

The Ethics of Researching with an Extreme Archive: Caring for Self and Students

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Searchlight Archive

- ◉ Hosted by University of Northampton
- ◉ Main collection – records of Searchlight Magazine, anti-fascist organisation founded in 1964
- ◉ Other collections include:
 - ◉ Regional anti-fascist collections
 - ◉ World in Action/Panorama
 - ◉ Oral history project with anti-fascists.
- ◉ Single archivist since opening, with occasionally research/volunteer staff
- ◉ Final main accession to Searchlight Collection Feb. 2022
- ◉ Still expanding other collections (3 new collections in 2024 so far)
- ◉ Opened to users Summer 2013



Searchlight Archive users

- Currently ~500 boxes on catalogue, most at box level
- C. 1750 boxes in total
- 10.2 visits per month on average in 9.75 days of open time. (Pre-pandemic)
- 215 visits (so far) since re-opening May 2021. 57 of those since January.
- Used by:
 - Undergraduate, Masters and PhD students
 - Institutional academics
 - Independent researchers
 - Journalists
- Used for:
 - Research
 - Teaching
 - Outreach/Engagement



The ethos

- Took an attitude of prioritising researcher access over perfection
- Part of a wider debate within archive studies
- While traditional debates look at an axis between preservation and access, extreme and activist archives present additional challenges.
- Safety and wellbeing of staff, researchers and other users
- But also opportunities – material is often engaging, dynamic
- Hidden Histories?



Staff

- Physical protection:
 - Access Controls
 - Locked room, secure building
- One user refused access, some users withdrew when presented with access form. Biggest impact is as deterrent.
- Don't collect material directly from the far right
- But, there is far right contact.
- Can be managed but still has an impact on mental wellbeing.
- Extreme material can alter perception of "acceptable" extremism.



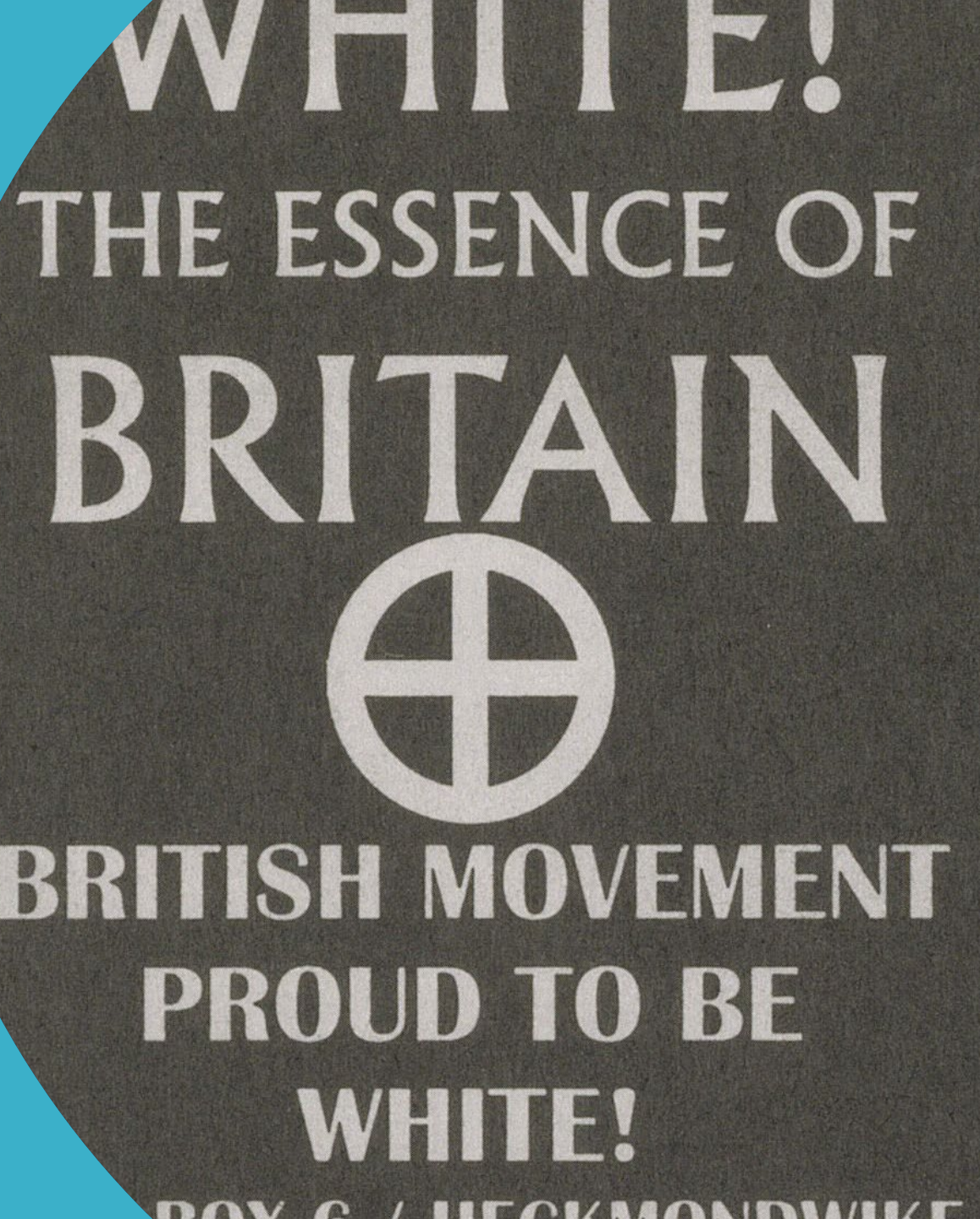
Researchers

- Nature of the content
- Under 18s?
- Legal risks
- Material to be withheld
- Supervision vs independence
- Initial visit advice



Outreach and Teaching

- Appropriateness
- Openness
- Extreme material and contextual information
- Risk of decontextualization
- Community histories – engagement opportunity
- Responsibility/opportunity to widen history engagement?



Role in supporting PGRs

- Archive as a repository of good practice on safety
- Extremism research rarely concentrated
- Importance of sharing practice – overcoming embarrassment etc
- Providing space for peer mutual support
- Public role - Permanent members of staff v. temporary staff/student researchers
- Social media
- Avoiding the algorithm?



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