



History Acts 21

Archiving a Crisis

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Activists: Paul Dudman ([Living Refugee Archive](#), London), Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida ([Interference Archive](#), New York), Fani Arampatzidou and Chris Jones ([MayDay Rooms](#), London)

Historians: [Charlotte Clements](#) (London Southbank University), [Andrew Flinn](#) (University College London)

Key questions:

- How have different projects been attempting to archive the pandemic, and what are their intentions?
- How has the pandemic impacted the work of radical archives and their future operations?
- What is the relationship between archives and activism? How should we understand archiving as an activist practice?
- How can archives function as anti-capitalist institutions?
- In what ways can radical archives engage with contemporary activist groups and movements?
- What does an activist or movement-led archiving practice look like?
- What ethical and practical considerations are there, particularly when so much of the material being collected is digital?
- How can radical archives' use of space and ideas around 'use as preservation' inform future possibilities for both physical and virtual spaces in archive creation and use?

Paul Dudman began by explaining the history and work of the Living Refugee Archive in London. The archive is based in the University of East London's Library at Docklands, the home of the Refugee Council Archive for over a decade. It facilitates accessibility to archival resources on the refugee and forced migration experience. Paul explained that, over the years, the archive has tried to adopt an activist style approach to its work. The intention is for the archive to be actively used to challenge negative discourses around migration and

refugees. To this end, Living Refugee Archive has carried out a series of civic engagement and public outreach projects. For example, one of these projects recorded oral histories with refugees and asylum seekers in East London in order to address the lack of refugee voices in the archive.

The Living Refugee Archive has launched a [Covid-19 archiving project](#), intended to record how displaced communities, as well as associated organisations and activist groups, have been impacted by the global pandemic. More broadly, the Living Refugee Archive has been working nationally and internationally in collaborative working groups, focusing on the documentation of refugee and forced migrations histories. Commenting on the future of archives and the Higher Education sector generally, Paul expressed concerns. The next few years are likely to be a challenging and precarious times for radical archiving projects, which only reinforces the need to work collaboratively in the future. Paul has written a blog post expanding on his thoughts on archiving the crisis, which can be read [here](#).

Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida, volunteers from the Interference Archive in New York, provided an overview of its work and aims. Interference Archive is a volunteer-run archive in Brooklyn which focuses on the relationship between cultural production and social movements. Whilst the collection at the archive is very global, the organisation is staffed by a collective of local volunteers. Interference Archive is an open-stacks archive, which means visitors can go through the archive material on their own. The organisation strives to be non-hierarchical, and is focused on working out how to exist as an anti-capitalist archive, drawing on the legacy of the activist groups contained within the archives to grapple with this problem. One way they achieve this is by actively working with movements on the ground in New York. For example, they have previously worked with tenant organisations to help organise local rent strikes. The organisation rejects the notion of an 'apolitical archive', and is staffed by a collective of broadly anti-capitalist volunteers, who have regular conversations about contemporary movements in relation to their work.

Interference Archive is focused on the idea of 'use as preservation'. This means that the archive encourages visitors to have a 'hands on' approach to the material. By making its collections as accessible as possible, the material is preserved as the ideas and histories contained within are carried forward to inform contemporary movements and struggles. The archive also produces its own materials and publications, and hosts public events and programmes as a means of engaging the local community. They are currently navigating the need to engage with movements on the ground during the coronavirus crisis – most notably the Black Lives Matter protests taking place in New York and throughout the rest of the US – with the institutional precarity engendered by the pandemic. Interference Archive hosts its own podcast, 'Audio Interference', which can be listened to [here](#).

Fani Arampatzidou from MayDay Rooms gave us an overview of the work the archive does collecting and preserving historical materials related to social movements, experimental culture and the radical expression of marginalised figures and groups. Just as the Interference Archive is embedded within its local community and struggles on the ground, MayDay Rooms also functions as an organising space and social centre for radical activist groups.

Chris Jones from [56a Infoshop](#) also joined us to discuss the project he is working on collaboratively with MayDay Rooms, called '[Pandemic Notes](#)'. 56a Infoshop started as a squatted building in the corner of a council estate in Elephant and Castle. It combines an archive, social centre, organic food co-op and large open access bicycle workshop. 56a Infoshop is therefore spatially embedded within the community it serves and documents. None of the archivists at Infoshop are trained, and it is an entirely DIY, grass roots operation. The archive doesn't even have its own catalogue, and like Interference Archive, is open shelf. This approach is generative, as it always produces a conversation around the material, rather than visitors coming to view specific items from a catalogue and leaving again.

Aside from the obvious limitations imposed on 56a Infoshop during the pandemic, similar projects face barriers in general because of longer term economic trends. 56a Infoshop was originally started by squatters who could draw on the resources of a welfare state that wasn't quite as punitive as today's, and many contemporary volunteers and activists now have to deal with demanding work, debt, precarity and housing issues.

Chris from 56a Infoshop had originally been working with MayDay rooms on a political education project that was unfortunately derailed by the pandemic. Pandemic Notes came out of re-thinking these initial plans in response to the crisis. They felt that other projects were missing the more emotional and material responses people were having. Pandemic Notes is focused on people's imaginations for the future; this historical moment is one of possibility, and the project records people's hopes for a transformed world, alongside their current experiences. Contributors can either submit written or audio-visual contributions to the project, and are asked a series of questions as prompts. E.g. What does the current moment feel like?

The Pandemic Notes project has had to contend with the sheer number of other projects archiving the pandemic, with little interaction or collaboration between them. Another barrier the project has faced is the desire to record the voices of the most vulnerable, whilst these are the very same groups likely to be facing more immediate, material concerns - like job losses, illness and housing precarity.

Andrew Flinn began by emphasising the ideas of 'precarity' and 'sustainability' when trying to think through the kinds of archiving projects taking place at the moment. Andrew is interested in the cross-over between the academy and activism, and the challenges activism faces in those spaces. He is also interested in the use of archives as an activist practice. He worked in a social movement archive for around 15 years during the 1990s, before he moved into the academy. Before sharing his broader thoughts about archiving the crisis, Andrew showed his T-shirt from the Trade Union Library in Cape Town, which reads 'Knowledge is too important to be left in the hands of bosses'. Who controls the material and knowledge that allows us to shape the future is vitally important.

It is worth questioning the purpose of projects attempting to both archive experiences of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly when so many projects have sprung up. Why are we asking people to donate material? Who are we asking, and what materials are we asking them to donate? Andrew argues that being movement-led is really

important in thinking about how these collecting policies are shaped. If we're movement-led, we are drawing on the knowledge and expertise of movements with regards to how the material collected might be used. Are mainstream archiving initiatives simply collecting material from people who have the time and energy to contribute - and what use is this?

Andrew recommended that workshop attendees read a [blog](#) published by American archivist Eira Tansey about the commodification of trauma during the pandemic. Another important consideration is whether the material we collected might serve the state in its persecution of left-wing activist groups. We know that the police will use the archives against activists, and have been doing so for hundreds of years. E.g The Communist Party archive was raided by the police. How do we collect ethically and safely, whilst ensuring these histories are recorded?

Andrew returned to the ideas of precarity and sustainability. We need to think about the precarity of people working in the archive – sometimes furloughed or working several jobs, and facing conditions that might not leave much time for activism. Being movement-led gives you resourcefulness and sustainability, as the archive is sustained by an active community.

Charlotte Clements is an historian of charity and welfare. During the pandemic, we have seen charity and welfare morph itself to fit the current crisis, e.g. through mutual aid groups and community and charitable organisations fundamentally transforming their daily operations to sustain their services. Recording this crisis is therefore going to be vital in shaping our understanding of how the state, charities, NGOs, business and private individuals have responded to something that is unprecedented.

Charlotte's interest in the history of charity and welfare led her to work on the British Academy project, '[Archiving the Mixed Economy of Welfare in Britain](#)'. The project seeks to support charities and voluntary organisations with archiving their work. Responses to the pandemic have heavily involved this mixed economy of welfare. Some of the challenges and questions we are facing with regards to recording the current crisis, many charities and NGOs have been dealing with in their archiving for quite some time.

Due to the wealth of archiving projects that have sprung up during the pandemic, we have been left with a disparate and disconnected set of archives. This sense of disconnect has always been a huge challenge to archiving the voluntary sector. How could we create a more cohesive archive of these experiences? What we collect will inevitably be fragmentary. The fragments we are getting are coming from people who have the time and energy to contribute to archives at the moment. How can we create an intersectional archive when the BAME people most impacted by the pandemic can't afford to document their experiences? Gender, class, poverty and precarity have shaped the experience of the coronavirus crisis - will archives reflect this?

Moreover, how can we bring together the experience of the pandemic with the explosion of the Black Lives Matter protests?

It is really important to think about the local and the global. The London Borough of Newham (where Living Refugee Archive is located) has the highest rate of mortality cases for the

virus the whole of the UK. How can we think about documenting these particular local experiences of the pandemic?

How can we grapple with the digital nature of life during the pandemic? A lot of our social lives and activism during the pandemic has taken place on digital platforms owned by huge corporations like Twitter and Facebook. How can we archive this material outside of these platforms? How, for example, can we record the history of what is happening in local mutual aid groups being organised on Whatsapp groups? Charlotte ended by asking how the activism contained within the archives might be transformed into a new form of activism, as well as new forms of archives and archiving.

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The floor was then opened up to discussion and questions. How has the digitisation of the world impacted archives and archiving practices, particularly when social movements often use social media platforms to organise? MayDay Rooms have been working on a project to archive housing campaigns in the 2000s, but it has proved difficult to scrape material from the internet and digital platforms. The culture of organizing and activism has changed with the internet, which presents new challenges in archiving this work. 56a Infoshop is focused on the physical, paper documents — there is something powerful in people engaging with a physical object made by someone directly engaged in struggle decades ago. When organizing moves online, physical fliers etc. for rallies are less prevalent, generating less ephemera to be recorded.

Digital and online archiving also presents the challenge of an overload of information. Archivists need to grapple with the practical ways to store digital information, but also with important questions about what should be preserved from this vast sea of information.

Interference Archive have had conversations with activists who see their websites or instagram profiles as archives in themselves. This question of what archives are and what their relationship to activism is in a state of flux. We should always be centring the question of use — how are activists on the ground using archives/the historical record, and how do they intend their archived material to be used in the future? Interference Archive, for example, has taken on born-digital content from the Occupy Wall Street movement, but we must question who the archives are being used for. The born-digital content at Interference Archive seems to have been used more by academic researchers than activist groups thus far. Are contemporary activist groups turning to the internet and these 'online archives' to inform their activism, more so than physical archives?

Jen from Interference Archives asked whether this impulse to document everything might not come from an impulse to assert that our experiences are real, and we will not allow the government to tell us what to do in this moment. Charlotte agreed, suggesting that the impulse to archive is motivated by the need to find some power in a situation when lots of people feel powerless. Andrew concurred that there's a powerful argument for archivists playing an activist role as a form of accountability — they can document decisions, mistakes, violence. This is not just about the historians in twenty years time, but about struggles now. It is important to focus on documentation that can be used to inform and undercut the narrative put forward by the government and mainstream media.

On the broader topic of digital archiving, Andrew suggested we must keep in mind the climate change impact of storing vast amounts of digital material, in terms of the energy this takes. We must also consider the ownership of material on digital platforms by large corporations, and state actors shutting down social media accounts and platforms, and co-opting the information they store. Activists are put in an awkward position themselves, as they rely on these platforms to organise, but there are serious questions to be asked about who owns and controls this data.

What measures are being taken to make people's voices who are usually marginalised feel comfortable sharing their responses with publicly accessible archives? Paul explained that this is a challenge the Living Refugee Archive has been working on in the long term. They try to focus on the ethical questions around various projects, and ensure participants interviewed as part of oral history projects are made aware of how the oral histories might be used in the future. Charlotte reiterated that our archives are necessarily going to be fragmented. For example, the coronavirus death toll is huge in care homes — it is highly unlikely these stories are going to be documented in full.

A contributor from the Glasgow Women's Library returned to the question of ethically documenting and collecting stories. The Women's Library has had to grapple with these questions, as their archive is primarily made up of materials donated at various points from members of the community. Marginal communities are at the heart of what the GWL does. For example, volunteers at GWL wanted to donate their stories as members of the community who feel a sense of collective ownership over the archive. Fani from MayDay Rooms reminded us that the radical archives we work with — and the communities that surround them — often fall into these marginalised categories themselves.

Contributors offered their final thoughts on the evening's discussion. Charlotte concluded by suggesting that coronavirus has offered us challenges on an unprecedented scale, but also offers an opportunity as academics, archivists and activists to do things differently from now on, which is something to be hopeful about in a difficult situation. Andrew reiterated that we can use this moment to think about the other worlds that are possible, and that activist archives can be part of this re-imagining. Chris from 56a Infoshop emphasised the new and instant ways activists are accessing information, with information available online about how to navigate legal questions at protests and deal with kettles. Younger activists are accessing this information in ways that both intersect with, and exist outside of, archives in a more formal sense. Fani from MayDay Rooms reiterated the emotional nature of the responses the Pandemic Notes project has documented so far — oral history speaks differently to us, and is fundamental to trying to understand how people have experienced the pandemic. Jen and Nora from Interference Archive suggested that this is a moment of possibility for radical archives; we can suggest new ways to do things. Whilst focusing on archiving the perspectives of the most vulnerable, we need to make sure we are looking to those communities themselves for how best to archive. Radical archives need to be flexible and adaptive in their relationship with social movements.