July 3rd, 2014

Gabe and Rachel’s June Letter Home

A rendition of Henrick Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, performed atop the Kanawha River, Charleston, WV. After the performance we were able to take part in dialog about how to deal with water issues in the region.

June has just flown by. Summer is in full force here in West Virginia, with 100% humidity and temperature in the 90’s. The gardens are starting in full force and swimming holes are filling with locals on the weekends. It is boating season at the place Gabe has been at for the past 6 months, however, the project is demanding a move to Charleston. As the capitol city, it has all the contacts, organizations, and proximity to the coalfields - where this project is focusing, - which Summers County does not. For example, the rendition of *Enemy of the People*, by Henrick Ibsen, shown above, was a key place to make important connections, and a space where people doing this work came together. Old friends and new are supporting the hunt for a place in the city.

However hot and humid, June has been a month of clarity - the website for the West Virginia side is coming into focus as to what a realistic goal for a finished product will look like. That process of clarity has come out of a month of meeting with activists, leaders, and scientists in the region. Also, this month has brought vital connections with local community development and community organizing efforts.

Early on this month there was an oral history training with Appalachian folklorists, artists, and oral historians Michael and Carrie Kline. We attended that training, improving interviewing skills and cultural sensitivity and context. Michael and Carrie’s technique is not only useful for oral history, but with its deep focus on how to listen, and listen well, the training has a wide breadth.

Then, we started connecting with the Advocates for a Safe Water System (ASWS), a rising environmental group here very interested in the project. They are focused on shifting the position of the West Virginia Public Service Commission towards more active regulation, something that could have prevented January’s massive chemical spill. Partnering with this organization has not only given this project a community engagement strategy, it has been a delight to work with such sharp and impassioned people.
After a while discussing this project with Cathy Kunkle, lead organizer for the ASWS, several local organizers, the main web developer for ILoveMountains.org, and the program director for Appalachian Voices’ Water Watch, a basic outline for the newest vision of West Virginia’s website is coming into focus. Many of these folks advised that the recent water crisis would be a key entrance for this project. As such, many people have honed in on the potential for this type of web resource to support stronger regulation and legislation around water contamination in this state. A large part of the conversation about how to make this resource support such efforts has been about its ability to serve as a publicity tool, and a site where evidence can be displayed. Similarly, people have discussed how having interviews and stories on this website could be very useful to explaining what the data means. A simple number or even a change in a thematic map does not bespeak what someone’s testimony might.

Therefore, the newest vision for the West Virginia pilot web page is to present it as a digital story telling platform, where we first focus on the recent water crisis. The page would show a thematic map of the present and historical service areas for the water company in part responsible for the spill – West Virginia American Water. As one would scroll through the map over time, multimedia content would appear that you could click on to understand how smaller water utilities had been shut, hearing people’s stories of why the drinking water intake for 300,000 people was at one site in the midst of unregulated chemical facilities. People would be able to comment and post their own content into these different historical maps. Furthermore, a social media campaign would link in social media content to these areas.

With this vision, data collection moves forward. Interviews have already begun in various rural sites within the coalfields. Also, the process of unearthing the historical data around water in this state has been extremely laborious, and is taking extensive time. However, it seems like it will be possible to find the data and display it.

A final note from June – what stands out the most is an interview from a town called Prenter, in the coalfields. Prenter had its water poisoned by a coal waste processing facility in the early 2000s, or earlier. After high cancer rates, birth defects, and a host of meetings and lawsuits, the town was given municipal water in 2009 and settlements given to the claimants. DJ, a 22 year old resident, gave a truly heart wrenching interview about having a terminal kidney disease, which doctors link to the water pollution and tell him will take him in his 30s. He discussed having to deal with this second water crisis – the latest one in January.

Wish us luck as our work and this summer heat up.

Gabe and Rachel