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Archive

Weed or Treasure? The problem of Journalists' archives

Lashmar

On 16 May 2016 I was to give evidence in the High Court for 156 tradesmen who had been blacklisted by employers in the construction industry for political or trade union activity. Just a few days before I was due in the witness box the defendant companies opted to settle, issuing an apology and paying damages. It was the last in a series of successful cases involving hundreds of workers.

Back in 1988 David Leigh and I, then at *The Observer*, exposed the infamous blacklisting organisation the Economic League, working with our TV counterparts from the World in Action. In January 2016 I was approached by Julie Carlisle, a lawyer from O H Parsons acting for the UCATT union on behalf of the claimants who had been subject to blacklisting. She had heard I had kept the files from the Economic League story and drove over to my house one Saturday morning to spend some hours of reading through a pile of dusty lever arch files. Obviously delighted and describing it as 'the best morning of my life', Julie told me that the archive could play an important part of the claimant's case linking the defendants much more closely to the blacklisting system. Apparently among the papers were memos on 'Services Group' headed notepaper- this was an employers group not the Economic League which the lawyers argued demonstrated that it was an entity separate to the League. I had lists of meetings and attendees that the lawyers believe demonstrated the extent of various companies involvement and that suggested they were not, as they had claimed just as consumers of a service. I was able to find a note of a 1988 conversation with the Economic League's North West manager who had defected spilled the beans, handed over documents but has since died. When I was told of the court win I was delighted, as blacklisting is an insidious practice. It made all those years carting of dozens of large archive boxes from place to place seem worthwhile.

I offer this story as an example of the advantages of journalists keeping the archives of their 'greatest hits'. Most do not. As my former colleague, David Leigh says; "Journalists divide into two groups, those who keep archives and those who don't. I'm in the latter. When I retired from the Guardian I weeded out a lot. I don't have the space to keep them."

Ian Cobain from the Guardian keeps an archive and says "Quite a few of my stories have concerned matters that I've returned to again and again over the years, and I realised some time ago that journalists not only need the skills of the researcher, salesman, professional traveller and writer, they also need the skills of the archivist and librarian." The ideal solution for archives is to have space at one's place of work. Cobain is a model of good practice: "I keep most of my files in digitised format, some of the sorted into gmail folders. But I also

have paper files, some held at the Guardian archive, and some in a small cupboard at home. One of the keys to good record-keeping is, I believe, disposal. Every couple of years I go through the paper files and work out what I'll never need again."

Cobain is aware, as most journalists are, that if not working for an organisation registered Information Commissioner's Office they must be registered individually for £35 a year and conform to the Data Protection legislation that requires journalists to dispose of any personal details of people from our stories that we no longer have good reason to keep. "As far as the DPA is concerned, I think it's essential that journalists be aware of the Information Commissioner's guidance to the media. (<https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1552/data-protection-and-journalism-media-guidance.pdf>) he says.

Keeping documents in the workplace can have its own problems in the volatile world of the news media as former BBC producer Meirion Jones discovered. "At Newsnight I was able to keep almost everything I wanted, paper, tapes the lot in big cupboards behind my desk and sensitive stuff at home. But when I had to spring from Newsnight to Panorama to make Savile film - I had to grab everything I could and take it home in a matter of hours. I had also started to transfer some active files to the new Newsnight office in New Broadcasting House.

"Since then I've been squeezed out of BBC altogether and moved house after 20 plus years. Net result is I've got most of my main files - Trafigura (probably a cubic metre), nuclear weapons, vulture funds, Savile, bogus bomb detectors etc but I'm missing some stuff I was still actively working on in Sept-Dec 2012."

Obsessives

The archive space problem is most serious for journalists who worked in the pre-electronic age of hard copies on paper. The journalist who revealed the phone hacking scandal, Nick Davies is a self-confessed obsessive archiver:

"I have kept every single notebook since I started out on local papers 40 years ago. That is not because I think they have any practical use. They are full of shorthand and scribble on stories which are long past. I keep them because - for some odd psychological reason - I don't like throwing away personal things. They are stashed away in dark parts of the house where they cause no trouble." Davies adds: "I also have hundreds of files of information which may be more important - documents of one kind or another which were involved in the background of stories I've written. They might contain things which ought to be preserved. From time to time, they turn out to be useful."

I suspect that for some of us – and this maybe mainly a bloke thing – our documents are another narrative in the story of our lives, like large LP

collections and cuttings books, which prop up our psyche. But there is a wealth of material sitting in boxes in these journalists' archives. Over the years I have done a huge number of interviews with people with remarkable stories that are now dead. They include spies, military, criminals, politicians and much more of historical interest. I was reading a note recently from an interview with the Soviet head of the equivalent of RAF Strike Command during the Cold War. I have never seen another interview with him. It is also remarkable how the same people come up over and over sometimes with a decade or more gaps. Mark Thatcher was one, Brian Reader "the Diamond Wheezer" of the Hatton Garden robbery fame, another. Meirion Jones points to advantage of keeping rather than binning documents. "A simple example of use of keeping files is this: When Wonga Coup story broke (Mark Thatcher, Simon Mann Equatorial Guinea) I got hold of the contract for the coup and we ran that story and got pick up for it. Years later when Simon Mann released I was able to fish out the files and we got coverage all over again."

Although I don't really have space I have paid to keep it securely. I have shredded all those that I just could not see being useful in the future but it is still I have a lot. I have a large repository on major UK crime – want to know about the Baker Street robbery, Brinks Mat or Security Express robberies, I'm your man. I have an archive on Spies and another on Cold War Strangelovian goings on. Such space consuming obsessions do not go down well with partners. At various points my archives have taken over the basement, the shed, the garage more recently, a rented secure storage facility, rarely to my partner's appreciation. Andrew Fowler who has worked for ABC's Four Corners programme for many years told me: "On the question of what my other half thinks of 'those boxes' - that's exactly the phrase she uses and is possibly self-explanatory!"

"The old files are certainly useful," he hastens to add. "I have about 30 years of notebooks and assorted files stored in boxes at home under lock and key in a stone cellar. It's usually dry, except when the local storm drain gets blocked and water runs down the side of the house! Other sensitive documents I have stored elsewhere, in hopefully non-easily traceable places. This is the material I think it would be a good idea to digitise and to share with others through your journalists' central archive, though I would have to talk to others before this could be done."

Former Mirror Group, Channel 4 and BBC investigator Sue Bishop says; "I have boxes in my attic of old files, notebooks, cuttings and Newsnight and Watchdog films. The main times they have come in to use have been during the run up to the Goddard Enquiry (my old children's homes child abuse investigations) and a return to the Profumo Affair because I did a long filmed interview with Ivanovich the Russian spy - the only one in existence - for which the BBC has brilliantly lost the rushes."

Mark Hollingsworth was also able to help on the Blacklist campaign because he kept the archives which he used for his book 'Blacklist', published in 1988. "Some documents are almost impossible to digitalise e.g. an actual Blacklist of construction workers on A3 paper which was given to me by Paul Foot when I wrote 'Blacklist'"

Keeping archives does have its other more fiscal benefits. I have a set of photographs which were given to me in 1982 when I was investigating police corruption which include Brian Reader with his comrades in crime and families taken in exotic locations abroad when he was avoiding the attention of Scotland Yard who suspected him of various robberies. I'm also regularly contacted for interviews for real life crime documentaries. These have provided some useful extra income. You do get known to be a resource. Mark Hollingsworth says: "I have lost count of the times when newspapers ask me if I know anything about a businessman or politician from the 1980s and 1990s and I find something." One approach is to scan all the material so a house full of documents can be reduced to a large hard drive. Hollingsworth says: "The problem with scanning and digital archiving is that it is incredibly time-consuming and I just find it so much easier to pull out the filing cabinet draw!!

University archives

So how to get "those boxes" out of the house when it all gets too much? Some keep in the in storage warehouses but that is expensive as I have discovered. Former deputy editor of Panorama Andy Bell is one of number of journalists who have given sets of their documents to Universities. "The University of Northampton have taken all my papers related to crime and the extreme right. That was the stuff I thought worth keeping together. Most of the rest got binned." Tap in the name of Laurie Flynn, the former World in Action producer into a search engine and you can see he has handed his documents on the asbestos industry to the University of Strathclyde. <http://strathclyde.ica-atom.org/flynn-vincent-laurie-macpherson>

In terms of archive size the Duncan Campbell, the investigative journalist who first revealed the existence of GCHQ in 1976, takes the biscuit. He is currently working with his partner to log and box his archive of story documents collected since the 1970s. They are going to the Special Collections at the University of Edinburgh library. Duncan estimates the archive size as the equivalent of 60 filing cabinet drawers. So far they have dispatched some 40 archive boxes to Edinburgh but estimate they have a further 150-200 to go. What made Duncan hand his archive over? "The number of occasions I was referring back to the material was tiny – a rare event. But the number of times I was contacted out of the blue by researchers wanting material was several or so times a year." The University sent some archivists down on a scoping exercise and they spent several days going through the material. "They thought it was valuable material

and archivists have their own special knowledge of what is important”, says Campebl. He is pleased that the archive is going to a good home. “It is nice to be memorialised in this way,” he says.

Increasingly a lot of archive material comes in the form of emails and scans and though taking up much less space it can be hard to manage. Meirion Jones has some advice. “I also keep a hell of a lot on email and I had to try to copy across (v Labour intensive 100 hours +) from work to personal. I would recommend anyone working for large organisation sets up system to duplicate all emails into personal account as you go, in case you leave.”

A Central archive?

Several people I spoke to felt would be useful for a not-for-profit organisation that would archive professionally so they could be available to future researchers. Anyone who has visited the director of The Centre for Investigative Journalism (TCIJ) Gavin McFadyen’s home knows it is creaking under the strain of a library and files collected over the last five decades. This inspired him to scope a central archive project for investigative journalists and has been looking at options for a year or so. Gavin says it would be in the national interest to archive this material regardless of whether it is paper, tape or electronic. He says that the problem with archiving is that it can time consuming to weed material, make sure that personal information from sources or unproven information from inquiries is not released into the public domain. Scanning can be expensive. Therefore setting up a funded organisation to help journalists with this would provide for a very useful long term archive.

Nick Davies though fears this might have its problems “I don’t know about storing these files in an archive. I can see that that could possibly be genuinely useful for some future historian, but I’d be worried about handing over something which could disclose an off-the-record source or which could allow some evil bugger to start suing somebody. So I’d have to read every document before handing it over which would be a big job. Mind you, I’m retiring so it could be a project for the future.”

Meanwhile in basements, lofts, and storage facilities around the country, once hard won documents of the great stories of yesteryear will await their place in history.

Dr Paul Lashmar is head of Journalism at the University of Sussex and an investigative journalist who was on staff at *The Observer*, *World in Action* and the *Independent* newspapers.

