

Institution: The University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 34		
Title of case study: Working with Vulnerable and Hard-to-Reach Groups to Transform Community Histories		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Simon Popple	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer in Photography and Digital Culture	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: January 2005 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Four community history projects involving vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, using action research to develop a digital heritage platform, had the following impacts on two sets of beneficiaries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations concerned with heritage and community history: The projects allowed such organisations to better understand the experiences of users of their resources, by enabling the development of more inclusive approaches, including co-curation, and this in turn helped bring about policy change in organisations working in community heritage and archives. • Heritage users/audiences: The projects benefited heritage users by allowing them to participate in collaborative heritage projects. This in turn increased levels of engagement, and improved digital skills, inclusion, confidence and well-being. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Four research projects, the first three led by Popple and the fourth with Popple as co-investigator, used collaborative action research to 'co-produce' solutions to heritage problems, with impacts on the two key sets of beneficiaries highlighted above.</p> <p>Project 1, <i>Pararchive</i> (2013-2015) investigated problems related to community heritage and archiving, across a range of contexts and locations (in Bute, Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester), working with a number of heritage groups and institutional partners (the BBC, the Science Museum Group, and web designers Carbon Imagineering), and sought to provide solutions to them. Problems identified included a lack of resources, limited access to guidance and support, poor archival repositories, and a lack of digital skills and tools. The communities on the Isle of Bute, for example, had developed a rich resource of community histories that had become digitally inaccessible due to the island's poor internet coverage (1, 2). To make these community histories accessible, the project used action research to develop a community-designed digital heritage tool, YARN (3), which was then further developed in Stoke and Manchester. Crucially, the software design was informed by the involvement of community groups in all three locations. This co-design took the form of Community Technology Labs, which allowed groups to work independently with designers and coders in writing the specification for YARN. On Bute members explored local farming, archaeological histories and the value of digital tools. In Stoke (under the title <i>Ceramic Stories</i>) the group constructed histories of their pottery industry and the environmental damage it had caused and explored the diasporic nature of the town's history. In</p>		

Manchester research led to the spread of digital training, community filmmaking and the prototyping of digital heritage tools (1, 2, 3).

This investigation of community empowerment through co-curation of digital heritage tools continued during **Project 2**, *Island Stories: Growing Digital Heritage*, which investigated the potential of using digital tools to develop heritage activity and policy development on the Isle of Bute (2). The project used mixed methods (interviews, digital mapping, paper and online questionnaires) to assess key structural barriers to digital connectivity and their effects on cultural and economic activities. The research found that communities needed access to training, bespoke digital resources and inclusive practices, and that they benefitted from collaborative working methods (5)

The role of digital skills in telling community histories was revisited as part of a follow-on AHRC project, **Project 3**, *Digital Community Workspaces: Delivering Impact through Public Library and Archive Networks* (2017-2018). This project built on Projects 1 and 2 by further exploring how disadvantaged and hard-to-reach audiences might gain greater access to, and contribute to, local history and genealogy. It found that co-working and the use of 'hidden' or degraded digital resources allowed community users to better narrate community histories, and to build their digital skills (1, 4). Four communities in York, Wakefield, Leeds and Bute worked with a partner organisation involved in heritage or archives (respectively Explore York, Wakefield Libraries, Leeds City Library, and Rothesay Library services) to explore how library and archival resources could be made available for more users. The research identified new core features for the YARN platform and developed training materials for community heritage groups.

Project 4, *Digital Tools in the Service of Difficult Heritage: How Recent Research Can Benefit Museums and their Audiences* (2016-2017), more explicitly addressed how the YARN platform could explore the benefits of digital tools to end users. Working with three museum sites in England (The Science Museum, The Thackray Medical Museum and the National Holocaust Centre), the research established the need for these institutions to engage audiences more in the interpretation and dissemination of their collections and to understand how to improve the inclusivity and resilience of more marginalised communities in relation to difficult heritage issues such as the Holocaust, birth stories, and war wounds (1, 3). The software was used to collect stories of personal experience such as recent migrant Afghani women's experiences of childbirth, allow for reflection on exhibits by army veterans, and teach children from non-Jewish migrant backgrounds about the Holocaust. By using YARN to collate and archive this material, the project placed community histories and community users at the centre of its archival practice, demonstrating the value of digital skills and community co-creation.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Popple, S. and Mutibwa, D. (2016) Tools You Can Trust? Co-design in Community Heritage Work. Borowiecki, K.J, Forbes, N and Fresa, A. (Eds.). *Cultural Heritage in a Changing World*. New York, Springer, 197-214.
2. Duffy, P.R.J. and Popple, S. (2017) Pararchive and Island Stories: Collaborative Co-design and Community Digital Heritage on the Isle of Bute, *Internet Archaeology* 46. <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.46.4>
3. Yarn digital heritage platform: <https://yarncommunity.org/>
4. Popple, S. (2015) The New Reithians: Pararchive and Citizen Animateurs in the BBC Digital Archive, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into ^{TE} New Media Technologies*, Vol. 21(1), 132-144.
5. Popple, S. (2020) Disorderly Conduct: the Community in the Archive. In: Popple, S. Prescott, A. and Mutibwa, D. (Eds.) *Communities, Archives and New Collaborative Practices*. Bristol, Policy Press, 20-40.

Grants

Project 1: *Pararchive: Open Access Community Storytelling and the Digital Archive*, AHRC Connected Communities scheme: 2013-2015. PI: Popple, Co-I: Coleman, £424,129

Project 2: *Island Stories: Growing Digital Heritage - A case study with a rural island community*, EPSRC: 2014-2015. PI: Popple, £32,309.52

Project 3: *Digital Community Workspaces: Delivering Impact through Public Library and Archive networks*, AHRC: 2017-2018. PI: Popple, £75,840.49

Project 4: *Digital Tools in the Service of Difficult Heritage: How Recent Research Can Benefit Museums and their Audiences*, AHRC: 2016-17. Co-I: Popple

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)Impacts on Heritage Organisations

The projects benefitted organisations dealing with heritage and history, and led to policy change in a range of these organisations.

By allowing marginalised and under-represented groups of users to enhance community history resources and to reflect on problems and exclusions (see below), the projects expanded the historical resources of the heritage organisations concerned. Projects 1, 2, and 3 benefitted Rothesay Library Services (**A**) and Brandanii Archaeology (**B**) on the Isle of Bute, Scotland, by significantly expanding their historical resources concerning the history of the island. The Director of Brandanii Archaeology and Heritage reported that 'the YARN platform enables us to introduce new digital potentials offered by the [then] recent connection of island high speed broadband and allowed us to provide "soft" digital training... supporting the key government ambitions of the Digital Scotland programme. [I]t also encouraged reflection on how communities have responded to social and economic challenges in the past' (**B**). He noted that the project's community focus allowed members of Bute's Youth Forum (12-14 years), who had previously connected with the local libraries as children, to return to these libraries to learn more (**B**). The YARN community consists of 4,980 registered users, many of whom are groups or organisations sharing a common login. The platform hosts 650 published projects. There are an additional 24 project organisations using the project website feature, which means these micro sites host multiple published projects. In total, the platform has received 207 archival donations of films or photographs. Without the intervention of Popple's project, it would have been difficult to encourage these relationships and co-curations between heritage organisations and the local community. In this respect, the Director has observed that 'Yarn helps to disrupt hierarchies and structures of authority in the heritage sector. It reflects the growing awareness in the sector that even professional archaeology and historiography is a subjective practice akin to 'storytelling', forming narratives based on a fragmented data-source. The platform has changed that storytelling by democratising people's interaction with archives' (**B**).

These developments in turn brought about policy change, in the form of greater community engagement on the part of heritage organisations. The Inclusive Arts & Media Coordinator at Explore York, reported that the research in Project 3 'enabled Explore York to widen access to its archive through innovative and engaging multi touch platforms and digital tools to support the HLF funded Gateway to History legacy plans. It enabled us to work in collaboration with targeted groups such as adults with learning difficulties who have very limited access to archives, to harness their knowledge and expertise to develop and co-produce engaging innovative digital tools to make digital storytelling and archiving more accessible...it has made me think about other audiences that we can target and other hard to reach groups' (**C**). As a result of the project, the Archivist (Access and Engagement) at Explore York has opted to deliver the digital access and engagement modules of the 'Bridging the Digital Gap' programme, a National Archives' HLF-funded training programme, to trainees in Yorkshire and London: a change in

archival policy surrounding community histories and their audiences (D). The Senior Library Officer (Information and Culture) at Wakefield Libraries commented that as a result of project 3, she developed a new approach to community history curation which involved '[...] not just putting an object on display, or an old photograph or a map, but getting the impact of that to shine through by getting people to interact [...] and tell their story, rather than us curating a story' (E).

The projects also led to policy change in larger heritage and history organisations. Project 4's collaboration with the Science Museum Group had a significant impact on policy there. The Head of Research & Public History considers that the collaboration with Popple 'was an important component of our development of a public history agenda for the Science Museum Group', demonstrating 'how we could work with people from a wide range of backgrounds to develop effective dialogue around matters of import to us, including the value of historical artefacts to subject-specialist heritage enthusiasts.' (F). The Former Head of BBC Archives, who worked with Popple on Projects 1 and 3, reported that, as a result of the collaboration, the BBC was able to model new forms of partnership and archival practices with regards to community histories of hard to reach groups, noting that Popple's research allowed 'BBC executives to begin a journey towards an appreciation [of the] priceless and irreplaceable testimony' held within the archives, which may form the foundations of a 'national conversation' concerned with 'the value of diversity and the benefits of empathy and inclusion.' He also noted that 'by inviting the general public to explore, revisit and then add contemporary contributions to the recorded past, the BBC allowed ordinary people to gain a previously inconceivable insight and perspective into the role we all play, and continue to play, in creating a collective narrative for the nation'. Since taking on a leadership role at the New York Public Library, this senior archivist has 'come to appreciate how far communities can drift apart when they are deprived of access to shared perspectives and unbiased documentary [...] I now hope to build on lessons learned from the Pararchive projects', including 'the ground-breaking work of Simon Popple and his team at Leeds in demonstrating the need for communities to have unimpeded access to their own stories, recorded in their own words, and without editorial "spin" or commercial bias.' (G)

Impacts on Users

The projects benefited heritage users by uncovering problems and using action research to address them.

Project 3 improved the social welfare and sense of inclusion of a community group, the Friends of Ossett Library. The Senior Library Officer (Information and Culture) at Wakefield Libraries, noted that, by working through YARN with elderly users 'It gets people to be less lonely and less isolated in their thoughts' (E). A group leader on the projects, a member of the Ossett elderly community, commented that 'Doing the YARN project I feel as though I've learnt quite a bit because I've learnt how to [...] edit audio and video recordings', and that these new digital skills contributed to keeping his mind active (H).

Project 3 likewise enabled social inclusion by engaging with a group of adults with learning difficulties in York to develop their digital skills. Aided by the YARN platform, these users from Blueberry Academy, which trains people with intellectual and physical disabilities, worked with digitised materials from Explore York's collections to build stories and engage in creative projects concerning their own lived environments and experiences. This helped to improve the quality of life of Blueberry Academy's clients, build skills and confidence and assert their presence in the wider community. The project worked with a broad group of 20 learners, but developed an extended and close relationship with three: one who was a former rough sleeper, and two learners at Blueberry Academy, one with Down's Syndrome, and one with complex autistic characteristics. These learners have produced nine projects to date but continue to use the platform for creative, skill-building projects. The Centre and Advice and Guidance co-ordinator at the Academy noted that the research 'raised confidence and encouraged trainees and their families to embrace the rewards gained by taking measured risks through increased social interaction' (I). This increased social interaction has enabled trainees at the Academy to

participate more fully in the heritage displays and interactive locations of Explore York, and the YARN platform also enabled the Blueberry Academy to train two Blueberry Trainees for voluntary positions at Kirkgate, York Castle Museum in November 2020. (J)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Library Supervisor, Rothesay Library, 6/11/2017
- B. Director of Brandanii Archaeology and Heritage, 14/2/2021
- C. Inclusive Arts & Media Coordinator at Explore York, 7/12/2020
- D. Archivist (Access and Engagement) at Explore York, 17/05/2019
- E. Senior Library Officer, Information and Culture at Wakefield Libraries, 10/05/2019
- F. Science Museum Group Head of Research & Public History, 19/12/2019
- G. Former Head of BBC Archives and current Chief Digital Officer at New York Public Library, 10/12/2020
- H. Group member of *Ossett and Gawthorpe Community Archive* (OGCA) and the *Friends of Ossett Library* (FOOL), 10/05/2019
- I. Centre and Advice and Guidance co-ordinator at The Blueberry Academy, 24/05/2019
- J. Email testimonials from Centre and Advice and Guidance Co-ordinator at The Blueberry Academy, 23/10/2020 and 13/11/2020