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| Institution: University of Nottingham | | |
| Unit of Assessment: History | | |
| Title of case study: Using MOOCs to Transform Public History & Empower Global Citizenship – changing engagement strategy and culture at the British Library | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009-2020 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Maiken Umbach | Professor of Modern History | 2011 – |
| Dean Blackburn | Lecturer in Modern British History | 2013 – |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Online interactions have been widely criticised for creating ideological echo-chambers, and for de-valuing expertise vis-à-vis populist polemics. To promote alternatives, Umbach and Blackburn partnered with the British Library (BL) to transform their digital strategy. Together, Umbach and Blackburn worked with nearly 100,000 members of the public, from four continents and highly diverse backgrounds, to change the way they interact with historical knowledge, and with one another. Our two co-produced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) each ran multiple times from 2015 to 2020, generating rich social interactions online. Originating from an open-call for partners for a solitary online course, the relationship with the BL has blossomed into multiple runs for two stand-alone MOOCs – enabling tangible progress for the BL’s online engagement strategy, increasing exposure of unique historical collections and enriching public understanding and online debate for an audience of tens of thousands. Self-reflection has been a constant throughout, changing the nature of public debate and understanding of the role of ideology in everyday discourse, placing emphasis on individual and collective agency, critical political thinking and global citizenship.</p> | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research underpinning this impact has taken place under the umbrella of Nottingham’s Centre for the Study of Political Ideologies (CSPI). CSPI was founded in 2013, and is co-directed by Umbach and Mathew Humphrey (Politics). Blackburn serves on its management board, and led one of the strands of our collaboration with the BL; a further eight historians from the units actively contributed to the project. Together, the CSPI team developed a distinctive brand of ideology analysis, which investigates ideologies not as formal political doctrines, nor as a form of false consciousness that needs to be unmasked, but, rather, as clusters of sentiments, beliefs and epistemological shortcuts, that are shaped by and performed in everyday life. This led the team to reconceptualise the relationship between the personal and the political, historically and today [3.1].</p> <p>The project builds on research that Umbach conducted and published, individually [3.2] and as part of a Leibniz-Foundation funded collaboration together with the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich [3.7 and 3.3] on the relationship between private life and ideology in National Socialism. These publications challenged traditional notions of the top-down operations of totalitarian ideologies, and demonstrated that Nazism, far from seeking to control or abolish the private sphere, valorised the private as a realm in which new political beliefs and behaviours could be tried out, practiced, normalised and reconfigured as ‘common sense’.</p> <p>Furthermore, CSPI’s research has explored the longue durée of ideologies. As Blackburn’s research has demonstrated [3.4], present-day ideological beliefs that operate in and through everyday practice remain unintelligible unless we explore the prior histories of the imaginaries and memories from which they are constructed. Thus, any ideology analysis always needs to be attentive to historical genealogies.</p> <p>Umbach’s and Humphrey’s co-authored monograph [3.5] then exemplified how these two impulses can be brought to bear on a case study of one key political concept – authenticity – across a long time-span, from the sixteenth century to the present. The book demonstrated</p> | | |

how only an analysis that focuses on the production of ideological imaginaries *in and through private life and personal habitus* can explain the power of authenticity as a political concept, which travels across different **periods** and **geographies**. Authenticity's political effectiveness rests on its significance as a personal aspiration, which can be politically activated by a range of different actors.

CSPI has brought together a team of historical researchers to further test and develop this approach to ideology analysis. They include, within the UoA, experts in **modern British cultural history** (Blackburn, Hornsey, Auerbach) and **modern European history** (Harvey, Badcock, Baron, Laven), as well as historians of **colonialism and post-colonialism** from beyond the institution, whose research has, through case studies ranging from British courtrooms to the politics of advertising, and from Italian ideas of community to Stalinist practices of punishment, contributed to this emerging field of the study of political ideas *qua* lived experience and habitus.

Together, these scholars, under Umbach's direction, worked with the **British Library** and its extensive curatorial team, led by Ian Cooke, to develop **interactive digital platforms** (MOOCs) that offer new ways for a large and diverse group of citizens to discover these approaches, and use them to re-think their own roles not just as recipients of historical knowledge, but as active contributors to the making of ideologies through their respective, and very diverse, life experiences and actions. Umbach, Humphrey and their PhD student Clulow then analysed around **120,000** detailed written comments by participants, applying their method for ideology analysis to this material, and turning them into the basis for further published ideology research **[3.6]**. The results have informed a sustained partnership with the BL, constantly refreshing and optimising the content of the first MOOC, and co-developing and delivering a second.

3. References to the research

- [3.1]** HUMPHREY, H; **UMBACH, M**; LAYCOCK, D, eds, *Ideologies in Action: Morphological Adaptation and Political Ideas*, Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 9780367496050.
- [3.2]** UMBACH, M, 'Selfhood, Place, and Ideology in German Photo Albums, 1933-1945', *Journal of Central European History*, 48/3, 2015, 335-65. DOI:10.1017/S0008938915000783.
- [3.3]** HARVEY, E; HURTER, J; **UMBACH, M**; WIRSCHING, A, eds, 2019. *The Private in Nazi Germany*, Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781108754859.
- [3.4]** **BLACKBURN, D**, 'Still the Stranger at the Feast? Ideology and the Study of Twentieth-Century British Politics', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22/2, 2017, 116-30. DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2017.1298549.
- [3.5]** **UMBACH, M**; HUMPHREY, H, *Authenticity: The Cultural History of a Political Concept*, Palgrave, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-319-68565-6.
- [3.6]** HUMPHREY, H; **UMBACH, M**; CLULOW, Z, 'The Personal and the Political: An Analysis of Crowd-Sourced Political Ideas from a Massive Open Online Course', *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, 24/2, 2019, 121-38. DOI: 13569317.2019.1589958.
- [3.7]** Leibniz-Gemeinschaft internationalisation grant. PI: A Wirsching; **Umbach** Co-I. SAW-2013-IfZ-7. Das Private im Nationalsozialismus. £49,228. 1/7/2013-30/6/2017.

4. Details of the impact

Historical understanding ought to empower people to become active citizens. But current modes of public history – for example, in television documentaries – often reduce audiences to passive consumers of historical knowledge, conveying little sense of why this history matters to them, or how they can use this knowledge. Umbach and Blackburn tackled this challenge by:

- helping the **British Library** (BL) use new digital media (MOOCs) **strategically**, to engage a wider and more diverse audience in more active ways
- encouraging members of the **public** to make better use of resources of one of the world's largest, and most diverse, research libraries and archives
- drawing on CSPI's approach to convey to citizens a sense of their **own agency** in the making of histories and ideologies
- demonstrating how contemporary political views and identities draw on historical precedents and memories, and how a better **understanding** of these histories can enhance **critical** political thinking and action today

- realising **global citizenship** by enhancing person-to person dialogue between citizens from different cultural, political, ideological contexts.

The British Library is a world-leading historical research library, and a global archive of over 170 million items. It has long used the mechanism of in-house exhibitions to showcase its collections to a wider public. Although the institution welcomes 1.7 million visitors on site each year, the **reach** of these physically exhibitions is **limited by geography, class, and ethnicity**. In 2014, the BL initiated a search for academic partners to realise their 'Vision 2020' ambition to connect with a far broader global audience through digital initiatives. It took as its starting point the 2013 exhibition *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, to explore how digital media could be used to **widen and enhance its reach and impact**. A team led by Umbach and Humphrey, was selected, through a competitive process, to support this effort [5.1].

This marked the starting point for the co-creation of **two** MOOCs. They have since run eight times on FutureLearn, an interactive digital platform dedicated to "transforming access to education". All FutureLearn courses are free to participants from any part of the world. Only a handful of existing FutureLearn MOOCs, however, have been co-produced by academics and an institution like the British Library.

Our first MOOC, "**Propaganda and Ideology in Everyday Life**" combined materials from the original BL exhibition with new sources and wide-ranging historical expertise. The course was organised not geographically or chronologically, but by themes – with five weeks exploring, respectively, **freedom, justice, place and territory, community, and consumption**. This enabled us to engage learners in an interactive discussion about how such key ideas are used to attract support, and mobilise support, across a wide range of different **regimes**, past and present, and to connect historical examples with their own lived experience in different countries and cultures.

This MOOC has run four times since 2015, for a total audience of **29,217** people [5.2, p. 4; 5.3, p. 5] from no fewer than **128 countries**, with a remarkably even demographic spread [5.2, pp. 24-30; 5.3, p. 6]. Historians from Nottingham, including our campuses in China and Malaysia, and some international colleagues, presented key insights on the nature of ideology in their specific areas of specialism in accessible formats – combining site-specific videos (shot in art galleries, court rooms, and in the BL with collection items) with short texts – and explored with learners how their own political identities are grounded in multiple and entangled histories, rather than singular national stories. Together, these learning steps moved away from the model of the singular historical '**expert**' towards an **interactive dialogue** showcasing many different perspectives. As our learner comment analysis shows [5.3 & 5.4], this enabled participants to develop a language in which ideological differences could be debated in a **respectful** manner, and in which everyone's experience mattered.

In 2016, Umbach's and film maker Alec Millward's MOOC film 'From the Just War to the Unjust Peace', featuring Umbach on site at the Djanogly Art Gallery, discussing Lee Miller's photographs of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, won the national 'Learning on Screen Award' from the British Film Institute in the category "Courseware and Curriculum Non-Broadcast Award" (<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/awards/winners-2016/>).

Umbach and Humphrey then conducted a detailed corpus linguistic analysis of the **60,000** learner comments, as well as uploaded learner images, from the first two iterations of this MOOC. The results, which they published [3.6], offer new insights into how ordinary people imagine ideas such as freedom, justice, community, and how they communicate these across cultural and political boundaries. A key finding, which explains some of the dynamics of contemporary populism, is that those political concepts which provoked the liveliest debates were those that travel most easily between purely **private** and **public / political realms**: "*The idea of freedom generated intense debate in both our course runs, more so than any other topic. In the 24,871 comments posted 'freedom' was employed 9,056 times and 'liberty' (which we take as a synonym) 1,043 times. In contrast, 'justice' occurred on 1,217 occasions and 'community' 1,785. Amongst all these comments, we encountered none in which freedom was not positively appraised. Yet freedom as an idea, and ideal, meant many different things to different participants.*" [3.6].

Strong direct engagement with the key themes of both MOOCs carried on throughout subsequent course runs, particularly in 2020, where – as part of a total **14,132** comments –

they informed discussion over **16,000** times [5.3 & 5.4]. Some indicative example of learner contributions from the latest 2020 run highlight how the course transformed how they understood their own role in the making, and re-making, of **ideological imaginaries**, and felt enabled to talk across **political divides** [5.3 & 5.4]:

“This course has led me to [...] realise how pervasive and normalising various ideologies and values are in everyday life, in every society. It has been interesting to read comments from people around the world and to realise that most people hold the same political concerns and ethical values.” / “After taking this course, I started to realise the previously unnoticed, small things in everyday life that shaped our values, sense of belonging and feelings of being in a community.” / “Do I think differently about the role of political ideas in everyday life? I suppose I do.” / “After completing this course, I am now wanting the government updates about Covid-19 with an eye for propaganda.”

In the 2020 end of course survey, **93%** of responses said that they had gained new knowledge or skills by taking the course, **77%** said they had shared what they had learned with others, and **44%** said they had already applied what they had learned to their lives [5.3].

All comments showed that the ‘Ideology and Propaganda’ MOOC generated great enthusiasm amongst members of a diverse demographic for engaging with historical research, with several learners moving beyond the content the team created for the platform to read the academic literature the MOOC linked to in its original form in academic **Open Access** repositories. But the MOOC had not yet equipped these learners, who mostly did not hold pertinent academic qualifications, to continue engaging with historical research and evidence on their own terms. This led to a discussion between Umbach’s team and the British Library about the next **strategic** step. They decided to focus on skills development, linked to the question of topical applications of historical research.

The result was a new, co-produced MOOC, entitled **“Learning from the Past? A Practical Guide for the Curious Researcher”**, co-directed by Umbach, Blackburn, and Cooke. This has run twice thus far, in 2018 and 2020, and responds to this challenge by combining specific **skills training** for lay users of history with reflections on what we can learn from history when tackling thorny **contemporary political issues**, such as **inequality**, environmental **sustainability**, and **violence** – and where an uncritical use of history can distort our perception of these problems. Learner comments from the course’s run in 2020 highlighted both the acquisition of **new skills**, and a more critical awareness of the contemporary **implications** of history. Typical examples were:

“The course introduced me to new sources and improved my approach to studying historical documents.” / “This has made me think about how I go about my historical research.” / “[...this course] has given me so many valuable skills and tools to add to my kit in terms of online resources, databases, and broader questions about the ethics of historical sources.”

In the 2020 end of course survey, **94%** of responders said that they both gained new knowledge or skills, and that they had share what they had learned with others. **50%** said they had already applied what they had learned to their lives [5.4].

With the courses relaunching in the Spring of 2020, the **COVID-19 pandemic** loomed large in several MOOC discussions, receiving close to a thousand mentions [5.3 & 5.4]. Though not the original intention, these MOOCs nonetheless provided a **supportive** and **constructive** outlet for many at a time of worldwide lockdowns – *“I am currently out of school and I wanted to find something to keep myself busy but that I would benefit from” / “Looking forward to more interesting discussions along the way. Hopefully, they will brighten up the tedium of Covid-19 lockdown”*. It is a significant reflection of the **course themes** strength how often they were directly related to the pandemic – *“I am also writing this during lockdown [...] which has removed a lot of my freedom” / “A more pernicious for of nationalism is maybe coming to the fore though as a result of COVID-19” / “A useful article that has, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, become all the more pertinent”*.

In 2018, the cultural consultancy company ‘Next Up’ **evaluated the impact** of Umbach’s collaboration with the BL [5.2]. They concluded: *“In terms [...] extending reach with new audiences, the project was an outstanding success with a total audience of 26,000 learners [in the first iteration of the course alone] who were not engaged in formal academic education, and would not typically visit The British Library.”*

Reporting to 'Next Up', the BL summarised **the impact on their own institution** thus [5.2]:

1. *"We found Nottingham's approach to interpreting history and making it relevant to our understanding of the world today extremely useful; this learning will be used more widely.*
2. *Our understanding of online learning and how to make it work is now very good and will be applied in other ways.*
3. *The course on impact that Ian Cooke attended with Maiken Umbach as a result of their partnership was very useful, and this learning has been shared internally with BL and is being used to create stronger partnerships with HEI more generally.*
4. *We particularly like the way the Nottingham approach has created debate around our collections – a key objective for the BL."*

To **share best practice with other institutions**, Umbach and the BL's Ian Cooke published articles about these outcomes in media such as *History Today* [5.5] which concluded: "A MOOC enables people to experience the relevance of history in their own conversations with those who live in different places and who adhere to different political beliefs. Many participants commented that the course made them more aware of their own role as global citizens, narrowed the gap between formal politics and everyday life and showed how politics is always shaped by histories". Cooke also ran **training sessions for library** and archive staff from other institutions to disseminate how to work with academics to use digital platforms to widen access [5.1 & 5.2].

In their testimonial of 2020, the British Library highlighted how the project had led them to re-evaluate the relevance of their own holdings especially of more **ephemeral** and **everyday historical** texts and images and explore their potential for a radically new approach to public pedagogy: "Maiken [Umbach] provided important **critical feedback** on the materials that the Library was selecting, and also on how new sections could be presented. [...] Maiken's research [...] was **crucial** in helping us introduce learners to this nexus between political histories and their own lives. Maiken also provided methodological insights to the Library's curatorial team for how they could better use the Library's own [...] collections." [5.1].

The BL also commented on the project's contribution to their internationalisation **strategy** ("supports the Library's goal [to] be international in outlook and attractive to audiences around the world, as well as, by extension, to diverse BAME and faith communities within the UK").

The **Head of Contemporary British Publications** went on to say: "Your input and your original historical research methodology have enabled us to reach a much **larger audience** [...] and provided us with powerful **tools** to challenge our learners and encourage critical thinking and **respectful** debate. The collaboration **enriched** the content of our digital learning [...] we were able to increase the **exposure** of our holdings [...], introduce our audiences to new objects and their interpretations, whilst making a tangible progress towards our **strategic aims** in regard to both the quantity and quality of our online engagement." [5.1].

The collaboration will continue in future years – a testament to a long-standing and constantly evolving working relationship that has profoundly reshaped the **practice** and **strategic outlook** of an **iconic** global institution, and improved **historic understanding** and public political **discourse** for an audience of tens of thousands across the world, at a time where respectful online debate has never been more needed.

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

[5.1] Letter of Support British Library

[5.2] Consultancy Report by "Next Up"

[5.3] MOOC 1 "Propaganda and Ideology in Everyday Life" Learner Comments Summary

[5.4] MOOC 2: "Learning from the Past? A Guide for the Curious Researcher" Learner Comments Summary

[5.5] "Can MOOCs offer anything new?", *History Today*, May 2016, <https://www.historytoday.com/can-moocs-offer-anything-new>

See also 3.6, above, an academic publication based on participant comments and images from the 2015 iteration of the 'Propaganda and Ideology' MOOC