Evaluating the 1947 Partition Archive from the lens of Human-Computer Interaction

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# The 1947 Partition Archive

## Introduction

The Partition of India-Pakistan at the end of the British rule in the subcontinent served as a bloody foundation of two nation-states (later, three), which changed the fabric of communal society on both sides of the border. It led to the migration of 15 million people “over the course of the year”, six million were uprooted [[1]](#footnote-1), and at least a million people were killed during the year. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Mass historical accounts of the Partition have been dominated by events and numbers, and mostly feature names and faces of political players involved – Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Attempts to reconstruct personal, oral histories have received limited [[3]](#footnote-3) and scattered attention, and where they have, are not accessible to all. As the years pass, the generation of people who have memories of the time will inevitably dwindle.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is why [The 1947 Partition Archive](https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/) (henceforth, The Archive) is an invaluable and timely digital archive, documenting not just the intra-continental and global migration of the people at scale (their target is 10,000 oral history recordings [[5]](#footnote-5)), but also, for the first time, building a fairly representative library of stories of those who suffered during the Partition, from individuals themselves, and in their own language.

“Archives constitute the memory of nations and societies, shape their identity, and are a cornerstone of the information society.” [[6]](#footnote-6) As such, a grassroot-level effort such as this one is commendable and holds the potential to empower people to tell their stories, and feel heard.

## The Archival Structure

At first glance it may seem that The Archive is the website, supported by the eponymous NGO, but a little digging reveals that the website itself is one part and the overarching mission of the project connects several important pieces:

1. Video footage of the interviews housed at Stanford University Digital Repository [[7]](#footnote-7)
2. Physical items from individuals lives, digitized, which were scheduled to be on display at sites in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in 2017 (no update on that)
3. A strong social media presence which acts as a space for long-lost friends and family to find each other

This project will evaluate the user interface of the website alone to evaluate how the principles of Human-Computer Interaction can be applied to its usability and contribute to its usage, as a repository, as a unifying multi-perspective narrative, and as an addition to the large body of work already done within the field of Partition studies. [[8]](#footnote-8)

## Landing Page

It is easy for even an uninitiated visitor on the website to make a quick guess about what it may contain. The map on the homepage, powered by **CartoB** maps shows the number of people and the migration to and from. While important, it does little to connect to the larger mission of giving voice to people’s stories. There are no images, no links to the relevant interviews on either Facebook, or the videos at Stanford’s repository. It seems to be have been designed with only those who may be in search of someone – the search bar within the map allows you to look for names, and where they migrated to, but little else.

To those coming to the site for the stories themselves, there is little to guide one on how to access what material and where. The ‘Donations’ banner is typically placed near the end of most websites, so the placement of crucial ‘About’ and ‘Mission’ statements towards the end is counter-intuitive to established knowledge on how we navigate websites.

Human-Computer Interaction principles deal with making devices and systems “more usable”. [[9]](#footnote-9)

How would we establish usability of The Archive? From its mission, we can deduce it is to:

1. Connect people who were torn apart during their partition
2. Bring to the front voices and stories that threaten to be forgotten if they are not recorded
3. Preserve the memories of the people who were uprooted during this time [[10]](#footnote-10)

By placing the featured ‘clips’ (interviews of the individuals) at the very bottom of the home page, it hides these stories instead of bringing them to the forefront.

While the repertoire of accessible videos (for which one has to go to the [Stanford Libraries website](https://exhibits.stanford.edu/1947-partition/browse/interviews)) does “encourage people to experience culture from difference perspectives” [[11]](#footnote-11), the website itself fails to evoke an “emotion-driven experience” [[12]](#footnote-12) that characterizes affective computing, and by extension, digital humanities projects. And even the Stanford library itself only exhibits 50 out of the over 9000 interviews conducted – the rest are available to researchers upon request.

## Deconstructing the design

The page has two horizontal blocks places on top of two vertical columns, in which the text in unequally divided, and creates a lot of visual confusion: the about section is right next to the box for newsletter subscription, the press coverage is placed to the left of the videos. There is no hierarchy of importance for the information.

These general issues are visible on each page of the website:

1. **Lack of images**: There are no photos of individuals, nothing from open-access images of the Partition. Even the library of books and film is all words
2. **Layout:** It does not follow the clean grids of good web design [[13]](#footnote-13)
3. **Formatting**, organization and presentation of the information all make interaction with The Archive an unpleasant experience
4. **Representation:** The website is entirely in English, with no obvious way to translate it into at least Hindi and Bengali, the two major languages of the South-Asian region
5. **Timeliness:** Several parts of the website have not been updated in around three years, attributed to a lack of funds

## Enriching Experiences

New technologies afford ways to present experiences in unique ways and “provide context for the cultural content they offer” [[14]](#footnote-14). Using the internet as a site of presentation, The Archive does add a layer of personal history to the political events of 1947. In creating a community on social media [[15]](#footnote-15), it ensures a more continuous engagement with history, and layers critical and personal understanding.

It is not the agenda of The Archive, but an intentional weaving of essays and stories about partition into the collection would help it realize its full potential.

As is characteristic of oral history practice in India[[16]](#footnote-16), The Archive initiative has collected personal items and artifacts, though they are yet to be put on display, a promise that was made in 2017. This delay then, means the project fails to create a much needed contextual environment outside the digital realm.

The filmed interviews deepen the understanding of any listener/viewer. Interviews have translations (but no subtitles), and is another obstacle to the user-friendly presentation of archival material. The exhibition videos at the Stanford library are mobile-friendly, but the website of The Archive is not fully optimized for mobile phones. While contents of a page fit on the screen, the font is much smaller, to the point of being illegible.

## Middleware

The site is built using the Drupal content management system [[17]](#footnote-17), but there is no documentation on this choice, the why and how of using Drupal and what it does or does not afford the team to present. If, using Drucker and Svensson’s notion of the idea of a middleware that includes all the “tools and circumstances of presentation” [[18]](#footnote-18), we analyze The Archive, then there is other middleware at play:

1. The physical objects and the planned exhibits
2. The exhibition at the Stanford digital library

Neither the exhibit nor The Archive seem to have been designed for interpretation, only exhibition, though the project’s use of the digital is clear – there is no other way these stories could have reached the masses as they have. Interview translations and metadata for the exhibits at the Stanford Library can be downloaded as XML files, which aims for sustainability, an oft ignored aspect in digital archives.[[19]](#footnote-19)

It’s efforts at layering also fall short – the map tells one story, the videos another and there is nothing to bridge that gap. If the concept of middleware tells a story through how users interact with the website and how elements are juxtaposed, then The Archive tells a disjointed one, and the presentation fails to live up to the mission.

Then the middleware features produce a secondary argument through language/presentation in a graphical, spatial, or audial interface where hierarchy, proximity, juxtaposition, scale, sequence, proportion, color and timing of display are enabled by the click, drag, drop, enter, search, and play functions that order our behavior.

There is immense potential in using the archive to be used as a ‘witness’ in how it “structures the discourse” [[20]](#footnote-20) of partition stories, but for now, the inventions (the language, the tabs on the homepage) used on the website, in the way it is structured point to its more immediate mission – to collect the stories as fast as possible – with little thought to framing the material or the design of that frame. [[21]](#footnote-21)

## Team and Contributions

Part of the reason for this single-track approach is an issue with funding, which The Archive is fairly transparent about.

The project is the brainchild of Guneeta Singh Bhalla, a physicist by education. The rest of the staff comprises writers, historians, some with a focus on oral history, engineers, and one researcher with a background in Digital Humanities, with tasks related to training interns, managing social media, writing the stories of the individuals and campaigning for donations.

Almost no staff member mentions contributing to critical decisions about the material and its presentation, at least on their LinkedIn pages. As Dr. Bhalla has said in the press before [[22]](#footnote-22), the aim is to get the interviews done and all efforts are directed to that goal.

Story contributions are crowdsourced, which is an effective approach given the diversity – linguistic, geographical and cultural – among the interviewees. Citizen Historians complete a short course before conducting interviews, which provides as a useful quality filter for the method of crowdsourcing which is applied. The design of inviting volunteers reflects the expertise of the team, which has a historian-slant.

A lot of the grunt work, including video and audio editing, creative writing, outreach etc is done through unpaid internships, the calls for which are updated. The list of past interns is mentioned, but not their contributions. Given infrequent website updates, it is difficult to say who is involved as of 2020.

Monetary contributions are largely through donations and grants. Funding is made relatively transparent, so is the cost of collecting a story. Donors also get to know which story their contributing helped preserve, which points to a sense of transparency of the processes.

## Conclusion

The aim of the archive is clear; to collect a people’s history of the Partition of India and Pakistan, with a long-term mission of using this material as a learning and educational tool.

However, the design of the website, the lack of visuals, the incohesive information presentation, and reduced real access to the material together negatively impact the usability of The Archive, and affect the “the quality of interaction”. [[23]](#footnote-23)

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