

Modernising the Past: Impacts of Digitisation on the Accessibility of Historical Materials for Local Communities

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INTRODUCTION

- This project discusses 'What impact has the digitisation of archival material had on the accessibility of history for local communities?'
- The use of digital technologies to access historical materials is of debate, due to a perceived threat to traditional methods and the authority of the historian in identifying 'convincing' historical narratives. However, digitisation improves the accessibility of history for all by removing the 'academic elitism' surrounding the usage of archives, and increases community engagement with history.

ARCHIVE

A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.

OBJECTIVES

- How does putting material held within archives online improve the accessibility of history?
- What is the impact of this in local communities?
- How do local attitudes change after being exposed to this online material?
- Why should funding be provided to digitize archival material?

METHOD & RESULTS

- Used surveys to assess the impacts of putting oral and photographic historical materials online, focusing on two institutions local to York.
- Used newspaper articles from the founding years of the institutions to establish previous local attitudes.
- Studied historical debate surrounding validity of oral and photographic sources (Portelli, 1981/1991; Seagraves, 2020; Trouillot, 2015).
- Researched political and economic influences of digitisation (Ovenden, 2021; Thompson, 2017).



**RAILWAY
MUSEUM**



Photography



- ❖ Saw an increase in engagement when website was easier to navigate.
- ❖ Relevance of material found to determine the likelihood of independent exploration.
- ❖ Faced issues regarding the diversity of participants due to low survey response rates.
- ❖ This removed the ability to assess accessibility for minority groups.



Listen to the
oral histories here!



WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Digitised material was found to positively impact a community's knowledge of their history, but the limited public awareness of this access prevented its use. Archives contain knowledge that is beneficial for all of society, academics and public alike, and the preservation and promotion of our national heritage should receive more appropriate support.



University of York; 1960s



Carriage construction in York, c1885-1960

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- Digitisation improves the community interest and understanding of their own history.
- The validity of oral and photographic sources has been demonstrated.
- Identifies a lack of awareness within the local York community of the free online access to archives.
- Suggests the perceived relevance of the historical material to the individual determines the likelihood to explore the material in future.
- A lack of funding prevents these accessibility issues from being solved.

NOW WHAT?

1. Greater funding needs to be allocated to the public history sector.
2. This access needs to receive greater marketing to increase community awareness, and subsequently engagement with our national heritage.
3. More digitisation projects also need to occur worldwide, and I will be assessing the impacts in Luxembourg throughout Summer 2023, testing whether these conclusions hold on an international level.

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