

# **The Ethics of an Extreme Archive: Experiences from a Decade of the Searchlight Archive**

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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
- Institutional vs Independent researchers
- Supervision vs independence
- Initial visit advice



## Outreach issues

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



# Using material for Teaching

- Why use this material?
- Learning and Teaching innovation project – material engaging, helped embed and explore
- Diversity of sources, and from more diverse groups
- Preparing students – context and framing
- Further projects – exploring specifically engaging diverse audiences
- Need for glossary.
- Content warning?
- Best practice guide – Dr Siobhan Hyland
- Engage with community when going further – mutual benefits for wellbeing



**YOU HAVE ONE VOTE**

**VOTE FOR BRITAIN**

**VOTE NATIONAL FRONT**

**HOUSE  
BRITONS  
FIRST!**

**REMEMBER** – you don't need a polling card to vote in this election. Simply go along to the polling station and you will receive a ballot paper.

We would be grateful if you would bring this leaflet with you and give it to our checker outside the polling station.



**STOP IMMIGRATION**

**VOTE FOR**

**HAMMILL**

**ON NOVEMBER**

**Your  
National  
Candidate**



# 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?



# The Future and our Subjects

- Increasingly online nature of world
- Moles, infiltrators, informants etc.
- Beyond death – Family perceptions
- Emotional upset
- Criminal acts from antifascists/community activists
- Also may reveal criminality RE: held items
- Impact not unidirectional



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