Collecting Covid-19: An RLUK Report on contemporary collecting

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COLLECTING COVID-19: AN RLUK REPORT ON CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

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RLUK Research Libraries UK
In the past few months, Covid-19 has been a disruptive force impacting societies and their economies globally. The crisis has undoubtedly affected higher education and cultural heritage institutions which, within a short timeframe, had to close their physical buildings and operate mostly in the digital environment. However, despite the shift in working routines and practices and the challenges associated with this, the important role that institutions, such as research libraries, and their services have in society soon became apparent. Through organising a variety of campaigns and initiatives - many of them based on institutional collections (e.g. see Kamposiori, 2020) - research libraries were able to swiftly respond to the needs of their communities and support them during a difficult time.

Collecting contemporary material related to the Covid-19 crisis has been also deemed by many as a way to support their institutional - staff, academics and students - and broader communities in the long term. Documenting institutional responses to the pandemic as well as the experiences of different groups in society can prove useful for research, teaching, and other activities that can encourage communities to critically reflect on what happened and, most importantly, produce lessons learned for the future.

Thus, several projects have recently sprung up, especially in the US and across Europe, aiming to document the current crisis and collect relevant material (e.g. see Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg 2020). These are often led by higher education or cultural heritage institutions or constitute collaborative endeavours between cultural organisations and academics or other community groups. Responding to its members’ needs, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) developed a programme of activity, ‘Capturing Covid-19’, which aims to understand the impact of the pandemic on its member institutions.1 As part of the programme, a short survey was also launched in May 2020 to investigate RLUK institutions’ plans to collect material related to the Covid-19 crisis.

This report presents the results of the survey which are complemented by data gathered from online and social media research conducted by the RLUK Executive to identify the launch of relevant projects and initiatives led by RLUK institutions on contemporary collecting. These results will hopefully lead to discussions around contemporary collecting practices in research libraries and can be used as the basis to develop further work in areas of interest and importance for RLUK, its members, and stakeholders.

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1 For more information on the RLUK response to the Covid-19 crisis see: https://www.rluk.ac.uk/rluks-response-to-covid-19/.
RESEARCH LIBRARY COLLECTIONS AND COVID-19

The Research Libraries UK (RLUK) survey on collecting Covid-19 was launched in May 2020 and was circulated to the RLUK Special Collections Leadership Network (SCLN) for completion. The aim was to gather information about member initiatives to collect material related to the Covid-19 crisis and, thus, RLUK institutions had to answer questions on the below issues:

• Their plans to collect in the short term material related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the motivation behind these plans.
• The nature of the material, including types and formats, they were collecting or planning to collect.
• The envisaged use of the collected material.

As seen in Table 1, fourteen research libraries took part in the survey. The information provided through the survey was complemented by data gathered through online and social media research; this was conducted mainly on Twitter institutional accounts, including accounts sharing updates on special and other university collections, and the library or university websites. The analysis of the data is presented in the following sections.

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<th>Participating Institutions</th>
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<td>University of Leeds Library</td>
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Table 1 Participating RLUK Institutions
COLLECTING COVID-19: PLANS AND MOTIVATION

According to our results (Fig. 1), the majority of RLUK institutions participating in the survey have either started collecting material related to the Covid-19 pandemic or are planning to do so in the short term.

If we add the results of our research on Twitter and institutional websites, the number of institutions collecting relevant material is higher than the one ensuing from the survey, as they take into account information shared by research libraries that did not complete the survey. Yet, it should be noted that, as many initiatives are taking place internally and are not announced online (see below), they can be difficult to identify through online and social media research; thus, the number of institutions engaged in contemporary collecting related to Covid-19 can be even greater.

Generally speaking, our survey and online and social media research results showed that those research libraries which have launched campaigns and other initiatives to collect material related to the Covid-19 crisis are mainly interested in gathering information about institutional responses to the pandemic and/or the experiences of different groups in their communities. Some reported gathering material produced by other organisations as well. These campaigns and initiatives were either public, especially when looking for community contributions, or internal, such as when collecting relevant material from staff and students. The responses provided in the survey by libraries which have not started collecting yet but are planning to do so revealed similar intentions in terms of the categories of material they are interested in collecting.

Although many of the campaigns and other projects reported in the survey were led by research libraries, some institutions also chose to participate in collaborative initiatives with other national or local organisations and communities. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that our online and social media research revealed a number of campaigns and other initiatives to collect Covid-19 material that seem to be led by different teams (e.g. academic or other professional) in universities outside the library; even though libraries may not appear to be the leading units in these cases, it is very possible that many of these collections will be submitted to the library for safekeeping when the projects are concluded.

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2 See the Appendix for examples of initiatives from RLUK institutions participating in the survey and beyond.
3 See the Appendix for examples of collaborative initiatives.
4 See the Appendix for relevant examples.
Fig. 2, which is based on survey responses around the motivation behind engaging or planning to engage in contemporary collecting activities related to the Covid-19 pandemic, confirms our results presented above on the areas of interest to research libraries. Hence, the main motivation behind collecting Covid-19 material for the majority of institutions is to capture institutional responses to the crisis and document the experiences of their institutional (student body, academics, research outputs) and local/ regional communities. Some of the libraries completing the survey were also motivated to collect material related to the national and international response to the pandemic, while the responses to the option ‘other’ were further clarifying some of the other choices made under this question or further explaining why it was important for some institutions to collect this material.

In fact, some additional reasons why research libraries participating in this study wanted to collect material related to the Covid-19 crisis included: to inform future institutional planning; to ensure marginalised voices are represented in collections; to support future research and teaching; for community building reasons; to facilitate the development of collaborations; because doing so matched the role and mission of the institution; and because this material fell within the institutional collection remit, matched the interests of the research community, and could raise the profile of the institution. As it will become apparent in the next section, the motivation and reasons for developing collections around Covid-19 are closely linked to the intended use of this material on which more information will be provided.

BUILDING COVID-19 COLLECTIONS: TYPES OF MATERIAL AND ENVISAGED USE

According to Fig. 3, all survey respondents reported gathering paper and ephemera associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the majority was collecting institutional correspondence and plans related to the crisis as well as various types of born-digital material. For eight libraries, part of the collected born-digital material included social media feeds (e.g. Twitter content under specific hashtags), while one participant mentioned also collecting websites. One institution reported collecting photographs, zines, artworks, audio, and video on top of other material.
Beyond the information provided in Fig. 2, though, the qualitative answers submitted by survey participants shed further light into the types and formats of Covid-19 materials collected or planned for collection by RLUK research libraries. These confirm that libraries gather both digital and physical material of various types that document institutional responses, decision-making and business-continuity plans as well as capture the experience of specific institutional and other community groups, such as essential workers and underrepresented groups. More specifically, and in addition to those mentioned already, these can include creative responses such as posters, short videos and films, and poetry scrapbooks; oral histories; various types of digital communications related to processes, procedures and guidance to support the transition to working, teaching and learning from home during the lockdown; university records and online material (e.g. from events); journal, diaries and reflections (e.g. from students); photographs of staff working from home and other material sent by volunteers; newspapers, official publications, and other written content; and material around Covid-19 published by external bodies (one institution collected screenshots of the RLUK social media posts).

Regarding the intended use of this material, the majority of RLUK institutions participating in the survey will be interested in developing collaborations based on their Covid-19 collections (Fig. 4), with some having already started to collaborate with others. More specifically, some of the types of collaborations currently being formed or considered for the immediate future are between RLUK institutions and other organisations, such as local authority archives and archive councils, museums and other cultural institutions (e.g. theatres) holding collections that complement those held by RLUK libraries, as well as the creative industry with the aim of producing work that can enrich institutional collections. One participant mentioned that they will be using this material to form partnerships with businesses and, in particular, Preservica.
Moreover, some of the survey respondents were planning to use the collected material to form partnerships with other higher education and affiliate institutions (e.g. local hospitals) with which they have been traditionally collaborating. Several institutions will be also engaging in some form of collaboration with their local communities (also mentioned below). According to one participant, engaging in partnerships with their local communities is more likely compared to forming collaborations with other organisations and academic institutions due to lack of capacity and resources; yet, informal partnerships that allow knowledge and skills sharing, awareness of collecting priorities of other organisations, and sectoral support is a possibility.

When asked about other potential uses of the collected material (Fig. 5), all of the respondents argued that this could be used to facilitate research, while the majority will be also using it to expand institutional collections, facilitate teaching, and develop activities that will help them engage with their institutional and local/ regional communities. Some mentioned that they will be using this material to develop funding applications, while a participant who chose ‘other’ highlighted again the potential use of the material for developing partnerships. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the types of collaborations RLUK institutions are currently forming or planning to form as well as their intention to use the collected material for the purposes shown in Fig. 5 were also evident during the online and social media research we conducted; some relevant examples can be found in the Appendix.

Finally, all survey participants would be willing to participate or consider participating in further RLUK research on the topic (Fig. 6) or relevant RLUK events, confirming the importance and timely nature of this work.
This statement is further supported by additional comments provided by our survey respondents which underline the importance of initiatives to document the Covid-19 crisis in society and collect relevant material. However, several participants expressed concerns with regards to some of the aspects surrounding initiatives to collect Covid-19 related material that should be taken into consideration when conducting work on the area or using this material. A principal issue raised was the sensitivity of the content in these collections as many aim to document the personal experiences of different community members which, in some cases, can be traumatic. Thus, it was suggested that extra consideration should be given to properly plan the collection and documentation of this material. The development of ethical guidelines around the collection and handling of this material by the GLAM community or the use of approaches previously employed to document events of similar importance in society (e.g. Manchester Arena attacks) were also proposed. Moreover, a more thoughtful approach should be employed when engaging with specific communities and sectors which may have been affected more severely by Covid-19; for example, it was noted that when working with small producers and artists, institutions should ensure that they are paid a fair price for their work.

Other points raised were related to long-term planning and management of the Covid-19 collections RLUK institutions have started to build. For instance, one of the participants highlighted the challenging aspect of planning for the collection of Covid-19 related material as, they argued, this may take months or, even, years, given that a lot of retrospective collecting can take place; this can be especially true when gathering material captured by others (e.g. communities) before or after the lockdown. Apart from this, there was a concern about the creation of duplicate collections, something that can occur when there is limited understanding of what others are doing and when there is no agreement on who is responsible for collecting which types of resources. Finally, preservation - especially as much of the Covid-19 material is in digital format and in risk of loss - and future access of these collections when there is lack of infrastructure, capacity, skills and resources were presented as some of the challenges that RLUK and other institutions will need to address in the short term.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the aim of the current report was to investigate RLUK institutions’ plans to collect material related to the Covid-19 crisis and formed part of the work conducted as part of RLUK’s ’Capturing Covid-19’ programme of activity. Based on our results, many RLUK research libraries have already started or are planning to start collecting relevant material; the majority of these collections will aim to document institutional responses to the pandemic and the experiences of institutional and local communities. As it became apparent, this material will be used for a variety of purposes, including the facilitation of research and teaching, the enhancement of institutional collections, and the development of partnerships with communities and other organisations. However, given that most of the initiatives are still at the very early stages of their development, it is worth monitoring their progress and identifying areas where RLUK can contribute and support its members; providing a forum where difficult issues related to the development, management, and use of these collections can be discussed will be particularly valuable in the immediate future.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Examples of campaigns or other initiatives led by RLUK research libraries


‘Covid-19 Collecting and the University of Bristol Community’, Bristol University Library, University of Bristol: https://specialcollections.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2020/05/11/covid-19-collecting-and-the-university-of-bristol-community/

Examples of campaigns or other initiatives led by other teams within the RLUK research libraries’ home institutions


Examples of collaborative campaigns or other initiatives where RLUK research libraries are taking part

CILIP Wales: For the Record: https://www.fortherecord.wales/

The Mass Observation Archive: http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/what-s-on/205-covid19