Collecting Covid-19: an initiative to document the University's community response to the pandemic, by Lorraine McLoughlin and Sara Day Thomson

The Centre for Research Collections (CRC) at the University of Edinburgh – which includes collections housed in libraries, archives, galleries, and museums – launched the *Collecting Covid-19 Initiative* in late April 2020. The *Initiative* invites staff, students, and anyone affiliated with the University to donate any materials that document their experiences of the pandemic and lockdown. Web and social media content, photographs, videos, art, and all other materials are welcome. The *Initiative* is led by the Archive team, who will consult with a collaborative advisory group from different areas of the University as the collection develops. In preserving a range of materials and formats for the long term, we aim to prevent gaps in memory and experience.

In this post, we share the ways the Archive team at the CRC makes decisions about what to collect. We discuss how the *Initiative* aligns with existing collecting policies but also provides us with an opportunity to challenge conventional methods. 'Active collecting' – implemented to document the pandemic as it unfolds – has led us to explore approaches to capturing records contemporaneously in response to a major event. Though these approaches have been introduced at a pace, they are not temporary measures. Rather, they are lasting innovations that will support a more responsive (and therefore representative) collecting of the University's diverse

communities and activities.

About the CRC and Archival Collecting

The CRC preserves and provides access to the University of Edinburgh's many and varied historic collections, from anatomical specimens and artworks to University statutes and conventions. Archival holdings reflect a broad spectrum of events and life experiences. The CRC also documents University governance and research accomplishments and preserves some less-easily categorised examples of University life, culture, and events.

The University community — a broad term to describe individuals and groups affiliated with the University of Edinburgh — usually engages with the Archive by donating letters, notebooks, sketches, diaries, theories, poems, artworks, ruminations, and all sorts of unique memories. Since the advent of digital technologies, these unique materials are often donated to the Archive in digital formats.

The CRC, in response to this shift, has undertaken the development of a digital preservation programme to look after born-digital and digitised materials. However, the selection of material, digital or analogue, for long-term preservation is a highly nuanced process. Archival content (whether digital, physical, or both) should be unique, authentic, and highly valuable. Assigning value — the ultimate responsibility of archival appraisal — is a subjective process which is very difficult to define. But attempt to define it we have done none the less.

Over the past three years, we have been developing a robust methodology for documenting *how* and *why* materials are selected for preservation in order to provide accountability for collecting decisions. The methodology allows archivists responsible for selecting materials to describe decision-making and enable us to identify gaps in historical memory.

The process is both iterative and highly dependent on external variables. Therefore, what we collect (and how we do it) should and does change over time. Our methodology is based on the fundamental principle of providing evidence and transparency.

Active Collecting in Response to a Crisis

Since April 2020, the Archive team has been 'actively collecting' materials – using methods to source and select content as it emerges – for the *Collecting Covid-19 Initiative*[i]. The open call has been left deliberately broad to encourage participation from individuals and groups doing core 'COVID-related' work *as well as* those whose lives have been changed in other, less apparent ways.

The traditional archival method of collecting materials at the end of a project, or even at the end of a researcher's career, involving multiple conversations and usually in-person donation, does not support active, contemporaneous collecting. Therefore, the Archive team, working with the Digital Library Development team, launched a web form for members of the community to submit donations remotely.

The Digital Submission Form for the *Collecting Covid-19 Initiative*[ii] supports some basic archival procedures to ensure confidence in the security and confidentiality of submissions while making it simple to make a donation. Members of the University community can donate their materials by filling in a few pieces of information about themselves and their materials, attaching the relevant files or including a URL, and hitting 'Deposit'. We use the information from the Form, ethically and in compliance with personal data legislation, to help us organise and present archival materials in a way that reflects their original intent. It also provides valuable context needed by users to support interpretation and analysis of materials in the future.

The Digital Submission Form allows us to capture responses *now*, while the pandemic and lockdown are on-going. In times of crisis when normal life is severely disrupted, resources and attention are diverted to cope with the crisis, which of course, is how it should be. However, this diversion also leads to gaps in shared memory that could help support decision-making in future crises as well as providing context and insight into personal experiences. Therefore, the *Initiative* will remain open for as long as the pandemic is with us and public health-related restrictions are in place and, likely, for a long time after.

Covid-19 and New Archival Methods for a New Future

As mentioned, many of the materials submitted to the *Initiative* are born digital, and many of those are web-based. These web-based submissions, from blogs to Twitter feeds, have particular value as they represent the most prolific way people have been communicating during a pandemic that has prevented families, friends, and professional teams from interacting in person.

Inviting the donation of web-based content is an important strategy for active collecting. While the Archive collects and preserves digital formats, until the outbreak of coronavirus, there was not a systematic method in place for collecting web-based content. As previously mentioned, historically, the archivist intervenes at the 'end of life' of a collection. However, archivists don't have time to wait for born digital materials, like websites, to amass over time and we don't have a crystal ball to predict what content will grow into cohesive collections.

Web archiving, using bespoke tools, provides a method for capturing contemporary, born digital resources in a rapid, proactive way. Capturing content from the live web as soon as possible is vitally important because web resources disappear or change more quickly than other types of digital media. In a

paper from 2015, the UK Web Archive reported that in just two years, 40% of websites collected in the national web archive had disappeared from the live web[iii].

The availability of new, robust tools has made it possible for the Archive team to capture some selected web-based materials manually. In fact, this entire blog – including all posts and linked citations – is being archived as part of the *Initiative*. This archival capture of *Covid-19 Perspectives*[iv] provides an authentic record of how CAHSS researchers have responded to the pandemic and lockdown. It will allow future researchers, looking back on this historic event, to learn more about how CAHSS research contributed to our understanding of the virus and its effects on individuals and society.

To undertake web archiving at scale for University-wide web resources about the pandemic, the Archive team are partnering with the UK Web Archive[v] at the National Library of Scotland. Working with the Web Archivist at NLS, the Archive team will build a collection of web resources created by the University and its communities using the UK Web Archive's infrastructure and guidelines.

Conclusion

Active collecting, and in particular web archiving, provides a meaningful glimpse into the future of archival practice at the University of Edinburgh and for the sector more generally. In particular, it provides a blueprint for the development of practices that reflect contemporary ways of communicating and sharing information. Digital resources can exist in multiple forms and can be accessed simultaneously in different places on different platforms at the same time. They can evolve throughout their lifetime for different purposes and become transformed through sharing and re-use.

Digital technologies, because of their nature, enforce the plurality of authenticity and perspective in our shared

memory. They enable the creation and publication of resources outside of typical structures, diversifying (and democratising) public and academic discourse. It has spurred archives to consider how to adapt our methods of communicating so that they reach all the diverse communities creating culturally and historically important resources.

Covid-19 has imposed new ways of working and interacting — many of which have led to difficulty and frustration — but many of which have catalysed change already underway. The *Collecting Covid-19 Initiative* has brought rapid changes to archival working practices but has also provided an opportunity for us to forge new relationships with the communities we serve. In fact, the *Initiative* is situated within a much wider conversation currently on-going within the Archive team to interrogate and refine our working practices.

This investigation of *how* our collections develop provides us with a greater understanding of *who* is included in our institutional memory and how they are represented. We aim to give far greater priority to active collecting in order to broaden the nature of material we hold beyond those highlighted in traditional power structures.

Lorraine McLoughlin is the Appraisal and Collections Review Archivist at the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections. Her work revolves around archival value, authenticity and revealing hidden collections.

Sara Day Thomson is the Digital Archivist at the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections. Her background is in research and development in digital preservation and web and social media archiving.

Header image: Opening event for the Video Wall and MakerSpace

at the Main Library (November 2019) © The University of Edinburgh.

[i] Collecting Covid-19 Initiative: https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/collecting-covid-19-initiative

[ii] Collecting Covid-19 Initiative Digital Submission Form: https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/collecting-covid-19-initiative

[iii] A. Jackson, 'Ten years of the UK web archive: what have we saved?', UK Web Archive blog (18 September 2015), https://anjackson.net/2015/04/27/what-have-we-saved-iipc-ga-2015/

[iv] Archival capture of Covid-19 Perspectives: https://conifer.rhizome.org/sdaythomson/cahss-covid-19-perspectives-2/list/homepage-and-linked-policy-statements/b30/20200826154722/https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/covid19perspectives/

[v] UK Web Archive: https://www.webarchive.org.uk/