 4.

Collective archives

Social media inherently offers a model for the collective curation of archival material. One's social media network, on its own and for its own perhaps inscrutable interests, curates the material, by appraising it and re-posting, re-tweeting, or linking. A curatorial model, as suggested by Elizabeth Yakel, invites those most invested in the preservation of a collective memory into the archive.⁹⁹ Discussions of the "participatory" archive have looked generally at the ways users can contribute to the description or organization of existing archives. So far, most of these discussions remain reticent on the question of engaging the user in providing and selecting the content of the archive.

Srinivasan and Shilton explored this possibility in their 2007 project for the South Asian Web, an information system designed with the participation of community members.¹⁰⁰ The information system would serve the culturally and ethnically connected members of the Los Angeles South Asian community and be built through a comprehensive process of interactions, including focus groups and informal meetings. Participants would create and share their video, audio or other documents. These materials would then be arranged and described by community members within an information system designed according to the community's requirements. Importantly, Shilton and Srinivasan's model for a participatory community archive provides for the protection of the content created by community members, since it would presumably avoid

99. Elizabeth Yakel, "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records, and the Social Web," in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011): 269.

100. Ramesh Srinivasan and Katie Shilton, "The South Asian Web': An Emerging Community Information System in the South Asian Diaspora," in *PDC 2006—Proceedings of the Ninth Participatory Design Conference 2006*, 125–133, 2006; and Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 87–101.

reliance on outside commercial interests. However, several responses in the Burning Man survey suggest that the volume of participation at commercial sites like Facebook influences a community member's decision to contribute to the flow of documentation. Facebook's "network effect" leads to a greater influx of contributions, sharing of documents, and other community activities on that site than others. The successful establishment of and continuing engagement with any online community requires a critical mass of participation, and the popularity of commercial sites means that little of the community's attention economy may remain for participatory appraisal efforts.

Whether the platform for community information takes the form of a commercial site or a bespoke system designed by community insiders, the widespread adoption of social media could give rise to a collective curation model for community documentation. As demonstrated by the example of "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" video, the constant sharing and forwarding of Web links among community members provides a channel for selection of potential social media documentation, generated by the community members themselves. Collective adoption of singular hashtags on a platform like Twitter already form the foundation for selection and study of social movements and public opinion. A community's own selections of links and use of such hashtags guide the collecting. Social media's mirror on the community could serve to guide archival appraisal and description in an almost automatic fashion.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, casting a wider documentary net by means of social media allows for the construction of a more complex and comprehensive record of an event.

101. For an example, see Chirag Shah's ContextMiner.org, described in "ContextMiner: Collect Different," in *Proceedings of DigCarr2009 Digital Curation: Practice, Promise and Prospects*, eds. Helen R Tibbo, Carolyn Hank, Christopher A. Lee, and Rachael Clemens, 79–80, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2009.

I asked Michael Mikel, during our conversation, if he thought anything that happened on social media among burners could be of importance or worthy of preservation. He suggested that the origins of ideas, the seeds of innovation, might be found among the documents shared:

There are some things, items, that I consider very important. They're the initial broadcast or initial exchange of a significant event or happening. Those are important. Because they give the starting point, or something you can point to, saying this is significant. It's significant because this started this, or this is the first time that this information was revealed, or it was the first time that this idea surfaced within the Web, within the 'Net.

With the overwhelming flow of cultural production, of information, streaming through and around us, the difficulty lies in how to determine what signifies a seed of future import, and what could be considered chaff. While we can only ever hope to capture a sliver of these traces, a collective curation of the archive, or as Frank Upward suggests, a “participatory recordkeeping model,” may permit us to gather and preserve a broader and more richly detailed picture of the past.¹⁰² The key may be to observe and identify the inflection points present in the networked continuum of social media. Upward, originator of the continuum model of recordkeeping, along with his collaborators McKemmish and Reed, recently proposed an extension of that model which takes into account the web-like nature of records generated in an environment such as social media. Records in this model and environment operate temporally and with multiple creators. The networked continuum promotes the inclusion of social media documents in the archives, as opposed to more traditional archival formulations. And, as Reed notes, “It is the community that constitutes and empowers the archives. Exploring this within a continuum consciousness empowers non-traditional views of archives. How should we define our

102. Frank Upward, Sue McKemmish, and Barbara Reed, “Counterpoint: Archivists and Changing Social and Information Spaces: A Continuum Approach to Recordkeeping and Archiving in Online Cultures,” *Archivaria* 72 (Fall 2011): 221.

communities?”¹⁰³ Communities define themselves in a multitude of ways, whether online or in person. To overlook social media’s potential in an archival setting would sidestep significant portions of readily available documentation of cultural creation and human activity. In most participatory archives models, a conceptual barrier between institutional authority and the users and creators of records remains in place. However, if postmodernism allows the archive to encompass more than just the bureaucratic, if it allows us to incorporate cultural activity, then we as archivists must not shut out culture that is happening in the present.

103. *Ibid.*, 78.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

What's the value of the archive? Largely as stories get told they grow and elaborate and morph and maybe that's true of reality anyway. Nothing is really real. But... often by looking back and finding those bits of facts and information you can get a picture of how something became something or how things really work or what the truth was.¹⁰⁴

This study explored the use of social media technologies within the community of Burning Man participants. Members of the community participated in an online survey that collected descriptions of their uses of and attitudes toward social media within the sphere of Burning Man culture. Interviews with members of the Burning Man organization supplied further insight into the way such technologies affect the community. First, social media technologies form a community of records that reflects representations of the community back upon itself. These records expand and multiply each participant's view of the event and the community, as well as spreading those views beyond the world of burners. Next in importance, the study revealed that participants collect and keep objects, both physical and digital, to which they attach profound meaning that contributes to their identity within the community. Most responses indicated that the most prized item is a physical object, especially necklaces given as playa gifts. Next, the research showed that Facebook is second only to email as the most popular tool for planning and creation of the event by participants. In addition to affording these pragmatic connections, social media forges and maintains a sense of belonging to the community beyond planning and coordinating projects. Finally, participants felt that dissemination of information about the Burning Man event occurs chiefly through the channels of the Web and social media, helping to

104. Michael Mikel, in discussion with the author, June 14, 2012.

acculturate newcomers, despite the finding that most respondents had heard about the event from someone first hand, rather than over mediated channels.

This study contributes to the understanding of the role of social media in documenting communities and social movements as they occur. It shows how the documents created and shared by participants—user-generated content—constitutes both the performance and the record of the community. The community’s goals, activities, and social ties, recorded on commercialized and commercializing platforms of social media, are at risk of permanent loss. This study revealed that both participants and organizers rely on sites like Facebook to build the community and share its meanings and values. Because these sites cannot be effectively preserved, these records are ephemeral, even more so than the Web pages created a decade and a half ago. Archivists, theorists, and technologists face the challenge of revising the prevailing paradigms of archives in the twenty-first century, to more accurately reflect culture and society, especially as we engage with and employ new technologies. The sharing of participant documents—project plans for the play, photographs of the event, playful videos expressing the joys of creativity—contains an archival consciousness, a spark of the moment of archivalisation: that desire to document and to preserve, to share with others or share with oneself at a future moment.

Appendix A: Survey

Burning Man Update: The Jack Rabbit Speaks
Volume 16, Issue #21
June 29, 2012

ACADEMIC SURVEY SEEKING PARTICIPANT OPINIONS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Dawn writes:

“Greetings fellow Burners! Are you interested in the preservation of Burning Man culture? Do you have an opinion about SOCIAL MEDIA and its effects on the Burning Man community? I’m a seven-time burner looking for your opinions about social/new media and how they affect our community. Your participation in a 10-15 minute confidential online survey will be a crucial part of my graduate thesis on social media, archives, and the future of Burning Man’s cultural record. The survey is open to Burners everywhere (as long as you are at least 18 years old). Please visit <http://tinyurl.com/BurnSurvey> to participate. Feel free to share widely. Thank you! ~Dawn.”

1. Informed Consent

2. Please select your age range.

- 18-25
- 26-34
- 35-45
- 45-55
- 55+

3. What region of the world do you live in?

4. - 8. Please select your country:

[menu for countries by region]

9. How many times have you been to Burning Man?

[0-26]

10. How did you first hear about Burning Man?

- Mainstream news report (such as television or newspaper coverage)
- Video on the web (such as YouTube or Vimeo)
- In person (such as a friend/family member, neighbor, co-worker)
- Blog post
- Photo website (such as Flickr.com)
- Other (please specify)

11. Please describe how you participate, generally, at Burning Man?

[Open text]

12. Do you post to any of the following social media sites?

- Personal Blog
- Vimeo

Flickr
Pinterest
YouTube
Facebook
Twitter
Other (please specify) [open text]

13. Do you follow any “official” Burning Man social media accounts? If yes, select all that apply:

Eplaya announcements -- eplaya.burningman.com
Burning Blog -- blog.burningman.com
Twitter -- twitter.com/#!/burningman
Facebook -- facebook.com/BurningMan
Jack Rabbit Speaks email newsletter
Other (please specify)[open text]

14. Do you follow or subscribe to social media accounts of other Burning Man participants (Burners)? Yes / No

15. If yes, please select all that apply:

Flickr
Facebook
Personal Blogs
Tumblr
Vimeo
YouTube
Twitter
Other (please specify)[open text]

16. Do you use the web (including social media sites) to find information about Burning Man?

Yes / No

17. If yes, what kinds of Burning Man-related material have you looked for?

Visual Inspiration (pictures and videos)
Finding or connecting with other Burners
Travel-related information
Project materials (building or lighting supplies, costumes, or other material for your Burning Man projects)
Leave-No-Trace tips and advice (greywater disposal, trash sorting, recycling)
Tickets
Other (please describe)[open text]

18. Throughout the year, about how often do you find yourself looking for Burning Man-related material online?

Daily
3-4 times per week
Weekly
2-3 times per month
Monthly

19. Does the frequency of your search change during the months just *before* the event?

Yes, I find myself searching online more often.
Yes, I find myself searching less often.
No, I search online about the same amount.

20. Does the frequency of your search change during the months just *after* the event?

Yes, I find myself searching online more often.
Yes, I find myself searching less often.
No, I search online about the same amount.

21. How do you generally save the information you find? Please check all that apply:
- Bookmarks to links
 - Print out the information
 - Download copies
 - Screen captures
 - Save emails
 - Other (please specify)[open text]
22. Do you use any of the following to plan, coordinate or find funding for Burning Man-related projects?
- Twitter
 - Personal Blog
 - Flickr
 - Facebook
 - Kickstarter
 - YouTube
 - Email
 - Google Groups / Yahoo Groups
 - Other (please specify)[open text]
23. Do you collect any PHYSICAL objects that represent or remind you of your Burning Man experiences?
- Photos (prints)
 - Survival Guides
 - Official Black Rock City map
 - What-Where-When guides
 - Books
 - Magazines or Journals
 - Newspapers, news clippings
 - Artifacts (non-gift)
 - Playa gifts - please describe (requires comment if checked)[open text]
24. What do you do with the physical materials you collect?
[open text]
25. Do you collect any DIGITAL objects that represent or remind you of your Burning Man experiences?
- Music
 - Photographs
 - Videos
 - Audio recordings
 - Web pages, blog and social media posts
 - Texts, such as personal stories
 - News items
 - Other (please describe)[open text]
26. What do you do with the digital objects you collect? [open text]
27. Is there a particular item, either physical or digital, that you prize above others? If so, please describe the item, and tell a little about how you got it: where you were, who you were with, why it's important to you. [open text]
28. Which social media sites do you think are the MOST VALUABLE to you in relation to Burning Man?
- Twitter
 - Flickr
 - Personal Blog
 - Facebook
 - YouTube

Google Groups / Yahoo Groups
None
Other site (please specify)[open text]

29. Why are the sites you selected valuable, in your opinion? [open text]

30. If you can, please describe a specific example of the value of social media in relation to Burning Man. [open text]

31. Do you think social media has had an effect on how you experience Burning Man?
Yes / No / How or why not?[open text]

32. How important do you think the WEB in general has been in sharing or spreading information about Burning Man?
completely unimportant/somewhat important/neither/very important/extremely important
How or why not?[open text]

33. How important do you think SOCIAL MEDIA has been in sharing or spreading information about Burning Man?
completely unimportant/somewhat important/neither/very important/extremely important
How or why not?[open text]

34. Have you had a memorable experience relating to Burning Man that involved (or was influenced by) social media or the web? Please describe your experience(s) below.
[open text]

Appendix B: Glossary of common Burning Man expressions

BRC – Black Rock City, the city that constitutes the Burning Man event, co-created by organizers and participants.

Burn, the – Depending on context, “the burn” can refer to the Burning Man event, or the burning of the Man sculpture on Saturday night.

Burner – Someone who participates in Burning Man culture, especially one who attends the Burning Man event.

Café – Center Camp Café, located in the center of Black Rock City, sells coffee and tea drinks and provides a communal shaded space to linger, socialize, and put on performances.

DMV – Department of Mutant Vehicles, responsible for inspecting and licensing the art cars to drive at the event.

DPW – Department of Public Works, responsible for setting up infrastructure at the event.

Fire Conclave—A collective of fire performers selected to perform choreographed fire dances around the base of the Man effigy before it is burned.

Gate – Part of the Gate, Perimeter, and Exodus department, a group that inspects incoming participant vehicles for stowaways, monitors the trash fence perimeter for gate-crashers, and manages the departure of the thousands of attendees at the end of the event.

Greeters – Volunteers who welcome participants to the event upon arrival and distribute printed materials such as the Where-What-When guide and the official city map. Greeters also reiterate the important rules of survival, i.e. sufficient water supplies and correct porta-potty usage.

On-playa, on the playa – Phrase meaning “at the event,” in reference to the desert location.

Playa dust – The alkali silt surface of the Black Rock Desert. With the texture and consistency of talcum powder, playa dust clings to and permeates everything it encounters.

Playa – The portion of Black Rock Desert in northern Nevada where Burning Man is held.

Ranger –The Black Rock Rangers are a volunteer safety and conflict resolution group, trained to mediate in disputes between participants or to avert dangerous situations. They were founded by Michael Mikel, aka Danger Ranger, in the early days of holding the event in the desert, when attendees could still get dangerously lost in the empty playa.

Regionals – The network of official Burning Man communities in regions around the world.

Temple Burn, the – The ceremonial burning of the Temple structure that takes place on Sunday.

Theme Camp – An encampment established by groups of participants providing interactive environments, services, or other activities to the community.

What-Where-When – The published guide of events, camps, and art installations. Participants choose to list their public camp activities and events in the guide.

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