Observing the 80s
Creating and curating a digital archive collection at University of Sussex

Summary
Observing the 80s (http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s) is a collection of digitised material drawn from three sources:

• The mass observation project at the University of Sussex
• The British Library oral history audio collection
• Digitised ephemera from the University of Sussex library

The collection was created in 2013/14 as a collaborative project at Sussex, with undergraduate and postgraduate students working together with academic staff, librarians and IT experts. The project was led by Professor Lucy Robinson in the department of history. The materials are now available as an open educational resource (OER) and are used in teaching for different purposes, including the module “1984: Thatcher’s Britain”. The work has "fundamentally changed [Lucy's] understanding of [her]self as a historian", and informs her approach as Chair of collaborative history.

Overall, the project has enabled participants to:

• Understand the process of creating digital archive collections through selecting and organising materials
• Consider the relationships between different types of evidence
• Develop a more nuanced understanding of how history is made and interpreted
• Appreciate the ethical and moral issues involved in licensing access to original materials
• Engage directly with the experiences of real people living in the 1980s, through their own words

Creating the archive
The 1980s was the last "pre-internet" period, and Lucy wanted to select resources from that time and make them available digitally. Library staff in the 1980s had recognised the significance of the period (it was a time of political unrest, student activism and "alternative" movements) and had consciously set out to collect materials that would reflect this.

The mass observation project (based at Sussex) began in 1981, with directives (sets of questions) being sent to correspondents up to four times a year between 1981 and 1990, resulting in a range of different written perspectives on common themes. The British Library’s oral history collection includes interviews on a wide range of subjects relating to British life, work, culture and experience.

Examples of ephemera from the University of Sussex library, http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/home/ephemera, accessed 26th July 2018

Staff and students involved in creating the observing the 80s collection had to look carefully at the original permissions granted by contributors, as these did not necessarily take account of the new opportunities (and indeed risks) presented by the open digital environment.
of 2013. There were important ethical issues to consider in making those materials freely available under a Creative Commons public CC-BY licence, and the team needed to develop their understanding of what this sort of licence really allows. Colleagues at the British Library also had to face new questions about how their oral history materials might be re-used and the impact on collection integrity of making just a sub-set available to Sussex. There were complex negotiations, but these resulted in a successful outcome and a useful learning process for all concerned.

The team found they had to do a lot of redacting - more so than when the materials were first collected - and importantly they needed to distinguish between redactions they had made themselves and those made at the earlier stage.

These students were able to learn about the 1980s from reading and listening to the materials, but also engage directly with the lives of those whose experiences were recorded in written or oral form.

An important point for Lucy is that these lives are not seen as “representative” of a whole, but are individual accounts - and that this is how history is made, in a raw and “messy” way. History is not a narrative, and historians need to "show their workings".

Moreover, the students had to think about the choices they were making and question their assumptions, in deciding to include (or exclude) material from the OER they were creating. What did this mean for the curated collection that resulted? How did their own experiences relate to the choosing and reflecting that took place earlier, when the source materials were put together? What was the role of those creating the “directives” which led to the responses from mass observation contributors? This again helped students towards a much more nuanced understanding of how history is made and interpreted.

Working with the archive
Observing the 80s now exists as a discrete OER, and Lucy continues to use it in her teaching. She notes, though, that at least in the early years it is necessary to provide some structure within which the students can work - rather than just "letting them loose" on the collection as a whole. First year students are offered specific materials from the collection. In the second year, the module 1984: Thatcher’s Britain requires students to undertake some directed research within the collection. By the third year, students are expected to do their research independently. Again, they have to think about how the materials were put together and the choices that were made, as well as reviewing the content.

“What I liked most about the responses was the fact that the authenticity of the sources has been maintained. As the diary entries have been made available in their original format, a number of them are handwritten and most of them are largely unedited. This leaves them open to interpretation and also offers further insight into the lives of the respondents by alluding to their age, social status or level of education.”
The OER is also used in an MA course resistance in the archive, and Lucy has used it in contributing to an exhibition for Jersey Heritage (Bergerac’s island) and also a BBC broadcast film (Queerama). The materials are freely available, and there are no barriers in respect of passwords, platforms or operating systems.

The resource has been used in other learning environments, including as part of a writing project undertaken with prisoners at Lewes prison, and with students at York University, Toronto. A student on this course commented:

“Observing the 80s brings together a remarkable range of sources that offer insight into life in 1980s Britain. I used the site to conduct research for a history paper and was intrigued by the topics covered and impressed by the convenient manner in which they were organised.”

An early experiment using augmented reality technology to access contextual information about the resources using the mass observation logo as a trigger was not entirely successful. Students were using a variety of personal devices and “freemium” apps in the classroom which did not always work as intended, and the effect was muddling rather than useful. In this case, Lucy felt that the augmented reality element was not essential to the learning process and chose not to pursue the idea.

Today’s students are comfortable with living and working in a digital environment, but this presents its own issues for Lucy in helping them appreciate the significance of the OER. They may be familiar with a virtual learning environment or with Twitter, but they may never have visited a traditional archive collection. In a sense Lucy has to work backwards from the digital resource so as to show where it has come from and how important it is that these individual voices have been made available online.

Although the students are working with a large corpus of digital materials, Lucy does not think of this in terms of “digital humanities” as such, and the focus is not on quantitative techniques or big data analytics (although there is an element of textual analysis using word counts). It is not about “bigger, faster, quicker”. The emphasis is much more on using the digital environment to gain access to original materials and understand the content, as well as reflecting on the context and process of curating this collection and the relationships between different types of evidence.

Students are able to work more directly with a bigger range of original materials, much earlier in their academic career, than would have been possible without this digital archive collection:

“[T]his was a unique resource which enabled me to look at materials that would have been otherwise unavailable to me.”

They can do better history as a result, and reach a much deeper understanding of what it means to study history.
In feedback, students always recognise the value of having access to their own "bespoke" archive. And they gain an understanding of how an archive is created, and the role of organisations (such as Jisc) which support this work.

"All the different documents that Lucy made available was honestly amazing and if you do not take this module you are seriously losing out."

Lessons learned, impact and future developments
Lucy has noted that the process of developing and working with the observing the 80s materials has completely transformed her approach to history. Significantly she now sees her "sources" much more as co-analysts or partners in the research process. And she very much appreciated the collaborative effort required from different professionals across the university when the collection was first put together, as well as the importance of co-creating work with students. All of this has informed her later approaches to teaching and research, as well as influencing her choice of the title "chair of collaborative history".

In recent years the university has set up its own digital humanities lab, and there is now a proper institutional digital infrastructure which supports the secure storage of online materials, rather than relying on Google docs, as in the past.

Lucy welcomes the supportive and innovative environment at Sussex and appreciates the freedom to be a bit "out there" in her teaching. She has been able to bring in new ideas, such as the school student intern who put some of their videos on to a Facebook timeline, or students creating physical infographics with relevant materials. Sussex will need to ensure that the value of such innovative pedagogy can be captured appropriately in the context of the TEF and other metric-driven exercises. In the meantime, Lucy has published work on her approach to teaching which has been submitted to the REF, effectively developing "teaching-led research".

Find out more
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Observing the 80s: http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s


Education consultancy Sero HE was commissioned by Jisc to interview Professor Lucy Robinson about developments in learning and teaching in a digital age at the University of Sussex. The studies focus in particular on the impact of such developments on the student experience.