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Critical Response 7

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**The Digital Presentation of Excavations at the John Brown House**

A quick Google search for “archaeology at the John Brown House” yields a list of results that are indicative of both the successes and failures of the digital presentation of research done at the site. The first few results are the archived forums of past Archaeology of College Hill classes, websites that are hosted by the Joukowsky Institute at Brown University. These links, though easy to navigate for the average Brown University archaeology student or faculty member, prove difficult to understand for the non-affiliated user. The rest of the results are links to brief articles that have been done on the excavations at the house by outside parties, followed by a handful of links to the Rhode Island Historical Society, which mostly relate to events hosted by the RIHS at the John Brown House. By page two, most of the results relate to the John Brown of Harper’s Ferry fame rather than the John Brown of Providence, Rhode Island. As Eric Kansa and Sarah Kansa point out in their chapter detailing the development and maintenance of Open Context, a general database for the dissemination of archaeological data, “search-engine discovery is important to Open Context use and to the impact of research more generally,” (Kansa and Kansa 2011: 82). Considering that excavations at the John Brown House take place in the context of a semester-long course, efforts for the responsible online presentation of archaeological data are admirable, but there is certainly room for improvement. To make information more readily searchable, the web forum used would have to be significantly updated to reflect user’s needs. Beyond identifying user needs and incorporating them into digital presentation, our efforts as excavators at the John Brown House should also be focused on the sustainability of the data we produce and ensuring its accessibility for years to come.

Posting our excavation reports and weekly updates on a single, unified website does allow for what W. Frederick Limp, in his chapter on the advantages and difficulties of the digital presentation of archaeological data, terms “disintermediation”; that is, our open publishing of some of our data acts as an equalizing force, providing broad access to information that otherwise would risk being kept in a highly localized, highly regulated archival environment. However, the difficulty of using the forum could be preventing this information from being used. As Kansa and Kansa argue, the digital presentation of data is only beneficial if the users of said data are understood (Kansa and Kansa 2011: 67). It is currently unclear who uses the data that we continually post, and investigation into this area would allow for the creation of a new iteration of the forum that would be more productive for both academics and casual information seekers.

This question of audience is a complex one, especially when it comes to a site like the John Brown House. Archaeologists in the greater New England region working at analogous sites may be interested in our excavations, but the type of data that they would find useful is vastly different than what kind of information the general public desires. Archaeologists would be more concerned with measurements, accurate records, raw artifact and context data, as well as high-level analysis. On the other hand, the general public may be more interested in the site narrative and the holistic presentation of our excavations. At the John Brown House, digital presentation has thus far favored the latter over the former. Analysis and narrative in the form of critical responses, field blogs, and the final report are abundant, while the actual documentation of raw data is lacking. A (very) small first step to rectifying this imbalance could be to scan and upload context sheets that students fill out over the course of the semester. These context sheets include drawings, Munsell values, Harris matrices, and other information that could be directly relevant to current and future New England archaeologists.

Alonzo Addison alludes to these varying types of data that can be presented and the problems with each. He asserts that “actual measurements and records are what have lasting value” (Addison 2008: 32), which is arguably the case if one only thinks of an audience comprised of archaeologists and other specialized academics. However, as Gavin Lucas points out, the compilation of raw data is just as problematic as all other forms of data presentation, noting that there is often a “separation between a site’s features […] and its finds,” (Lucas 2001: 64) that imposes a system of typologies and classifications that can sometimes hinder future analysis. Furthermore, images, narrative, and analysis are highly important in terms of engagement with the wider public, the consequences of which also have great long-term value. Increased visibility of and public interest in a site such as the John Brown House could help ensure continued research and the protection of previously collected data.

The sustainability of data collected at the John Brown House should be as great a concern as the original presentation of the data itself. The recording of excavations at the site certainly benefits from the support of the Joukowsky Institute, but further integration of data with a larger institution would help to guarantee the maintenance of our data archives. Limp suggests that including databases of archaeological research into larger university library databases could be a solution to fears over the preservation of online data. Archaeology, as an interpretative discipline, “has a responsibility to ensure that data continues” (Limp 2011: 270) so that future generations can continue to reassess and reuse it. At the John Brown House, the best and easiest way to do this would be to link our web forums to both the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Brown University Josiah Library System. If this were to be done, then it would be possible for a user to search for the John Brown House on Josiah and be presented with links to our excavation work, thereby increasing the dissemination of information. It would also safeguard our data by incorporating it into a database that is systematically maintained in the long-term, thereby eliminating the problem that currently exists where past seasons’ excavation forums are web-archived and become increasingly difficult to find as the years pass.

As a final suggestion, it seems that not only the availability of data but also the user’s ability to interact with it is important. The chapters by Limp and Kansa and Kansa allude to this but fail to directly address it. At the John Brown House, we seem uniquely poised to allow for public interaction with our work. In my own personal experience, sharing my field blog with individuals not involved in the excavation has assisted in my analysis of the site. Collaboration amongst archaeologists, academics, and the general public could prove extremely beneficial to the study of the John Brown House. It would allow for more open analysis of the site, our methods, and our finds, opening us up to both critiques and suggestions that could improve our current work. In a very simple way, this could be done by creating a comments feature on a field blogs where people could react to our weekly work and/or by adding a discussion forum section the website.

The John Brown House is a relatively small site with a short history of excavation. This makes it more manageable in terms of digital presentation than a larger, more complex excavation. Our weekly field blogs represent an interesting addition to the information we make public, giving a different perspective on our research. However, there is certainly room for improvement, both in the short term and the long term. Most immediately, a larger amount of images, especially photographs of finds both in context—so as to eliminate the false separation of features and finds defined by Lucas—as well as photographs of the objects in a laboratory setting would prove beneficial to both academics and the general public. The inclusion of completed context sheets would also be an important addition to the site that would allow for future archaeologists to re-analyze areas that they are unable to re-excavate. A possible long-term goal could be the integration of the course wikis with the greater Brown University Library system, which would protect our data from virtual erasure as well as increase the visibility of our work. Improvement in the digital presentation of archaeological information about the John Brown House is definitely possible, as long as we consciously and responsibly “work to make our data and research accessible and reusable in the future” (Addison 2008: 39).

**Works Cited**

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