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The Densho Archive: Harnessing the Power of Digital Media

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[The Densho Archive](#) is a web-based collection of over 300 hours of video taped oral histories with Japanese Americans who lived through or witnessed the large-scale internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. It includes more than 1,000 historical photographs and 1,000 digitized historical documents. The Archive contains interviews taken by Densho staff, digitized images of items from the collections of various museums and universities, and a growing collection of raw materials including interviews and B-roll produced by documentary filmmakers. Among the thousands of these items are newsletters written by and for camp detainees, signed copies of the infamous “loyalty questionnaires” that all detainees were forced to sign, home videos taken in the camps by inmates, and videotaped oral histories in which interviewees share their wrenching memories of childhood years in the camps. Over 150 gigabytes of invaluable information is stored on their servers and available to the general public. All of this is made seamlessly available on the website through common free software such as Adobe Acrobat Reader and Real Player.

Background

During World War II, thousands of Japanese Americans, many of them US citizens, were forced into incarceration in detention camps. In the years following the war, this shameful period in American history was largely absent from U.S. history books and the public imagination. Thanks to the sustained efforts of Asian American Redress Movement, the incarceration was officially judged to be a violation of the Constitution by the 1980 Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. This decision led to the dedication of funds for public education that contributed to a proliferation of scholarship, documentary films, literature, and museum exhibitions..

Densho

Densho a Seattle-based nonprofit, sprang from this movement. Named for the Japanese term meaning “legacy,” Densho began in 1996 as a community effort to videotape interviews with Japanese Americans in the Seattle area who had experienced incarceration during World War II—to capture their memories before this generation disappeared.

Today, the organization has a much more ambitious mission. Along with continuing local, off-line activities such as collecting interviews and holding workshops for teachers, it produces the educational website that includes a major online repository of digitized materials about the Japanese American experience of the twentieth century, with a focus on the war years. [The Archive](#) is now a major

educational tool working to improve public understanding of the Japanese American internment experience.

The Archive- a new kind of public media institution

The Densho Archive uses digital media to become something entirely new—a public, digital meta-museum. Its website presents videotaped oral histories that the organization has produced itself alongside relevant items from the collections of other institutions and individuals. Many of the items not produced directly by Densho are in the public domain. Others are donated by institutions such as the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, the National Archives, university museums, and individuals including documentary filmmakers Emiko Omori, Wendy Hanamura, and Frank Abe. Most of the digital images of historical documents and photographs physically reside in their original institutions; through an agreement, Densho is granted the right to make digital images of these items, enter the resulting digital files into its database and present them online, along with carefully notated finding aids. In bringing together materials that otherwise would be relegated to disparate institutions' or individuals' collections and making them much more publicly available, the Densho Archive makes itself a new kind of public media resource.

Densho balances its mission for public education with respect for the needs of those who have contributed their testimonies to its archive. Ikeda stresses that sensitivity to the latter convinced him to keep the archive one step away from being fully public. Users must register for a free user name and password to access the Archive materials. “It’s not much of a hindrance, but it’s an extra step that ensures that those who visit the archive are serious,” and not just casual web surfers, Ikeda says. This level of care was suggested by experts at Holocaust survivor archives, where there have been cases in which interviewees have been contacted and harassed by archive users. “I didn’t want for our narrators to have to relive that,” Ikeda explains, referring to the animosity they encountered during and after the war years.

Free Public Media—Avoiding the Costs of Technology and Rights

Becoming a new kind of institution that consolidates the relevant media of other collections while remaining free to the end user has required significant innovation in rights and cost arrangements. Densho has managed this thanks to the technological savvy of its board, the importance of its public mission, and intelligent use of its key assets.

Because Densho is breaking ground in the scale and public importance of its archive, technology companies have been eager to showcase their products by donating them to drive the site. For example, Isilon Systems, “a premier provider of intelligent clustered storage for digital content,” donated the software and archive structure. Such contributions have eliminated the technology and computer service costs that force similar projects to charge high fees to end users.

Similarly, museums, libraries and other content donors allow Densho to host their media free of charge in part because Densho’s mission often coincides with their own. These institutions receive high-quality digital copies of their materials and significant visibility in return for granting the rights to host their

materials online.

The urgency of Densho's educational mission has so far impelled three documentary filmmakers to donate their materials, no strings attached. For example, filmmaker Wendy Hanamura is donating interviews with her father, who fought in an all-Japanese American unit during World War II, that were originally made for her 1995 documentary *Honor Bound*. Asked why she has entrusted her materials to the Archive, even though posting materials online always carries the risk of misuse, she says, "Would it be awful for someone to misuse my father's words? Yes, but it would be more awful for his voice to be lost to history."

Because of these unique arrangements, access to the Densho archive is entirely free. Densho terms and conditions allow materials to be reproduced from the website for educational purposes; projects that require tapes of media are charged the costs of staff time necessary for duplication. Commercial projects wishing to use Densho archive materials must go to the original content owners themselves.

Cutting-Edge Use of Digital Technology

Technology has always been a tool at the forefront of Densho's mission. Unimpressed by the lackluster uses of audio-visual technologies by other Japanese American organizations, the founders took the inspiration for producing videotaped oral histories from Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. In its first phase as a community oral history project, Densho distinguished itself primarily in the quality and depth of its video interviews. As board member Franklin Odo points out, while other organizations' oral history interviews might be archived as documents or audio files, Densho uses the capacity of video to convey their personal and emotional impact. And where others' interviews might last only two hours, Densho devotes eight or nine hours per interview subject, allowing him or her the luxury of narrating an alternative, personal history on his or her own terms.

In its current phase, Densho continues to push the capacity of technology for its public mission. The Archive has a sophisticated digital structure that renders its content easily accessible. Digital indexing makes the archive, which is impeccably cross-referenced and indexed, powerfully integrated and easy to navigate. Click on a hyperlink, and a rich and varied array of images of documents, photographs, and audio-video interviews on the topic appears instantly. The networked nature of the Archive reveals the spectrum of opinions on any one topic, such as the controversy within the community over participation in the U.S. armed forces in World War II. It also allows each interview, document, or photograph to become one piece in a chorus testifying to the reality and injustice of this period in American history.

Conclusion

The Densho Archive is a resource useful to individuals and institutions. Hundreds of American school teachers and students are registered researchers. Its materials were an important part of the Museum of Jewish Heritage's exhibit about Jewish and other minorities' service in World War II, and have recently gone into a Japanese American Citizens' League video that compares the wartime disempowerment and subsequent redress of Japanese Americans with what Muslim Americans are experiencing during our contemporary wars.

With all of this, Densho's broadest value remains its success as a groundbreaking model of public media. By using its resources and assets in a smart way, attending to the needs of the community from which it sprang, and providing a huge service to an important political agenda, Densho has set new ground in the realm of digital archiving. As more and more institutions try to make their collections accessible online, the Densho model is an important and unique one that holds great promise for the field as well as for the communities that rely on these projects for their own work.