

Abstract:

WeSurvive: Stories of the Ebola Outbreak is a web-based, oral history database that allows users to access and view a substantial collection of personal video testimonials from Ebola survivors, their family members, and other community members affected by the 2014 West African Ebola outbreak. The project grew out of the NEH supported and forthcoming PBS feature length documentary film **Survivors**, which presents an unforgettable portrait of Sierra Leonean first responders during the outbreak.

We believe it is vital that West Africans contribute directly and significantly to the historical record of this global health crisis. Our goal with **WeSurvive** is to record, collect, preserve and share these testimonials and help contribute to how the Ebola crisis and the region are understood. This collection of interviews adds a unique and essential perspective on what it was like to live through the outbreak. The database can be configured, viewed, sorted, and served with a multi-user framework in mind for use by researchers, scholars, artists, journalists, public health professionals and the general public.

Enhancing the Humanities Through Oral History Video Archive of Ebola Outbreak

Introduction: As non-fiction filmmakers, we spend our lives collecting moments - everything from intimate exchanges between family members, to capturing defining moments of history that come to represent our collective memory. In most productions, just a fraction of this material is edited and publicly presented leaving the vast majority never seen by anyone outside of the filmmaking team. Our most recent project, the NEH supported film, **Survivors**, was uniquely collaborative. During production, we worked with a wide network of local Sierra Leonean filmmakers and gathered an enormous trove of interviews with Ebola survivors, their family members and others in the community who were directly impacted by the disease. To date, we have nearly a hundred hours of unused footage spread out over more than 80 interviews that are a critically important and tremendously underrepresented part of the historical record of this event. This volume of material born from our collaborative filmmaking process has led to this inquiry into how to make source material available as a public archive.

The Outbreak and Its Coverage: The 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak was the longest and deadliest in history. Lasting 24 months, the epidemic began in rural Guinea before spreading to Liberia and Sierra Leone. The virus killed more than 11,000 people and infected nearly 30,000¹, causing a global healthcare panic. West Africa received unprecedented international press attention after European and American healthcare workers contracted the disease and were diagnosed in their home countries. A preoccupation with the European experience of Ebola created even more distance from a region which hovers on the edges of international attention and understanding. The media frenzy failed to create a layered or humanizing understanding of the events or those affected. Instead, headlines only tended to replicate the damaging idea that the region is singularly defined by tragedy and could only respond to Ebola with ignorance and fear.

The issue of trust is at the foundation of any collaboration and the Ebola outbreak provides a fascinating case study of how the developing world and humanitarian aid sector work together. The

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/previous-case-counts.html>

three countries most affected by the outbreak were Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, countries with little to no health infrastructure in place to support the kinds of isolation and public health work required². Additionally, local trust in government and foreign aid organizations was lacking, and compliance with recommended health practices came slowly³. It is difficult to build trust and understanding in the pressurized environment of a health disaster. One of our central goals with the project is to add depth and authenticity to how the Ebola crisis is understood through the sharing of personal testimonials. We hope that these interviews will aid in a deeper level of understanding and will improve strategies implemented by foreign systems in the future.

“LEST WE FORGET! Our children and our grandchildren need to remember what happened during the Ebola crisis. We can never forget our history. We need to learn from it and to always be in prayer and to take actions that will ensure the safety and health of our people”

**Rev. Canon Dr. J.E. Modupe Taylor Pearce, Pro Chancellor of Fourah Bay College,
University of Sierra Leone.**

² <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/08/11/ebola-the-politics-of-resistance-in-liberia/>

³ Pam Scully 2015 interview of Pee Wee Flomoku, at the Carter Center, Monrovia, Liberia

Proposal Goal: In every generation, there are events that morally, socially and politically come to define that particular era. For the people of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, the Ebola crisis is without a doubt one such event. This is why it is vital that West Africans who lived through the outbreak contribute directly and significantly to historical record. Our proposal seeks Level I start-up funding to consult with academics, technologists, archivists, librarians, and other Oral History experts as we begin to curate and design this archive. We are proposing to convene two stakeholder summits to address our unique project challenges. Another project outcome is to develop a set of standards and best practices for the process of creating a new archive from already existing materials captured during the production of a non-fiction documentary film.

Challenges and Motivations:

We are highly motivated to preserve this archive and to continue our work to facilitate the inclusion of African voices in the telling of African history. Our first convening (see Appendix A for a detailed agenda) is designed to help us define the scope of the project while addressing practical considerations. Our second convening will dive into the more technical considerations including: how to build the archive using existing platforms, designing an adaptable multiple-user framework, metadata tagging strategies, as well as some planning for sustainability.

How Deep?: Our first challenge will be to define the scope of the archive. We expect that the project will remain an active collecting archive for the near future. In addition to the collection of interviews that our team recorded and is recording, we are also in touch with a wide network of other filmmakers and organizations that were actively recording media during the outbreak. The potential sources are vast. We have translated, subtitled and transcribed our own material and are aware of the immense effort and logistical complexity involved in adding outside sources to our archive, but we also recognize the value that comes with making more materials available. Guidance from Digital Humanities experts and feedback from potential user audiences will help us focus project intention as we begin this new planning phase. Outcomes will inform both how we continue to collect interviews and how to design the appropriate platform for their presentation.

Ethics: How do we preserve privacy without restricting access to the archive? Our project engages individuals from vulnerable communities and there are a variety of ethical issues that we will continue to explore. Many project interview subjects are sick and some have recently lost family members at the time the interviews were conducted. In addition, most subjects are living in a state of extreme poverty; there are power dynamics at play; some participants may lack an understanding of what it means to give consent despite our best efforts to explain. We plan to deeply engage and address these issues to ensure proper handling of sensitive materials.

Language Barrier/Preservation Opportunity: All the material we have filmed and collected is recorded in the subjects original language. We will continue gathering interviews in their original spoken languages and if we choose to expand the archive to include third party material, there will significant translation work to be done. So far, interviews were conducted in Krio, Temne, Mende, Kissy, Kono and Sherbro. We are interested in learning more about the variety of solutions to efficiently ingest material, including crowdsourcing translation, transcription with native speaker. Although the fact that these interviews were conducted in the original African languages does present these additional steps in order to make them publicly available and widely useful to a broad audience, it also makes the material doubly valuable to the humanities because they can also be used for language study and language preservation.

Community Inclusion: From this project's inception there has been significant West African thought leadership at the helm, and during production we crafted a community inclusive, culturally sensitive approach to the interview process. It is critical that we continue this approach through the design process as we decide how the material will be organized, tagged and shared. Arthur Pratt and Lansana Mansaray, our Sierra Leonean project leads, are coming to the US in the Fall 2018 to support the release of the **Survivors** documentary. We are planning our in-person convenings with our advisors around those dates. From West Africa we also plan to include PeeWee Flomoku, Director of the Carter Center in Monrovia, Liberia and Aminata Bangura who is a project interview subject, Ebola survivor, and advocate working with Sierra Leone Association of Ebola Survivors. (See Appendix A for detailed Agendas for the 2 convenings).

History of the Project:

Our work on the **Survivors** documentary and **WeSurvive** is the result of a collaboration more than a decade in the making. Project lead Banker White made his first film in Sierra Leone between 2002-2005 and subsequently founded the WeOwnTV Freetown Media Center in 2009 together with Sierra Leonean filmmaker Arthur Pratt. The media center houses the country's most experienced media collective and also serves as a media education hub. Our organization has collaborated with the Media Center on a variety of projects and continues to support many of center's programs. Our team began production on **Survivors** and **WeSurvive** in the summer of 2014 and, to date, we have recorded more than 80 individual accounts of what happened during the Ebola outbreak. We interviewed family members in quarantined homes, local healthcare workers, as well as community leaders involved in the response. All of our interviews thus far have been conducted in Sierra Leone. Our project will remain an active collecting archive for the near future. Our Sierra Leonean team is currently in production, both recording and collecting new material for the archive within Sierra Leone. Examples of the footage and the interviews being gathered can be seen via links in [Appendix B](#). In addition, we are considering expanding production and oral history collection efforts to Guinea and Liberia, and will refine our approach during our grant period.

Proposed Work Plan:

We are requesting a Level I grant to support an 18-month work period (September 2018 - February 2020). Our proposal seeks support for two convenings that bring together project stakeholders, experts, potential users, and partners to establish a blueprint for **WeSurvive** moving forward, as well as preliminary funding for an alpha-level prototype. Our timeline is as follows:

SUMMER/FALL 2018

- Identify experts who could potentially participate in the the first convening
- Develop and define project goals together with advisors
- October: The ***Survivors*** film is scheduled to have its North American television broadcast on PBS's award-winning series, POV
- November: First convening scheduled while Sierra Leonean team is still in US at Emory University, before ***Survivors*** is presented at Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in Atlanta
- Synthesis of information from the first convening
- Creation of the plan of action

WINTER/SPRING 2019

- Develop and define project goals and create program design for the second convening
- Second convening will be held in San Francisco
- Synthesis of information from the second convening
- Creation of work plan to begin work on prototype beta

SUMMER/FALL 2019

- Synthesis of information from the second convening
- Creation of work plan to begin work on prototype beta
- Beta launch and testing with diverse test audience

At the end of our 18-month grant period, we will come away with a clear strategic development plan for our database and a preliminary set of standards and practices for documentary filmmakers interested in creating a public archive using their source materials. Ultimately, we will launch ***WeSurvive*** and will work with project team members to pursue appropriate venues (conferences, publications) for sharing the work and building strategic partnerships.