# Collecting Hate – The Ethics of Archiving and Researching on the Radical and Far Right

## Introduction

As a research centre focused on the far right and anti-fascism, the Searchlight Archive at the University of Northampton has increasingly come up against questions of the ethics involved in collecting and researching extremist material. At the inaugural Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) conference in 2019, the Searchlight Archive panel was asked a number of questions about the ethics of our research, of our collection and how we make use of that collection to educate. During 2020, we have given talks on such topics to PhD researchers, and consulted on the ethics applications of researchers. But, really, what are the ethical considerations at play in this field? And what can we do to mitigate these?

At the outset, it is important to clarify two things. Firstly, that I do not claim infallibility on these matters: this is an area from which we are all still learning, and this article should hopefully be considered simply as a small contribution to understanding best practice. We are always learning and will continue to evolve as our collections do, and it is important to recognise that there are others who have been working and researching in this area for longer than myself. Also, ethics involve a degree of the personal within them. There will always be calls that can go one way or another. In that, please understand some of the ethical decisions within this reflect the decisions that I, and the teams I have worked with, were comfortable with. This is not to say others are wrong or unethical for making different choices – but simply to state that these are those taken by myself and others working with the Archive.

## Archival Concerns

Obviously one of the most pressing concerns for us in the archive are the ethics around collecting this material. In many ways we are lucky, in that we sidestep one of the highest risk parts of this work as we do not collect material directly. Instead our material comes from depositors who have themselves collected this material. Yet still, even before we consider giving anyone access to this material, ethical concerns arise as the material that is being held often has seen its creators arrested and charged under racial hatred laws within their countries. Some material also comes from terror groups, and this can at times need to be sealed – while terrorist material may be available online, that does not justify the Archive making that available to users, though a copy will be preserved with the Archive.

As was highlighted at the 2019 CARR conference, as far as we are aware there exists no defence or exception within the law for archival holding of this material for research purposes – and in fact recent changes to the law around extreme material online make the act of downloading rather than distribution to be criminal.[1] In this we are reliant upon a public interest defence alone should there be a decision to take issue with the holdings. It is for these reasons that when archive users are taking copies of material, such as photocopies or digital images, we recommend that they destroy those copies once their research has been completed.

There are two more mundane, but no less important, parts of archiving that we should consider when discussing the ethics of far-right research. The first is copyright – being a modern archive much of the material that we hold is still within copyright. For normal archive use this of course is not a problem, there are copyright licenses that cover its use for private use and research, though the limits this brings can be frustrating for researchers (ourselves included!). Where it begins to become truly problematic is when we enter commercial use and licensing. While there are some situations where we are willing to contact organisations about material that we hold that is under their copyright – such as Searchlight's own material, or material from the Institute of Race Relations – our policy is that we will not engage with far right groups to help secure licensing rights for material. This stems from a position of both not wishing to place archive staff in a position of having to contact the far right, but also that this could be seen as directly facilitating funding of the far right. We remain happy to help others, where we can, identify copyright owners – but that is where we draw our line. The second important part in regard to archiving far-right material is control of access and contact. When we opened the Archive, we had a number of concerns around whether the far right would take an interest – we did in fact get referenced on Stormfront. Given this, and the other concerns around the material in the Archive, a small access form was put in place for researchers to fill in before access could be granted so their credentials could be established. We have so far not refused anyone access, but we have at times had to place certain limitations or make our own preparations to ensure the safety of the collection and staff. Of course, we have received contact from the far right – all of this is collected and sits in its own archive box, stored in case it is ever needed, but never responded to as it is not contact we wish to encourage, and is not necessary or desired for our work.

## Presenting Research

The second area that needs to be considered is in our role as researchers and in our outreach in presenting material from the archive, be that in conferences, education, outreach, or social media. This has become an increasing part of what the archive is doing now that it is established: sharing the material that we have and the research that has come out of the archive. While all the previous considerations remain relevant, the public presentation of material introduces new concerns that we have to bear in mind if we wish to behave as ethical researchers. These fall broadly into two

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[1] Dearden, Lizzie, 'New Law Where Clicking on Terrorist Propaganda Once Could Mean 15 Years in Prison Comes into Force', *Independent*, April 12, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/terrorist-propaganda-law-thought-crime-click-link-online-prison-a8866061.html

areas, the first being the suitability of the material chosen and, secondly, the context in which it is presented.


## Suitability of Material

Suitability of material may seem like an easy question at first glance. Each of us will often believe that we know where the boundary of acceptability is and that people will be prepared for what our material may contain. It can become more complicated, however. On the one hand, as an archive we must consider what is the suitability of the material from an archiving perspective – we have a duty to our donor and to future generations to act as responsible guardians for this material. This means that where physical material is going out of the archive, it either needs accompanying by myself as archivist or we need to have duplicates of the item within the archive. Where we are using these archive duplicates we can allow the material to enter the classroom under the care of an educator, after a short briefing on document handling.

These duplicates are not simply the second copy, as we may well need two copies in the archive in case one becomes damaged: there are also third and further copies of items. They cannot have any notes or other unique markings of an archival value on them, and they will be the lower quality copies that we hold of each item – the best and second best of each item held back for the main archive collection. These will also then need to be selected to consider the audience, both the age and educational level of the audience, but also the framing that is around it. When selecting material it is important that we consider what the group may know about the context that the material comes from, such as the broader radical right or race relations, as we want our material to help embed learning not to become a trauma point that blocks engagement with their course. To give an example, in a course on far-right extremism there will have been a lot more framing that might allow engagement with more extreme material than if the material were going into, for example, an English Literature class to give context to study of extreme themes such as authoritarian dystopias.

This brings us to the actual material and the images and text within it, and how offensive this material is. Rather obviously we try to include a trigger warning at the start of all of our presentations where images will be used, but this should not give any presenter *carte blanche* to simply expose their audience to whatever they wish with no regard to whether the offensiveness of the material is justified by the educational or research outcomes. Not only can offense hurt, but the shock can act as a barrier rather than an enhancer to learning. Of course, this is largely a judgement call for the individual constructing the presentation, to try to find a balance between the offensiveness of the material and the illustrative qualities. One step we have introduced however is that all images are to be selected at least one day before finalisation of a presentation. This is because after a day looking at images of hate, it is easy for one's internal perception of extremism to have become skewed – what is extreme to a member of the general public attending a talk may not be what is extreme to someone after a day immersed in international Nazi content. Returning to the matter fresh has, more than once, allowed us to realise where perhaps material is too extreme and replace it with more suitable material.

## Controlling the Context

The context in which the material is presented means a consideration of both the audience and also how it might be used. Where material is used outside of the archive, we try to take great pains to keep control of the original files. This is because we are very much aware that large parts of the material we look after in the archive was designed to radicalise people into hate, and perhaps even violence. While we always present it with context that denatures it, if it were to be stripped of that context then it returns from its neutralised state as a historical source back to an instrument of radicalising hate.

Where we present material, we always try to include contextualising text on the same slide or poster. Someone taking an image of a PowerPoint slide, for example, could share that and the material would then be released, but not separate to its contextual information and not in high enough quality for it to be separated and used again. Where we are using files that could be ripped away from context, such as social media, we try to ensure it is the minimal amount and shared either at low quality, or with the article text blanked just leaving the headline, or both. It is important in researching thar we take these groups seriously and treat their material seriously, and this includes recognising its original intent and not allowing ourselves to unwittingly become a vector for its transmission.

## Protecting the Next Generation

In researching on extreme groups researchers may well receive unsolicited contact from such groups or figures within them. As mentioned, we have pursued a policy where all contact is recorded, and a log kept of this. We have had incidents where mail has come to researchers at the University from the radical and far right, and obviously this is a concern, but our institutional addresses are matters of public record. It is something that needs to be considered, namely how we support and prepare researchers for this kind of contact, which can obviously be upsetting and shocking. What steps can we take when organising research events as a discipline to control access to attendance, and are those appropriate and balanced? For example, soon after their first event sharing their research, one research student received material – specifically a far-right video catalogue - to their home address, an address which was not published. We were able to identify how we suspected they had obtained the address, but there was little we could do beyond logging the contact in case future contact occurs.

There is a further need for engagement from our field with institutional ethics boards to help draw up specific guidelines for some of the unique challenges faced that may stretch the expertise of existing ethics groups, for example in navigating the use of remote browsers or other tools to ensure students are protected as best we can from prosecution relating to the downloading of terrorist material. It is also important to counsel students and researchers in general about the impacts of accessing material on the Dark Web, which uses distributed hosting systems and raises concerns

over the hosting of extreme or illegal content unconsciously on researcher or University hardware, and for which existing institutional IT policies are often ill suited.

The final ethical point I would like to make concerns the wellbeing of researchers. As recent studies have shown, pressures within graduate research can be intense – with 1 in 2 showing indicators of mental distress and 1 in 3 rising to a diagnosable threshold, a rate much higher than at other levels of education.[2] Working with extreme or distressing material will only add to this, and material that is often isolating – at times it is also difficult to discuss the radical right with friends and families, as it might be perceived as a sensitive subject. Researchers, especially in this area, need to look for peer support – something we have been trialling within our institution using our video meeting software since the recent COVID shutdown. It also means we need to develop better systems to pick up on developing mental health concerns among our researchers.

## Conclusion

This piece highlights that often our approach to ethics vis-à-vis collecting and researching the extreme right is often reactive to the situations and projects that arise rather than proactive. This means that, as a discipline, we need to share our experiences and best practice in forums such as CARR. As we encourage deeper engagement with - and further collection of - radical and far-right material, it is important that we also understand and become pro-active about the ethical risks such engagement can create. The Searchlight Archive is committed to continue to work to research and collect in ethical ways that are researcher-focused, and to share our successes (and our failures) with the wider research community.

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[2] Levecque, Katia, et al, 'Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students', *Research Policy*, vol. 46, iss. 4 (May 2017), pp. 868-879