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Using digital technology to engage people with varying degrees of sight loss with archives and filmmaking during COVID-19

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Abstract

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached Europe in March 2020, the official archive for Northern Ireland, PRONI (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) was forced to close its doors and move all work online, including its outreach programmes. One of the people to benefit from the programme was a group with different degrees of sight loss from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). Ten people aged 20-60s took part in *Everyday is a School Day*, an eight-week filmmaking project which used Zoom and smartphone filmmaking to connect them with PRONI's archives and help them make short films about their experiences of education in 2021. A year later we brought the group back to PRONI for a second project, *Music Tales*, which helped them continue to develop filmmaking skills and to delve deeper into the archives and explore the role of music in their lives. In this article, we take the two projects as case studies and use a reflective methodology to analyse how Zoom technology and a participatory approach to filmmaking were used to enable the group to engage with archives and learn how to tell their stories through film.

1.   Introduction

When Covid-19 reached the island of Ireland in March 2020, museums, libraries and archives had to shut their doors and find other ways of engaging with the public. Outreach programmes, visits and learning services had to be adapted for digital delivery so that these places could continue to provide important services for people at home. Later when they began to re-open, organisations had to manage their spaces in new ways to ensure that people felt at ease (and safe from infection) when returning to shared spaces.

During the early days of the pandemic, organisations had to act quickly, with "those who were already most vulnerable due to existing social inequalities" finding themselves "most at risk to the social, physical and economic impacts of the pandemic" (Crooke at al., 2022: 8). Blind and partially-sighted people (BPS) were some of the worst affected when these cultural spaces had to move online or begin to re-open. For those who require assistance to go about their daily lives, taking a sighted person's arm, reading braille signs and touching shared surfaces such as door handles and handrails, could not simply be paused (Goggin and Ellis,

2002: 171). Furthermore, new physical barriers, the inability to touch objects and the difficulty in maintaining social distancing were some of the issues they also encountered when heritage institutions began to reopen (Cecilia, 2021: 2).

The pandemic also brought new possibilities to work, study, socialise and participate in cultural opportunities from home, helping those with adequate access to technology to overcome physical access barriers. While for many disabled people staying at home may be a default, the pandemic enabled the rest of the population to finally gain a sense of what a stay-at-home digitalised everyday life could look like. Previously, studies have highlighted the limited priority given to digital accessibility (*Ibid*: 5). However, in response to the pandemic, workplaces, educational, and cultural institutions promptly adjusted to health and safety protocols; resources such as 3D models, audio-descriptions and virtual and video tours became the "new normal" and were employed to provide "enriching, interactive and stimulating online experiences" (*Ibid*: 5).

Although virtual tours of museums and digital archives existed pre-Covid[1], the pandemic brought new levels of experimentation. Mia Ridge compiles a comprehensive list with some of these initiatives across the UK, ranging from interactive tours and 'deep zooms' to catalogue-style pages about objects (Ridge, 2020: n.p.). In Northern Ireland, the country's Museum Council had to move their successful Dementia Friendly Programme online and the project's partners, such as The Northern Ireland War Memorial, had to be mindful of the sensitivity of adapting such programming. As outreach officer Michael Fryer recalls, some participants had sight issues and, as a solution, the team created Covid-secure loan boxes which were sent to the home for participants to handle during the sessions. This, he says, "made a huge difference for people living with dementia because it brought in that multi-sensory element which has always been an important part of our reminiscence workshops" (Crooke et al., 2022: 11).

While interviewing BPS people for a research project on museum accessibility, Cecilia found that interviewees highlighted the positive aspects of being able to participate in cultural activities from their homes during the lockdown, but they also shared concerns related to physical access when spaces re-opened (Cecilia, 2021: 5). Digital inequality, thus, cannot be overlooked when assessing the impact of virtual engagement during the pandemic:

> Who can afford Internet access during job layoffs and who has the skills and support to take up new digital habits at a rapid pace, among other factors, may shape who is able to avoid some of the repercussions of the crisis. Even for those with sufficient access and skills, different habits of use (e.g., using the Internet for entertainment versus information seeking or social support) could mean some people benefit less from digital avenues to learn about the crisis, engage in telemedicine, and use online channels to give and receive support from their social network (Nguyen et al., 2021: 2).

In this article, we take two projects that we designed and delivered for the official archive for Northern Ireland, PRONI (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) and creative media hub the Nerve Centre as case studies to analyse how digital technology and participatory

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[1] See for instance: Europeana, the Library of Congress' Digital Collections, Internet Archive, and Google Arts and Culture (Manovich, 2017: 260).

filmmaking were used to enable a BPS group to engage with archives and learn how to tell their stories through film during the latter part of the pandemic (2021-2022).

As both projects took place within a professional context, rather than as part of a research project, we take a *reflection-on-action* approach as defined by David Schön: "thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome" (1983: 26). As we no longer have access to the evaluation forms the participants completed for the funders of the projects - due to GDPR policy – our reflections draw on two sources:

- Our journal notes which documented the relationship-building process, decision-making, issues and workarounds during both projects.
- Feedback provided by participants through blog posts and showcase videos, available through collabarchive.org and Nerve Centre's YouTube channel.

By taking this *posteriori* reflective approach, we seek to demonstrate how insights can arise when practitioners document and look back at their own practice and how these can provide other institutions with models to follow when designing similar projects to serve BPS communities. We start with a discussion on how (and why) archives have often been regarded as restricted to urban elites and "open to civil servants, curators and academics but largely closed off to members of the public" (Popple et al., 2020: 21). We then explore how the Covid-19 pandemic enabled PRONI to break physical access barriers and engage with a non-traditional audience, BPS people, in novel ways. We conclude with an analysis of the strengths, limitations and benefits of virtual and in-person engagement and share some lessons learned while delivering the two outreach projects.

2.   The evolving archive

Archives have been assembled as early as pre-ancient times by Egyptians, Assyrians, among others and throughout their long history they have served different purposes, going from "purely centers for storage and preservation to becoming the main repositories for the capture, preservation, reinterpretation, sharing, and (…) the instant memorialization of our everyday lives" (Giannachi, 2016: 76). If the 17th century brought theories around the management of archives, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the establishment of a network of national, local and specialist archives, the setting up of international standards for storage, processing and cataloguing, production of scholarly literature, and the creation of professional training and qualifications (Popple et al., 2020: 5).

Since the 1980s, the traditional view of archives as institutional and bureaucratic treasures responsible for storing and preserving official history is changing and giving way to an "archival multiverse" - a more fluid view that better reflects the diversity of the societies that create them (*Ibid*: 1). One of the drivers of this change is the springing up of community archives, *i.e.* archives established by (and within) communities themselves which allow "people to take control of their own histories and share their experiences, knowledge and expertise" (*Ibid*: 2).

We are also seeing the emergence of 'citizen archivists', a new form of user who is helping identify, digitise, and archive a nation's history through the Internet (Giannachi, 2016*:* 144). Crowdsourcing, social tagging, co-curation and co-creation are some of the ways that archives

are finding to better serve diverse audiences and, subsequently, enhance our understanding of history. As a result, these recent developments are making the professional archive community to rethink many of their own assumptions about how archives are created, preserved and made available. There is now a wealth of studies examining this 'community turn' closely (Ridge 2014; Grau et al., 2017; Caswell et al., 2018; Di Giovanni, 2018; Benoit and Eveleigh, 2019; Mukwevho and Ngoebe, 2019; Poole, 2020; Popple et al., 2020).

This fluid vision has transformed the way collective memories are captured and curated, and has reshaped our understanding of what archives are, how they function, and who works there. Whist the early twentieth century archive focused on collecting material from established institutions and landed estates and archivists followed strict criteria in relation to authenticity, integrity, reliability, usability and completeness, the archive of the twentieth first century is diverse (Stevens et al., 2010: 60-61). Archives are:

> a building, cardboard-box, photograph album, internet website, or discourse of interconnected ideas such as community heritage and shared memory; and it holds or contains documents, which can take the form of written texts, photographs, sound recordings, postcards, medical records, printed materials, material objects…and not just official records, nor necessarily things on paper either. (Moore et al., 2016: 1).

The digital age has also shaken up the archival world. Activities such as genealogy are generating a greater sense of involvement and belonging in society and reinforcing the importance of personal and community memory for archival collections. Digital catalogues are becoming more widespread, facilitating remote access to collections and increasing demand for new digital services. The digital age has also brought new challenges, particularly in relation to the preservation and curation of digital-born records (Giannachi, 2016; Grau et al., 2017; Popple et al., 2020).

Despite the benefits brought by the 'community turn' and the advancements in digital technology, many communities remain suspicious of mainstream archives, making collaboration and outreach not so simple. Ameena M. McConnell, from the Future Histories project, illustrate the issue well:

> black led organisations did not simply want to hand over material permanently, without knowing that there is a credible plan in place for its preservation, and access by the wider community, for fear of their histories being taken and placed in a dusty cupboard and neglected until mainstream cultural and institutional policy deems this history worthy of care and dissemination to the wider public (Stevens et al., 2010: 69).

Accessibility, thus, becomes central within this new archive discourse. In fact, as Gabriela Giannachi reminds us, archives have not always been the most accessible place and it was only after the First World War that most nations, except for France, started to see their archives become more accessible to the population (2016: 5). With the digitalisation of archival material continuing to grow since the 1990s, accessibility to important historical records is a pressing concern for the heritage sector. However, when it comes to audio-descriptions, **"the blind and partially sighted are still seen today as a niche audience, therefore pouring resources into access services for them is not always financially viable" (Di Giovanni, 2018: 157). Indeed, digitisation is not only costly, but also requires careful consideration in relation to workflows,

available technical and staff resources, quality control, metadata infrastructure, and copyright clearance (Riley-Reid 2015).

Despite the aforementioned challenges and legacy issues such as the one highlighted by McConnell, it is exciting (for practitioners like us) to see how archives have been in a constant process of contestation, construction and reconstruction. As this paper will demonstrate, turning archives into collaborative spaces is a great way of moving from being immovable storage and preservation spaces for the 'few' to becoming a space for the 'many' and a fertile ground for experimentation and collaboration. By doing so, we believe that archives will be more likely to widen representation, better reflect multiple voices and fill gaps within collections. We demonstrate now how the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) harnessed the power of digital technology and community collaboration to break physical access barriers and engage with BPS groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine the strengths, limitations and benefits of our projects and share some lessons for future practice.

3.   COVID-19 pandemic and PRONI

As a leading heritage institution, PRONI had to adapt fast to the closures brought by the pandemic in March 2020. Created under the Public Records Act NI (1923), it has a legislative responsibility to acquire, preserve and make available the records of the devolved administration of Northern Ireland. In addition, the governing legislation also allows PRONI to acquire collections from private individuals. The official archive for Northern Ireland currently has over 3.5 million historical records in its care, both digital and paper-based, more than a third of which have been deposited privately and are not official government records. PRONI's private collections include church records, local business records, landed estate records, records from clubs and societies and families and individuals. Private deposits can range in size from thousands of records to deposits of a single letter or photograph. Any individual or organisation can donate records that relate to the heritage of Northern Ireland.

Prior to the pandemic, PRONI had an annual talks and events programme, mostly held in person in its building in Belfast, covering a range of topics relating to the collections held there. Some of these would be live streamed to online audiences via its Facebook page, with a focus on reaching the international Irish diaspora. In addition, PRONI also engaged in outreach activities and had staff speaking at conferences or setting up stalls at cultural and heritage events, such as the *Balmoral Show* or *Back to Our Past*. PRONI also facilitated schools and group visits onsite, including one-off talks, guided tours and document displays. As a publicly funded organisation in a public building, accessibility is crucial at PRONI and the building, built in 2011, was done with accessibility at the forefront including ramps, automatic doors, braille signage and induction loops for hearing aids. However, accessing the building is just the first step, making the archives themselves accessible to everyone is a second and much more complex issue. PRONI had previously engaged with RNIB regarding public services and accessibility for those with visual impairments and sight loss. Some additions were made to the public search room on their recommendations, including accessible large keyboards and computers with enhanced software to make text larger. These additions have made accessing PRONI's digital and transcribed applications easier but there has always been much more to do to make the archival material more accessible.

From 2018 to 2022, PRONI got involved in two externally-funded projects, *Making the Future* and *CollabArchive*, which allowed for a more sustained, creative and participatory approach to community engagement and for reaching out to non-traditional audiences, such as young people, rural communities and BPS groups. We examine now two creative programmes designed and delivered by the authors under these projects: *Everyday is a School Day* (2021) and *Music Tales* (2022).

4.   Making the future: *Everyday is a School Day*

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached Europe in 2020, PRONI moved all work online, including its outreach programmes which were being delivered through the *Making the Future* project at that stage. *Making the Future* (2018-2021) was a €1.82m cultural project funded under the European Union's PEACE IV programme and led by creative media hub Nerve Centre in partnership with heritage institutions PRONI, National Museums NI and the Linen Hall Library. The aim was to enable people of diverse backgrounds and ages to come together to use archives and museum collections to explore the past, learn new skills and improve cross-community relations.

Making the Future was structured around nine strands, encompassing themes such as gender, identity and history, which were explored through exhibitions, events programme and outreach projects. Each organisation was assigned 2-3 strands and given a slice of the budget to hire staff and deliver them. PRONI had the two authors of this article working full time on the project – while Laura Aguiar was the Engagement Officer and Creative Producer, Lynsey Gillespie was the Archivist and Curator. Together, we developed and completed two exhibitions, an events series and 30 outreach programmes, with the latter benefiting over 600 people from diverse ages and backgrounds. Eight of those projects were delivered online from March 2020 to May 2021 using mostly the Zoom platform to engage with participants.

One of the people to benefit from *Making the Future* was a group with different degrees of sight loss from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). Ten people aged 20-60s took part in *Everyday is a School Day*, an eight-week filmmaking programme which used Zoom and mobile filmmaking to connect them with PRONI's archives and help them make short films about their experiences of education. Participants were recruited via an open call shared by group leader Olive Rodgers and together with Rodgers we decided the best frequency, format and activities for the group. From January to March 2021, participants took part in two one-hour Zoom sessions a week which included the below activities:

- *Virtual tour of PRONI:* 25 documents, including photographs, classroom records, and booklets were audio described and played during Gillespie's audio-visual introduction to PRONI's archives.
- *Research Workshop:* Participants learned what research resources are available online and how to access them.
- *'Your Archive' Workshop:* Participants were asked to select a 'home treasure' and a favourite song and share them with the group.
- *Filmmaking Workshops:* Three classes were delivered by blind YouTuber Conor Scott-Gardner who taught them how to film using their mobile devices.

- *One-to-one sessions:* These were offered to each participant to flesh out their ideas for the films, help them write their scripts and develop a filmmaking plan with adequate technical support.

Before embarking on this project, we had already delivered a few in-person filmmaking programmes and were familiar with using the Zoom app to conduct online workshops. However, teaching filmmaking online proved to be challenging, especially when working with a BPS group. Despite the long-standing notion of universality, films are not the most accessible medium for people with disabilities (Romero-Fresco and Dangerfield, 2020: 16). Therefore, while researching other projects for inspiration and best practices, we could only find projects by fully sighted filmmakers in which BPS participants would contribute mostly to scripting and interviews, but rarely to filming or editing. Fortunately, our research led us to Conor Scott-Gardner's YouTube channel, where we learned that it is possible for BPS people to make films, and we brought him on as a facilitator to teach and inspire them.

Since we were constrained by Zoom and the equipment people had access at home, we decided to offer them flexibility in terms of their level of technical involvement. Some chose to experiment with filming or taking photos using their mobile devices, while others preferred to focus on scripting and leave the technical aspects to us. Some participants attempted to record their own audio testimonies or interview family members via Zoom, while others requested us to handle the recording. Following Scott-Gardner's advice, only two participants attempted to edit their films and used software such as Kinemaster. The rest of the group preferred to leave the editing to us.

The result is a series of 10 short documentary films, ranging from 3 to 17 minutes in length, covering their diverse experiences of education, from graduating with a Law degree or learning about Belfast's history to learning through traveling and primary school memories. The films have been digitally archived and made accessible by PRONI and are also available via the Nerve Centre's YouTube channel:

- The Road to the Waterfront Hall (Mark McShane)
- The School with the Pool (Stephen Strong)
- Widening my Horizons (Liam Clarke)
- Happy Memories of my Life in Downpatrick (Jaqueline McCammon)
- The Wee School at Crane Hill: A Kitchen table interview (Patricia McKnight)
- The Day Candy Came to School (Carol Bennett)
- Harding Remembered (Olive Rodgers)
- The Influence of Art (Jim Tate)
- Ryan's Reviews of the Belfast Shipyards (Ryan McCartney)
- Days of Abbey's Past (Anthony McKeown)

5.   CollabArchive: *Music Tales*

A year later we approached the group for a second film project called *Music Tales*, to be delivered under another externally funded project, *CollabArchive* (2022). A much smaller project in terms of budget (£100k) and scale (one year), *CollabArchive* was a partnership between PRONI and the Nerve Centre and was funded by the National Lottery Heritage

Fund's Digital Skills for Heritage Initiative. *CollabArchive* sought to build on the community engagement work by *Making the Future* and create digital volunteering opportunities for non-traditional archive volunteers to make PRONI's collections more accessible to the public. Aguiar was the only staff employed full time on the project, but received plenty of support from Gillespie and colleagues at PRONI who helped her select archival material and make them accessible to participants of the five outreach projects developed for *CollabArchive*.

Over 60 people from diverse backgrounds and ages took part in the projects, gaining skills in filmmaking, podcasting, zine-making, research and transcription. *Music Tales* was the third *CollabArchive* project and was delivered to 10 RNIB participants – eight who took part in our previous project and two new recruits - during the Spring of 2022. We kept the focus on filmmaking but explored the theme of music history through the UTV Archives, the audio-visual collection for the first commercial television operator on the island of Ireland. With the pandemic restrictions loosening and covid infection numbers falling, we experimented with the hybrid workshop format and offered the following activities:

- *Tactile tour of the UTV Archives:* Participants went to PRONI for a behind the scenes tour, visiting the stores and the playback room where they learned more about how PRONI looks after audio-visual archives and make them accessible to the public.

- *Interviewing Workshops:* Participants took part in three Zoom workshops with Aguiar where they learned about different interviewing techniques.

- *Filming Day:* They returned to PRONI for a day to film interviews with each other. The filming was facilitated by professional filmmakers Camilla Meegan and Kieran Kelly (DNK Media Productions) who also taught the participants how to use professional equipment and set up for an interview. Meegan and Kelly then edited the videos.

By taking a hybrid approach to outreach engagement, *Music Tales* enabled the group to continue to further develop their filmmaking skills. While in the first programme we took a flexible approach to documentary-making which allowed participants to decide the length and narrative format for their films, this time we decided to focus on a particular style: *Question Bridge*. This method started with artist Chris Johnson in 1996 when he used a video camera and question and answer exchanges to get African Americans from San Diego to talk about their beliefs and values (Question Bridge, n.p). A decade later, artist Hank Willis Thomas turned this interviewing method into *Question Bridge,* a multimedia project focused on Black males, which included a website, educational resources, a video installation, and a digital archive:

> It's a method used by those who want to create honest expression and (…) works like this: first, one person asks a question looking into camera, as if they are talking directly to another person. Later, another person responds by talking directly into a camera (Question Bridge, n.p).

Inspired by the simplicity (and effectiveness) of the method, we asked our participants to come up with one question about music for each other and helped them come up with a substantial answer for the question. As a result, the project captured 10 short videos, ranging from 1.5 to 5 minutes, which offer a fascinating insight into music in the participants' lives, including:

- Una O'Toole talks about music in her home while growing up abroad.

- Stephen Strong and Doris Finley share their most memorable concerts.

- Olive Rodgers talks about sing-alongs in the cinema.

- Patricia McKnight and Carol Bennett recall the roles of Bruce Springsteen and Abba in their family lives, respectively.

- Liam Clarke explains how his music taste has evolved over the years.

- Stephanie Coyle recalls her first album.

- Mark McShane and Anthony McKeown explain what music mean to them.

Upon completion, the films were screened at the art deco Strand Cinema and the participants were offered the opportunity to volunteer with PRONI[2]. Three of them went on to take part in a transcription project to help enhance access to audio-visual resources. They received online training in audio transcription and closed-captioning and spent three months transcribing (remotely and in-person) content for PRONI's YouTube channel and catalogue. *Music Tales*, thus, enabled the participants to delve much deeper into the world of archives than *Every Day is a School Day* did.

6.   Lessons

The Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented and organisations such as PRONI had to act fast. With the dust now settled we have the opportunity to "gather what we have learned about the sector and how we can support all of our workforce who have a chronic illness, disabilities (hidden and visible) and changing needs in relation to service provision" (Atkinson, 2020: n.p.). *Everyday is a School Day* and *Music Tales* were about reaching out to traditionally marginalised audiences and effectively communicate that PRONI is a place for them - where they can feel welcome, represented, included, and safe. As many have noted, cultural and heritage organisations have the social responsibility to look and act beyond this devastating crisis and must play a central role in rebuilding lives and communities (Cecilia, 2021; Crooke et al., 2022). We conclude with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of both in-person and virtual engagement when working with BPS groups and filmmaking and share lessons for future work.

6.1.   Flexibility

As disabled artist Carolyn Lazard notes, "conversations about disability often rely on the idea of accessibility as a set of particular, pre-set interventions, but accessibility requires great flexibility" (Romero-Fresco and Dangerfield, 2022: 28). This is crucial as there are a range of visual impairments and only a small proportion of people with sight loss have no sight at all (Cock et al., 2018: 25). Therefore, when delivering both projects, it was important to co-design the projects with RNIB group leader Olive Rodgers and also to make some decisions with participants as we went along.

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[2] The films have been digitally archived and are available via PRONI's e-catalogue and the CollabArchive's website: collabarchive.org.

For *Everyday is a School Day*, we decided together the level of technical engagement they desired, ranging from scripting only to involvement in filming and editing. Although film is a highly visual medium, it was crucial to emphasise from the outset that filmmaking is about having a vision and not about sight *per se*. In other words, they could embrace the role of filmmakers without technical expertise. This approach not only gave them confidence to participate in the project but also enabled them to concentrate on the aspects they found most enjoyable. While facilitating the Zoom sessions, we quickly noticed that only two participants were interested in learning technical skills while the vast majority were more interested in the storytelling side of filmmaking. Therefore, instead of dedicating a whole session to editing, the facilitator Scott-Gardner only gave them a glimpse of it, and we used the one-to-one sessions to offer more tailored technical filmmaking support.

With this in mind, we decided to focus on storytelling and interviewing, rather than filming or editing, during *Music Tales* but offered them the opportunity to build technical skills when they went on to volunteer in the transcription project. They were asked to fill out a form in which they had to state what device they were most comfortable with (computer, tablet or phone), preference for in-person or remote work, and accessibility needs (e.g. use of screen reader). There was also a one-to-one follow-up call which helped us put a volunteer plan in place that met their needs. While some participants felt confident to work entirely remotely and use their screen reader software to support their work, others preferred to do the work in-person in PRONI first to build technical confidence and then work remotely from home.

Such careful attention to individual needs, abilities and interests illustrates the sensitive ethos of both projects and reinforces the importance of being flexible, particularly when working with disabled groups. As Gerard Goggin and Katie Ellis remind us, these groups already are at a disadvantage due to "disabling environments, the multiple cross-categories intersectionalities of disability, and the materialities of impairments", and therefore they "must be compensated for with additional supports, resources and availability of alternative ways of doing things" (2020: 169). The two projects, thus, highlight how a 'one-size-fits-all' approach simply does not work. Flexibility is paramount.

6.2.   Going Virtual

One of the silver linings of the pandemic has been the possibility of bringing archival and museum collections straight to the comfort of people's living rooms. As mentioned earlier, resources such as 3D models, virtual gallery tools, video tours and online participatory activities were some of the strategies adopted by heritage and art institutions while being closed (Ridge, 2020; Atkinson, 2020; Crooke et al., 2022).

We took a similar approach and offered a virtual 'tour' of PRONI in the form of a PowerPoint presentation with audio-described records. However, our efforts were not novel by any means. As Cecilia notes, many of the solutions that have been employed during the pandemic, such as audio-descriptions, "are the very same solutions that disabled people have advocated for years" and although audio-descriptions "have been used by museums, they do so for a very limited number of objects" (Cecilia, 2021: 6). Nevertheless, the effort to audio-describe a selection of education records was welcomed by participants.

As mentioned earlier, it is well known that potential users can regard public archives with scepticism and even fear. Allowing them to begin engagement in the place where they feel most comfortable – their own home – and taking the records 'straight' to their living rooms is

thus key to reaching people who may otherwise be non-engagers for different reasons (health, geographical, or financial) (Mukwevho and Ngoepe, 2019; Cecilia, 2021; Crooke et al., 2022). When located within cities, cultural and heritage institutions tend to be urban-centric and digital platforms such as social media and Zoom are helping them break not only geographic barriers, but also the aforementioned monolithic view of archives as restricted or elite spaces. Failing this, Jonathan Mukwevho and Mpho Ngoepe note, "the public archives will remain behind other public institutions and thus risk their existence and relevance" (2019: 383).

Indeed, through *Making the Future* and *CollabArchive*, PRONI was able to engage with people who would not be considered their traditional users, including disabled groups, ethnic minority groups and rural people. Our experience also shows that going virtual can offer great value for money and time efficiency for all involved: for institutions, travel, catering and staff costs are considerably reduced or eliminated and there is a wider pool of facilitators to work with. For participants, the are no costs involved, no commuting required and they can easily fit the project around other commitments. It was great to see people from all over the country, miles away from each other, coming together virtually to share their life stories and engage with PRONI's archives.

Whilst various studies have captured the benefits of going virtual, particularly as a way of overcoming physical access barriers, online engagement also has limitations (Schur et al., 2020; Arlow, 2022; Hirst and Foster, 2021; Jones-Axtell, 2022). Firstly, some methodologies of engagement may not work remotely for the simple reason that "part of the appeal and success of museum or heritage community projects is bringing them out of their homes, into new shared spaces" (Crooke et al., 2022: 13). Indeed, after bringing the group for an in-person visit of the UTV archives during the *CollabArchive* project, we realised that digital tours can never replace the tactile experience of holding an 1891 diary in your hands or the smell of an old film reel. These multi-sensory forms of engagement are, and always will be, regarded as the main sources to access and experience museum objects and archives.

Secondly, it is important to take time to create a safe space for people to engage with each other. During our first Zoom sessions for both projects, we shared guidelines and set some rules, such as do not share anything outside of Zoom without consent, use respectful language, and take into consideration that people will have different viewpoints, and so forth. Thirdly, the issue of digital confidence cannot be overlooked. Although the Covid-19 pandemic enabled people, particularly those of older generations and with different disabilities, to become regular users of platforms such as Zoom, one cannot assume that everyone will feel equally capable of managing the technology. As digital inequality scholars have pointed out, to fully benefit from virtual communication and digital media use, people need to possess adequate skills, and those who are less digitally literate may struggle to adopt new methods and technology (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Through our projects, we quickly realised how virtual engagement can end up becoming isolating if people feel they cannot keep up. Indeed, on several occasions, we had to offer follow-up calls to the less digitally confident participants to reassure them that technology should be an aid, not a barrier, to their engagement with filmmaking or volunteering.

Lastly, the issue of access to equipment and materials is important to consider as not everyone will have access to suitable equipment, reliable internet connections, or the financial means to acquire the necessary materials for the project. These constraints pose challenges when delivering an online filmmaking programme, regardless of the varying degrees of sight loss

among participants. After *Everyday is a School Day*, we felt that our participants could have gained a deeper understanding of filmmaking techniques if the workshops had been conducted in person. This would have allowed us to better tailor the tasks to accommodate each participant's degree of sight loss and technological abilities and to give them access to professional equipment and software. While the strength of their films undoubtedly lies in the stories they shared, having control of the technology used in the project would have enabled us to create more technically and aesthetically polished films, as we did for *Music Tales*.

Therefore, the lessons learned in the first project led us to maximising the power of virtual and in-person engagement for *Music Tales*. While the online sessions focused on scripting – something that did not depend on technology or technical skills - the in-person session focused on filming which allowed us to use professional equipment and end up with high quality results. Another contributing factor was keeping the participants' filmmaking task simple by using the *Question Bridge* method. It certainly proved to be the right choice particularly when time to spend on the project was so limited. *Music Tales* taught us not to underestimate the power that a single question has in generating a compelling and engaging story.

6.3. The participatory approach

As discussed earlier, the 'community turn' has brought participatory practices to the archival world, particularly when filling documentary gaps. While community archives are leading on this by gathering, preserving and making material publicly accessible, mainstream archives are slowly catching up, with crowdsourcing - *i.e.* when users help archivists tag geographical locations and enhance descriptions, transcribe records, and even digitise them - being the preferred method (Ridge, 2014; Benoit and Eveleigh, 2019; Poole, 2020).

The approach of co-creating an archival record with users, which we adopted for both projects, appears to be less common in practice. The participatory nature of our approach began during the design phase, when we first approached the group leader, Olive Rodgers, to explore the possibility of delivering a creative project for RNIB members. Our aim was to address gaps within PRONI's collections concerning BPS communities and we presented Rodgers with various options, ranging from crafts to oral history projects, but she opted for filmmaking as it was an unexplored avenue for them. In both projects, we structured each workshop session to give participants control over their own stories, from learning how to write a documentary script to how to interview people. This approach ensured that they understood from the outset that they would have complete agency over how their stories were going to be told and, subsequently, preserved and made accessible for future generations. This can be a helpful way of building trust, particularly when working with marginalised groups who feel underrepresented by archives.

The outcomes from both projects demonstrate the potential of digital technologies, such as Zoom and smartphone cameras, to open up new avenues for archives. These technologies offer opportunities to address digital exclusion and explore blended methods of engaging with non-traditional archive users. Through these projects, PRONI gained insights into various strategies for enhancing the accessibility of virtual and in-person tours of their archives, along with their collections, for BPS users. Additionally, PRONI learned how filmmaking can be used as a creative tool to engage new audiences and bring new narratives into their collections. When users with sight loss have a say in the design, creation, revision and consumption of access services, the benefits of this 'participatory accessibility' are endless:

as a shared experience, it implies learning from each other, regardless of sensory or age-related limitations. Moreover, it involves shared awareness of the difficulties that lie in the creation and provision of accessibility and, at the same time, it stimulates joint efforts in advocating for it. Indeed, participatory accessibility *is* a joint effort both in the creation and in the dissemination of the inclusive experience, thus also bypassing potential problems of mistrust and lack of commitment on the part of any end user (Di Giovanni, 2018: 158).

We hope to have demonstrated that when digital technology is harnessed and used in a participatory way, it can play a key role in inclusive archival practice, because it can "encourage the creation of more porous archives where the boundaries between creator, participant and user break down and there are opportunities to reflect and comment on the archive" (Popple et al., 2020: 11).

7.   Conclusion

After 4.5 years of experimentation with in-person, online, and hybrid formats, as well as participatory storytelling, PRONI has learned numerous lessons for the future. The enhanced accessibility afforded by online activities is evident and since the pandemic PRONI has adopted a hybrid approach and have been live-streaming several in-person events. Facilitating remote participation for international speakers and providing online access for viewers worldwide have proved to be essential components for ensuring continued successful engagement.

While in-person sessions are necessary for building personal connections and relationships, our experience has shown that some people are more comfortable taking their first steps online. It is, thus, important to bear in mind that with the reopening of heritage and art institutions, not all disabled and chronically ill visitors will be able to physically attend. Such places must maintain the momentum gained during years of lockdown and "foster remote engagement and participation, in order to truly offer inclusive experiences" (Cecilia, 2021: 6).

Considering that getting sceptical or intimidated people through the door is sometimes the biggest challenge for an archive, allowing them to begin engagement in the place they feel most comfortable is key to reaching those audiences that do not traditionally engage with archives. Therefore, we believe in the power of online engagement as a tool for breaking down those initial barriers and encouraging more of the community of Northern Ireland to step through the door and engage with their archival heritage in a meaningful and sustained way.

Our projects during the pandemic have demonstrated that remote participation can be effective and cost-effective in many cases. However, as our reflective analysis has shown, there are strengths and limitations to both in-person and virtual formats, especially when working with BPS groups. While *Everyday is a School Day* helped participants build confidence and introduced them to filmmaking in a DIY participatory way, the learning outcomes (and the technical quality of the films) were compromised due to limited access to equipment and software. By adopting a hybrid approach for *Music Tales*, on the other hand, we were able to leverage the accessibility and affordability aspects of virtual engagement while utilising professional equipment and maintain aesthetic and technical control over the final videos. Our case studies highlight the various levels of participatory work that archives can adopt, from

going completely DIY filmmaking to focusing solely on one aspect, such as scripting or interviewing, and the pros and cons of each approach.

The current interrogations and reshaping of engagement with the public archive are an attractive prospect, but they come with their own challenges. Current digital optimism and working practices are opening many much-needed doors, particularly in relation to accessibility and inclusivity. However, while doing so, these must be grounded on principles of inclusion, participation, discovery and creativity without losing sight of archives' multi-sensorial powers. This article has demonstrated how official archives can do what community archives have been doing for years and how participatory frameworks and digital technology can bring mutual benefits to all parties involved. Whilst PRONI was able to reflect on their archival practice, fill gaps in their collections and help diversify the music and education history held in their archives, participants, in turn, saw their stories acquire greater public visibility and a more secure future. The confidence-building that comes with this cannot be underestimated. As put by Olive Rodgers, RNIB group leader: "They are doing stuff that they never ever thought that they would do in their life time (…) trying to get people outside who maybe have lost their confidence who lost their sight and tried to get outside again to do things that the rest of us take for granted" (CollabArchive, 2022: n.p.).

Keywords

Participatory filmmaking, Archives, Covid-19, Digital literacy

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