SURVIVORS: Archiving the history of bulletin board systems and the AIDS crisis
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Abstract
The history of the Internet and the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis are fundamentally intertwined. Because of the precarious nature of primary early Internet materials, however, documentation that reflects this relationship is limited. Here, we present and analyse an important document that offers considerable insight in this area: a full printout of the bulletin board system (BBS) discussion group “SURVIVORS.” Run by David Charnow, SURVIVORS operated as an “electronic support group” for members living with HIV/AIDS from 1987 to 1990. These dates represent a period of overlap between both the AIDS crisis in America and the use of BBSs as a predecessor to contemporary Internet technologies. The contents of SURVIVORS were printed by Charnow before his death in 1990 and later donated to the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. Through our discussion of these documents, we articulate the striking relationship between the SURVIVORS printout as a material document that preserves a digital past and the lives of those whose stories are contained within the printout. We argue that it is not only the content but indeed the precarious, shifting media format of the SURVIVORS printout, born digital and now preserved on paper, that gives it its meaning. Thirty years after his death, Charnow’s printout of SURVIVORS keeps a critical piece of the interrelated histories of HIV/AIDS and the Internet alive, while also raising valuable questions about the archiving of these histories.

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Introduction
The history of the Internet and the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis are fundamentally intertwined. This is true in a number of ways, going back more than three decades. As scholars have shown, HIV/AIDS activists operating in the 1980s were a crucial group among early Internet users; indeed, online social networks have long been key sites of knowledge sharing for those seeking information about HIV/AIDS
In this article, we address another dimension of the connection between Internet histories and the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis, which also ties to broader resonances between the Internet and LGBT lives. As we argue, Internet histories and histories of the HIV/AIDS crisis are often similarly precarious and ephemeral. This manifests, in part, in related challenges around the archiving of primary documentation of early networked communications. Despite contemporary efforts to restore and preserve Internet content and online communications — such as the work of the Internet Archive, various archival task forces, and comprehensive residencies — much material from this early period, especially material created by marginalized groups, has been lost (Jeffrey, 2012; Mink, et al., 2016; Driscoll, 2014). In a similar vein, because of the ongoing marginalization of LGBT people and the limitations of traditional archives, the stories of those with HIV/AIDS are often likewise precarious: vulnerable to being erased or insufficiently preserved (Stone and Cantrell, 2015). As a result, the queer history of the Internet, and especially the day-to-day online lives of people with HIV/AIDS, is a site of double vulnerability and — by extension — absence. However, neglecting to tend to this overlap of HIV/AIDS histories and the Internet has impoverished our understanding of both the AIDS crisis and Internet histories.

However, some artifacts from the interrelated histories of HIV/AIDS and the early Internet do remain. In recent scholarship, both Cait McKinney’s research on HIV/AIDS activist BBS/analogue newsletters and Avery Dame-Griff’s research on the discussion of transgender topics on UseNet have demonstrated how elements of LGBT experience can be found within existing Internet history projects (McKinney, 2018; Dame-Griff, 2019). Here, we present and analyse another vital artefact that offers additional insights: a full printout, stored at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, of the bulletin board system (BBS) discussion group “SURVIVORS.” A sub-group associated with the larger LGBT BBS forum “The Backroom,” SURVIVORS operated as “electronic support group” for members living with HIV/AIDS. It was among the first BBSs dedicated to disseminating information about the AIDS crisis which existed solely online. SURVIVORS was started by David Charnow in 1987, when Charnow himself was diagnosed with AIDS. It ran until Charnow’s death in 1990. It is no coincidence that this time period represents two formative, overlapping historical moments: the height of both the AIDS crisis in America and the use of BBS discussion groups as a predecessor to contemporary Internet technologies. A full transcript of posts to the SURVIVORS BBS, totalling more than a thousand pages of posts, was printed out by Charnow before his death and, years later, was later donated to the ONE Archives in Los Angeles. Contained within one cardboard box are three years of communications between hundreds of group members. Nearly 30 years after his death, Charnow’s printout of the SURVIVORS BBS keeps a critical piece of the interrelated histories of HIV/AIDS and the Internet alive.

Through our discussion of these documents, we articulate the relationship between the SURVIVORS printout (catalogued at the ONE archive as the “David Charnow Papers” or the “UpperWestsider Papers,” after Charnow’s username “UpperWestsider”) as a material document that preserves both a digital past and the lives of those whose stories are contained within the printout. We do this by exploring three core themes that recur in posts to the SURVIVORS BBS, each of which brings its own complexity and tensions to our analysis. These themes are: loss and grief, uncertainty and ephemerality, and survival and perseverance. In drawing out these themes, we show how they are echoed in the form, history, and meaning of the SURVIVORS printout itself. We contend that it is not only the content but indeed the form of this artifact that gives it its value as a window onto the interrelated histories of HIV/AIDS and Internet. The SURVIVORS printout is a hybrid digital-analog document. This also represents a loss: the loss of the BBS’s original digital properties, such as waiting for each individual character to load onscreen at 30-characters-a-second, and their unique affective qualities. Yet, this material transformation also serves as a testament to survival. It is precisely because Charnow printed out these communications, rather than attempting to preserve them by digital means, that they have survived. In this way, the SURVIVORS printout has sidestepped the issues of technological obsolescence that have made the preservation of many pre-1990s digital records so challenging. Today, the SURVIVORS printout carries the stories of group’s members — many of whom did not survive the HIV/AIDS crisis, as numerous heartbreaking posts to the BBS attest — into the future; it gives these stories ongoing life. In this sense, SURVIVORS as a community and as a document play strikingly similar roles. Charnow himself described maintaining
LGBT Internet histories and queer approaches to archives

The SURVIVORS printout offers a valuable window onto the interrelated histories of LGBT lives and the earlier network technologies that would come to shape the Internet. Existing archives and scholarship that document or address the history of LGBT life online have yet to engage with this history in full, in part because of the difficulty of accessing and organizing documents pertaining to the early Internet (Brügger, 2012, 2011). For example, the Internet Archive, created in 1996, was set up with the intention of preserving historical Internet collections and to promote “universal access to all knowledge” (Kahle, 2007). It is singular in its size and reach as a hybrid Web library of Internet Web sites. However, the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (IAWM) does not operate like a traditional archive: there is no archivist appraising or organising the materials, almost no accompanying contextual data, and knowledge about an item’s provenance is limited (Ben-David and Amram, 2018). This makes it challenging as a resource for historical research and, as a result, leaves many materials obscured. Archivists have made significant strides in digital preservation and continue to refine appropriate processes for collecting and cataloging born-digital materials (Szekely, 2017; McGovern, 2018). However, there are still no set standards for digital stewardship in the heritage sector or archives nor widely agreed upon methods for utilising the Web archives that do exist (Mink, et al., 2016; Brügger, 2016). This means that existing Web archives, though well-intentioned, still struggle to capture the dynamism and nuance of the Internet, especially in its early history.

The difficulty of archiving born-digital materials is compounded when accounting for the often elusive history of LGBT knowledge production and documentation. Kate O’Riordan (2005) offers a useful historiography of the early Internet and networked computers for LGBT communities in the U.K. and the U.S. O’Riordan points to the growth of queer theory as an academic discipline in the 1990s as it paralleled the rise of networked computing and the Internet. Both the Internet and queer theory intersected with “key questions of modernity — identity, community, governance, time and space” [1]. O’Riordan’s focus on the UseNet group soc.motss, a purposefully discrete naming convention which abbreviated “social” and “members of the same sex,” acknowledged the need for ambiguity in queer communities to operate online without harassment. In addition, mentions of non-heteronormative behaviour, such as gender play, have often appeared in discussions of aspects of the early Internet, such as multi-user dungeons (MUDs) (Wakeford, 1997; Turkle, 1995; Dibbell, 1998). However, primary documentation of users’ day-to-day activities in these environments, whether related to LGBT identities or otherwise, remains limited.

For LGBT communities online, BBSes were a particularly important form of knowledge sharing. This was especially true during the AIDS crisis. Kevin Driscoll (2014) looked for these “forgotten histories” of Internet subcultures in his dissertation. In this work, Driscoll presents a narrative of the “popular Internet imaginary” as it was formed through early networked computer use. Driscoll devotes significant attention to BBSs that held information about HIV/AIDS and points to several features that made the dial-up bulletin-board a preferred system of communication for marginalized groups, such its file-sharing capabilities, its accessibility, and its anonymity. For these reasons, Driscoll says, more than 100 BBSs were set up between 1985 and 1993 to share information about HIV/AIDS with local communities. These boards were used by thousands and saw multiple calls a day, offering a space for information, education, and support without the stigma which too-often surrounded HIV/AIDS at the time (Driscoll, 2014).

The relationship between the digital and the analog is also an important element of LGBT Internet histories. There is a long history of LGBT informational materials bringing together digital and analog media forms. Starting in the late 1980s, paper ephemera like magazine ads and print brochures were circulated, encouraging LGBT folks to begin using proto-Internet technologies, whether for education, activism, or online dating services (“Computers and gays”). Cait McKinney (2018) addresses the complicated
relationship between the digital and the analog in LGBT and AIDS-related archive materials. Her work looks at the Philadelphia-based group Critical Path, which developed a print newsletter for people with AIDS by printing out materials from BBS communities. McKinney argues that this use of a BBS to inform activist work demonstrates the “politics-of-access” in early adopters, and that “HIV/AIDS activists approach[ed] new online networks as a fundamental equity issue” (McKinney, 2018). McKinney focuses on the ways that Kuromiya, the newsletter’s organiser, was “at the center of ... multimedia practice,” and therefore able to “reach people using familiar media technologies” (McKinney, 2018). This is an example of how LGBT and AIDS histories already entail strategic crossovers between digital and analog media.

Before turning to the SURVIVORS printout itself, it is valuable to consider the interplays between three areas of scholarship that constitute the backdrop to this research: archives, queer theory, and the history of the AIDS crisis. These are not separate areas but rather interrelated and, in many cases, co-constituted subjects. Queer theory has longstanding ties to archive studies and the critical impulses of archiving. Such connections can be seen by taking a historical view on the field of queer theory, which rose up alongside the “archival turn” in the early to mid-1990s — a shift generally considered to have begun with Michel Foucault and further prompted by Jacques Derrida (1996). It is fitting that this academic turn to reconsider the archives coincided with the emergence of queer theory, since the two areas of inquiry raise similar questions about epistemologies and ontologies: how meaning is made from the world and how states of being (or identities) are determined. Though the relationship between queer theory and history has been a site of debate within the field of queer studies (Duggan, 1995; Escoffier, 1990; Love, 2015), it is also worth acknowledging that both archive studies and key threads within early queer theory share a deep interest in the past. Indeed, the issue of how to document and understand queer histories appears as a central concern in many foundational queer theory texts (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990). Early queer theory that focused on conceptual thinking emerged in tandem with critical queer histories (David, 1990; Chauncey, 1994). Tellingly, both of these modes of early queer theory scholarship were written in the years of the AIDS crisis. Even alongside much debate, queer theory itself came into being both with and, in large part, because of the tragedy and the well-justified LGBT community outrage associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. Highlighting these connections is useful because it encourages us to foreground HIV/AIDS histories in our engagements with queer studies.

The AIDS crisis also has its own unique and poignant relationship to the archives. In the face of widespread death, questions of how to memorialize those who had been lost and hold onto memories of queer histories became immediate and pressing (Crimp, 2002). Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed identify the AIDS crisis as a time of significant historical — and, arguably, archival — urgency, since AIDS was “wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialise our losses” [2]. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) makes this connection between the AIDS crisis and archives explicit. She describes how during the AIDS crisis, a “specter of death produced a form of archive fever,” prompting a “range of testimony to the experience of living and dying with AIDS.” Cvetkovich writes that the “temporality of AIDS offers, if not time to live a full life, then possibly time to record some part of it” [3]. This emotional urgency demonstrates a palpable need for queer archives as a means to cope with loss during the AIDS crisis.

In addition to these connections, there is another important reason to approach the SURVIVORS printout though the frameworks of queer theory. Queer theory foregrounds issues that are crucial to understanding these documents, such as affect, embodiment, and intimacy. Work by queer theorists often values and attends to fluidity (such as across media form) and the complexity of loss. This is particularly visible in how queer theorists have addressed archives. Cvetkovich, for example, asserts that queer archives must “preserve not just knowledge, but feeling.” She writes:

Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism — all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive. Furthermore, gay and lesbian archives address the
traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect. [4]

The elements of LGBT life and history that “are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive” are often tied both to feelings and the body — which represent both what is present in these histories and what is lost. Marika Cifor (2015) addresses this situation in which she describes finding a stray strand of hair embedded in lipstick which belonged to a trans sex worker amidst archival documents. This hair, Cifor says, “materializes archival absence in all of its prickliness. It animates Victoria’s painful bodily experiences, as well as her bodily acts of resistance and self-definition” [5]. These traces of embodied experience give the archive an intense affective charge; indeed, using affective value as a technique for appraising may itself represent a step toward social justice in archival theory and practice (Cifor, 2016). The SURVIVORS printout is itself highly affectively charged. Approaching the printout through queer theoretical frameworks allows for an analysis that values that affective dimension.

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**The UpperWestsider Papers**

The “Upperwestsider Papers,” as the SURVIVORS printout is titled in the catalog at the ONE Archives, are physical, paper printouts of three years of posts from the SURVIVORS BBS, which was set up, moderated, and maintained by David Aaron Charnow from 1987 to 1990. Charnow started the BBS when he was diagnosed with HIV and ran it until his death in 1990. During that time, Charnow was also pursuing his Ph.D. at the Teachers College, Columbia University and it had been his hope to write a book about his experiences running and maintaining the board, though this project was never completed; this may have been the reason he chose to create a paper printout of the board’s contents. Several years after his death, the papers were donated to the ONE archives, before their institutionalisation as a formal archive with the University of Southern California. The full transcript of posts to SURVIVORS as it now exists totals more than a thousand pages. This print copy is one of two surviving records of the contents of the BBS: One is located in the ONE archives, the other with his surviving family.

A BBS is a digital computer server that uses direct connections or echo services to forward messages directly to e-mail inboxes (Driscoll, 2016, 2014). Their use predates contemporary networked Internet and dial-up. When operated by an individual, a BBS allows other users to connect to their server via a terminal application. Users can post text, download software, and leave messages for other users with just a computer, a modem, and a landline. Due to their ease of use, the dropping price of home computers and modems, and increased connectivity speeds, BBSs were very popular during the 1980s and early 1990s. Most importantly, BBSs could be operated by individuals with home computers, eliminating the need for a university or institutional affiliation. This level of accessibility allowed for a more diverse BBS user base, such as the community which flourished on SURVIVORS.

SURVIVORS was a sub-board on a larger BBS called The Backroom. The Backroom was run by Artie Kohn, a friend of Charnow’s, and was advertised on paper flyers as “America’s largest exclusively gay computer information and communication service” (“Computers and gays”). Charnow set up the board after his HIV diagnosis in 1987 at age 45, at Kohn’s encouragement. In one post to the SURVIVORS board, Charnow wrote, “I’ll never forget the moment, about a year ago, when [Artie] looked at me and said, ‘You could do an AIDS board.’ As I remember it, I looked back at [him] in disbelief, and said, ‘Me?’” As described in its informational materials, SURVIVORS was a board for and by seropositive people, people with HIV/AIDS, and people who otherwise identified as “survivors” of AIDS. This could be activists, loved ones, or individuals looking to learn more about those affected by the epidemic.

From its inception, SURVIVORS operated differently than many other BBSs of the time. Rather than posting directly to the board, users e-mailed their posts to Charnow. Charnow then anonymized the posts.
while issuing them onto the board. As he noted in one of his earliest posts to the board, “All the stories on this board are true; but none of the names are real.” Charnow also played an active role in shaping the content of SURVIVORS. He guided conversation topics, cautioned against unnecessary anger, and apologised when he felt he had overstepped his role. Due to Charnow’s anonymising, it is difficult to readily discern much about the demographics of SURVIVORS’ userbase. However, from the contents of printout, we can tell that most of those who posted on SURVIVORS were men. Initially, the people who submitted posts to the board were located in the New York City area, but as the board grew, the userbase expanded to include posters from other major cities. Some of those who posted to SURVIVORS had little experience with BBSs, but it is largely safe to assume that those posting had access to a home computer and modem.

While SURVIVORS was not the only example of an early-Internet online support or information group for people with AIDS, it is among the oldest. The board existed within a constellation of other online groups for LGBT folk, AIDS information boards, and support networks. For example, The AIDS Info BBS, operated by Ben Gardiner, started operations in 1985 (Driscoll, 2014). While not a BBS, the popular UseNet forum soc.motss began in 1983 (O’Riordan, 2005). Traces of these other AIDS and LGBT-related born-digital materials, such as e-mailed correspondences, can be found in a limited number of analog and online archives. Avery Dame-Griff’s work on the Queer Digital History Project, for example, has allowed for many early Internet artifacts of queer life to be maintained. Similarly, Jason Scott maintains text files of BBSs both on his project, TEXTFILES, and with the Internet Archive. Nonetheless, the UpperWestsider Papers represent a vital addition to this list of materials. As a born-digital artifact (for which its digital counterpart no longer exists), their analog state has permitted them to survive the “digital dark age” of early digital preservation efforts — often plagued by unstable technologies and technological obsolescence (Jeffrey, 2012). Their representation of early Internet use by a marginalized community also opens them up as a reparative object in Internet history projects.

In addition to contextualizing SURVIVORS within the history of Internet technologies, it is important to remember the context of SURVIVORS during the time of the AIDS crisis, which was rife with the loss of queer life. The enormity of this loss is difficult to comprehend. The CDC reported that from 1988 to 1992, roughly the time during when SURVIVORS operated, over 200,000 people died from AIDS (Center for Disease Control, 2001). Young, gay men were the first population in the United States to contract the illness in the early 1980s and remained disproportionately affected in the decades to follow. Many believed that the Reagan administration’s domestic policy responded so belatedly and inefficiently because the most affected populations were gay, low-income, non-White, and/or IV drug users (Shilts, 1987; Crimp, 2002; Kramer, 1994; Brier, 2015). The staggering loss of queer life contributed to the increased interest in memorialisation, activism, and LGBT archives (Crimp, 2002; Cvetkovich, 2003). This was also a period of LGBT activism, exemplified by organizations like ACT UP NY. Charnow, too, was a member of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, serving as both a “buddy” for those in hospital and, later, was on the receiving end of a buddy himself. In his posts, Charnow writes that he saw his own work maintaining SURVIVORS as a form of activism — an act of resistance and community building.

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Loss and grief

As mentioned above, there is a striking relationship between the SURVIVORS printout as a material document that preserves a precious and vulnerable digital past and the text posted to the BBS by those living with HIV/AIDS. Turning to an analysis of these documents, we now draw out three key themes that emerge across these posts — including loss and grief, uncertainty and ephemerality, and survival and perseverance — and articulate how they prompt considerations for the SURVIVORS printout itself.

The first key theme we observed that crosses the content and form of the documents is loss and, relatedly, grief. On SURVIVORS, many people wrote about losing people they cared about or grappling with a sense
of loss around their own illness. One user wrote about the loss they felt after a man they had been dating for a few weeks passed away from AIDS, “I shut down for a while and am coming out of it now but I miss him ... I have never buried a ‘lover’ before and it hurts like hell.” In another post, a user who had been diagnosed with AIDS described the sensation of seeing the sunrise during a morning walk while on vacation and an accompanying, overwhelming feeling of grief and loss. “It suddenly occurred to me,” they wrote,

that it had been a long time since I had been surrounded by that kind of stillness and loveliness, and even longer since I had appreciated it. I began to cry, and had to sit down in the sand because I couldn’t make myself stop. I was saddened to my depths with the realisation that I’m not even 30 years old and I had become immune to serenity, and how much I had possibly lost because of it.

Charnow himself wrote about what he lost following his AIDS diagnosis and how this loss manifested in his day-to-day, where these feelings often went along with experiences of grief. In one post, he relayed a story about a friend who cancelled an arrangement to have coffee, and how this loss of a friend affected him. Charnow reported:

I felt hurt. It is so important for me to offer an excellent blended and brewed cup of coffee to a friend I have ‘told.’ Because without saying so out loud, I’m saying very clearly: O.K., you know I got it, but you also know that you won’t get it from this cup of coffee. This friend not only just refused to drop over, but shouted a long argument, which I really couldn’t understand, lots of words and little coherence. So I was sitting there surprised, with these words pouring into my left ear from the telephone. I don’t remember all of those words, but somewhere in the middle of the call I hear, ‘You’re dying! You’re dying! And I’m not! And you want me to!’

Charnow continued to write about losing this friend over a series of three posts on the BBS, apologising for his grief by writing it off as a “dark mood.” He later compared this first encounter against another, when a friend flew in from another city. He said, “We both knew it was a grief visit.” They cried together. “Good crying,” Charnow clarified. These posts exhibit the pervasive presence of loss and grief, in their many complex forms, across the posts to the SURVIVORS BBS.

For those who posted to SURVIVORS, these feelings went beyond mourning the death of loved ones, as is consistent with writing on mourning and melancholy in the AIDS crisis by Douglas Crimp (2002). Feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, and anger became extensions of loss. These extensions are evident when a user wrote to mourn their old life of “serenity,” “certainty and stability,” or over the very material loss of a friendship. Whether it was in a sunrise, a lover’s quarrel, or a confrontation with a friend, the creeping periphery of loss was palpable. “I wrote of not seeing 35,” said one user on SURVIVORS, following up from a previous post. “I think that we all seek stability in our lives — healthy or no. AIDS and its manifestations denies us that stability and certainty about our future (or present).” Here, the user’s impending death represented the loss of stability in an AIDS diagnosis.

The UpperWestsider Papers are, themselves, a document of grief and loss. As an artifact of the AIDS crisis, the papers come from a period of significant loss of life. In this way, they carry an affective charge and can be understood as an archive of trauma. Indeed, the very act of engaging with the SURVIVORS printout can inspire profound feelings of loss and grief. As Marika Cifor notes in her work on affect and embodiment, working with physical objects in an archive can evoke profound feelings, closing gaps of both time and distance (Cifor, 2015). Lynette Russell, too, writes about “emotionally taxing” research when working with archives of trauma, which might, in turn, instil complicated feelings of distress and grief in the researcher working with them (Russell, 2018). While there is not an agreed upon definition for “traumatic records,”
within archive studies, Katie Sloan, *et al.* settled on “records that document a profound incident, or series of events, and that cause psychological distress” [5]. The UpperWestsider Papers are a lengthy documentation of trauma, spanning over a thousand of pages from hundreds of affected individuals during a time of crisis. Reading these emotionally intense and heart-breaking stories is both moving and devastating. The act of reading the UpperWestsider papers is not a removed one, but rather, intensely embodied, and evokes feelings of both grief and loss that parallel the grief and loss expressed by those who posted to the SURVIVORS BBS itself.

The UpperWestsider Papers are also indicative of loss in their materiality. Posts from SURVIVORS are now preserved on paper (an analog technology) despite being born-digital, representing a loss of an original media form. This change in medium makes the materiality of the printout all the more striking. The paper is delicate and wrinkled in parts. On one page, there is a coffee stain. These physical components of the documents unsettle their previously digital qualities — informed by their “un-digitising.” Indeed, the existence of this printout implicitly emphasises the loss of BBSs. As Kevin Driscoll makes clear, most BBS messages have been almost entirely lost (Driscoll, 2014). Death is also part of the history of the BBS; once the World Wide Web rose to prominence, BBS communities all but died off. Considered in this way, the SURVIVORS printout prompts us to consider what it might mean to grieve the loss of past technologies of communication, especially when these technologies have been used by communities that are themselves marked by the traumas of loss.

**Uncertainty and ephemerality**

The second theme we noted in the UpperWestsider Papers is uncertainty and ephemerality. This theme can be seen from the very first posts to the BBS, which open with a series of stories and interviews. The first story is from Charnow himself, who reflects on his diagnosis and his feelings for the future. He writes, “I’m not afraid of AIDS, I’m afraid of the ambiguity of information which was given me.” These feelings are echoed by others whose posts appeared on SURVIVORS, such as a user who writes that “AIDS and its manifestations denies us that stability and certainty about our future (or present).”

These posts show that the future of the board itself was often similarly uncertain. Rarely, if ever, did users discuss the longevity of the board or even the board itself. Most users focused their comments on concerns for the present moment rather than considerations for the future. When users did talk about the board, many wrote not about its preservation but about how they felt “grateful” for its existence, or they “appreciated the time and effort” Charnow took in its maintenance. One user wrote, “You are right about the SURVIVORS board. The messages ... are stunning, very moving. Anyone who takes his or her existence for granted, who wastes a lot of time, or is too self-preoccupied ought to read those messages.” This focus on the present, rather than an uncertain future, is echoed in how those who posted to the board discussed their own lives. Whether it is feeling uncertain about what medical treatments to pursue, the unpredictability of AIDS, or navigating unsure friendships in the face of stigma, uncertainty was a recurring topic of discussion on SURVIVORS. Charnow says in reply to one user’s comment about their HIV diagnosis: “You now have a piece of knowledge about yourself that won’t go away. That knowledge is sure knowledge ... But having that knowledge puts you in a very unsure position.”

Queer theory offers valuable conceptualizations for understanding this sense of ephemerality: a complicated yet key concern that surrounds the SURVIVORS printout and the stories that it contains, as well as queer archives more generally. Queer archives are often considered “messy,” in the sense that they do not conform to traditional norms of archival order (Manalansan, 2014). Indeed, the SURVIVORS printout could be seen as messy in the ways it “messes up” divisions between media forms, blurring the digital and the analog. José Muñoz points to ephemerality as the source of the queer archives’ messiness:

> Instead of being clearly available as physical evidence, queerness instead
Ephemerality implies that something exists only briefly, and, for people with AIDS during the AIDS crisis, their futures were uncertain, messy, and perhaps brief. Muñoz writes that “the present is not enough,” that the present is “impoverished and toxic,” and this is all too clear in the posts to SURVIVORS. For example, one user wrote about his frustrations trying to get a lover to talk about their shared lover’s illness: “He would like life to continue as it has for the last decade. I am trying to help him come to grips with the whole thing. But sometimes its like trying to bash my head against a wall to make a door.” Another user wrote about his regret and guilt following a hook-up, “Of course, I can justify what occurred by saying that anyone who jumps into bed with me is responsible to make sure be [sic] is protected, and vice versa. But it isn’t working. The first time I’ve had sex with someone in eighteen months, and I feel I’ve killed them.” The present during the AIDS crisis was not only messy, frustrating, and toxic, but also possibly deadly. This ephemerality and uncertainty also can be seen in the UpperWestsider Papers’ materiality, which amplifies these same feelings found in its text. The SURVIVORS printout exists in a liminal, uncertain space between born-digital, analog, and reborn-digital. BBSs like SURVIVORS were ultimately ephemeral modes of communication, and this is reflected in their preservation. With the rise of the commercial Internet in the early 1990s, “thousands of BBSs seemed to vanish overnight.” To combat the total loss of BBSs, many individuals and enthusiasts worked to digitally save and record sections of the boards. The “best known” collection of these saved BBSs is TEXTFILES.COM, a directory of BBSs begun and maintained by Jason Scott with the help of many individual tech-hobbyists since 1998 (Driscoll, 2014; Scott, 2005). While Scott’s collection is thorough, its records do not account for the breadth of marginalized and at-risk communities using BBSs like SURVIVORS. This is a reminder that attempts to preserve Internet histories, which often strive to make documentations of these histories less ephemeral and more long-lasting, may still be biased when determining which histories to preserve and which to leave uncertain.

The uncertain form of the SURVIVORS printout is itself fundamentally tied to experiences of ephemerality and precarity. The UpperWestsider Papers exist in an analog state (and were therefore better preserved than much other BBS content from the time) precisely because the individuals who maintained and contributed to the BBS were living lives of extreme uncertainty during the AIDS crisis. David Charnow died of AIDS in 1990. The man who maintained The Backroom, Artie Kohn, passed away shortly after. Charnow did not have the technological means to sustainably preserve the contents of SURVIVORS digitally for the long term. Yet, the act of printing out the SURVIVORS posts was an intentional effort to resist uncertainty and ephemerality — to preserve these posts even in the face of loss. Richard Pearce-Moses (2014) writes, “In a paper environment, records were an unintended by-product of other activities; records just happened ... In the digital environment, records don’t just happen.” Those born-digital records must be consciously preserved. The job of maintaining the UpperWestsider Papers is the archivists’ but would not be possible if Charnow hadn’t hit “print.” The UpperWestsider Papers exemplify both the ephemeral state of BBSs as well as the urgency in the face of uncertainty during the AIDS crisis.

Survival and perseverance

Despite the overwhelming sense of grief, loss, and uncertainty from users’ posts on SURVIVORS, themes of survival and perseverance are equally present. The name of the board, after all, is “Survivors.” Survival is embodied, and in the case of AIDS, often meant surviving drug side effects, medical trials, and the various costs of treatment. Yet survival, as it emerged in these posts, is also related to mindset and identity. In some instances, survival meant enduring the progress of AIDS. At other times, survival manifested in these posts as working through a diagnosis, such as when one user reminded others: “NOTHING HAS
Perseverance, often found alongside discussions of survival in the SURVIVORS posts, can be understood as not simply surviving but demonstrating the determination to survive. One user described perseverance as “not only surviving but flourishing,” in the wake of a loved one’s death, and another similarly credited SURVIVORS for renewing their “desire to fight.” Posting to SURVIVORS was, in many cases, an act of perseverance. One user posted emphatically, “I AM CONSTANTLY AFRAID AND THIS BOARD IS A GREAT HELP KEEP IT UP GUYS AND LETS SURVIVE TOGETHER. THREE CHEERS FOR THE UPPERWESTSIDER.” This community building extended into offers for real-world connections, such as when one user wrote, “If you want to hear what I feel about the last message on the <<SURVIVORS>> board, I’ll tell you in person. LET’S GET TOGETHER SOME NIGHT FOR DINNER!!! Please, believe me my friend ... *We* will live to celebrate life again.” Charnow himself credited the BBS as his “personal central strategy for keeping [himself] interested in living,” going so far as to say that he planned to keep the board going “even from a hospital bed if necessary” and “to die online.” Charnow’s commitment to maintaining the board demonstrated perseverance, even in the face of death.

In tune with the theme of survival, it is fitting that the documents themselves have persevered for thirty years as printouts in an archive. The papers were donated before the ONE Archives existed formally, and so their donation records are murky. Yet, they survived appraisal. Even though their shift from digital to analog radically changes their meaning, it is because of this radical shift of form that they were able to survive (Dever and Morra, 2014; Dever and Morra, 2014). In queer theory, survival and perseverance are closely intertwined with a relationship toward temporality and complicated futurities (Muñoz, 2009; Freeman, 2010). Writers during the period of the AIDS crisis observed that there was a new regard for memorialisation, narrativization, and death in the wake of the AIDS crisis, and as Cvetkovich noted, an attention toward archives as a site of LGBT culture in the late 1980s and 1990s could be seen as an extension of this urgent memorialisation (Cvetkovich, 2003; Crimp, 2002). Critical archive studies utilises these queer approaches to dynamic temporalities and futurity to inform ongoing debates about methodologies in both queer archives and traditional archives alike (Lee, 2017). To survive in an archive is within the purview of appraisal and queer appraisal methods highlight the “multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and always in motion” quality of their subjects [11]. The UpperWestsider Papers, in their text and form, make clear the complicated means by which queer artifacts survive into the future whether on paper or digitally — or, in this case, both.

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**Conclusion**

The three themes that we have identified within the contents of the UpperWestsider Papers — loss and grief, uncertainty, and survival — all have echoes in the SURVIVORS printout itself, as a document that prompts us to consider the relationship between materiality and Internet archiving. The first, loss and grief, appears extensively throughout the papers’ contents and is further reflected in the affective components of this and many other LGBT archival objects. The second, uncertainty, we also see in the material transformation of The UpperWestsider Papers, as they highlight the paucity of extensive primary documentation of early Internet use by LGBT users and their affective properties. The documents themselves also represent survival; they survived the “digital dark age” of early digital preservation efforts by being analog printouts.

Histories of the early and pre-Internet have been difficult to preserve. Methods used in critical archive
studies can inform further study of digital artifacts within Internet histories and Web historiography. As our work with the SURVIVORS printout demonstrates, these overlaps include grappling with the loss of knowledge, working with uncertain forms of memory, and acknowledging the means of their survival. The UpperWestsider Papers speak, too, to current discussions about affect and materiality within critical archive studies and provide an exciting landscape for future work which acknowledges this overlap. In their materiality, the SURVIVORS printout is delicate and reading them is an emotionally taxing endeavour. The history of LGBT Internet histories will benefit from an increased attention to affect, queer, and feminist theory as well as critical archive studies, as exemplified through work with valuable archives like the UpperWestsider Papers.

The UpperWestsider Papers also prompt us to consider queer pasts and futures in new lights, especially as they relate to the early Internet and LGBT archivy. For those doing work with LGBT Internet histories, it may be helpful and even comforting to turn to the wisdom of Charnow himself. Across his many posts to the SURVIVORS BBS, his articulation of grief, ambiguity, and, most of all, survival during crisis are both moving and insightful. His encouragement to one user bears repeating here, as it resonates with the contemporary work of engaging with the precarious archives of LGBT histories: “Be kind to yourself. You are facing something just as terrifying as death: you are facing life.”

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