

NCRM 2017-2019 - Placement Fellowships

Advertised Placement – Role and Person Specification

Placement Title

Research challenges for using the archived web for social research

What do researchers need to know about web archive collections? A case study to demonstrate methodological challenges and create innovative solutions for future researchers

Name of receiving organisation	The British Library
Location of placement	St. Pancras, London
Desired length of placement	3-6 Months
Desired time commitment per week (part-time, full-time, or proposed %)	Part-time/full time 2 days per week (6 month placement) up to full time, 5 days a week (3 month placement)
Approx. Start Date	Spring-summer 2018

Project Description (max. 400 words)

Background

The UK Web Archive (UKWA), based at The British Library but working on behalf of all six UK Legal Deposit Libraries, aims to collect all UK websites, preserve them and give access to researchers. Each year millions of websites (and billions of individual assets) are captured under the Non-Print Legal Deposit legislation and are made available to researchers in the Reading Rooms. This rapidly expanding collection has considerable potential for social science research, since not only does it capture UK websites, but it shows how they change and develop over time.

UKWA have worked to make the collection as discoverable as possible through a new (beta) interface: <https://beta.webarchive.org.uk/>

A small part of the collection (approximately 15,000 websites) is available anywhere but the vast majority is only available in the reading rooms of UK Legal Deposit libraries.

It is intended that a 'trends' visualisation, similar to this [example used on the SHINE project](#) will be included in the beta service shortly.

The visualisations and the collection as a whole are a potentially vast and useful tool for researchers in social science, providing insight into social, political and cultural change. However, results currently need to be treated with caution. Web archiving tools and methods can favour some types of web content over others (e.g. text is more likely to be archived successfully than images or sound). Additionally, selection policies will affect what is collected and what has been made available through the openly accessible web archive. Details on tools, methods and policies are important for understanding how representative a collection might be. This issue is well known in the global web archiving community but is relatively little studied or adequately addressed within the social sciences.

This Project

Using one of the UK Web Archive Special Collections, this project will develop a case study of innovative research, which will serve to highlight challenges and best practice in documenting web archive collections.

This project will investigate what information about the UK Web Archive social science researchers require. An outcome of the project will be a report including recommendations for describing and documenting the UK Web Archive.

Activities will include:

- Interviews with UKWA staff (and possibly other web archives) on what is currently documented plus what is known but undocumented. Interviews and/or a survey with academics in a range of social science research disciplines about what information they would like/need to know about the UKWA so that they can make the most of using the collection.
- Use of one (or possibly more) of the Special Collections (there are over 100) to use as a case study to identify methodological challenges around the data that researchers need to use archived web confidently. The case study will be used to demonstrate the challenges and offer solutions to research of UKWA.
- Literature review of research methods using web archives and live web, to focus on what information researchers use to identify and describe discovery, sampling and related methods.

Key Deliverables (max. 200 words)

- Written report on the findings of the investigation into what information about the UKWA collection researchers will require to make useful conclusions..
- Recommendations for describing web archive collections
- Case study using innovative methodology of one (or possibly more) of the Special Collections in UKWA.
- Presentation(s) at one or more conference(s) related to web archiving, digital humanities or social sciences.
- Presentation at a BL event
- Blog post for UKWA blog with summary of project and finding.

Role Description (max. 400 words)

The Fellow will be based within the Contemporary British Publications team at the British Library, working directly with the Web Archive Engagement Manager, the Lead Curator for Web Archiving and the Web Archiving Technician. The researcher will be expected to draw on their advanced knowledge of the use of the internet for social science research, to provide new knowledge about the information which the UKWA needs to make available to researchers. The Fellow will draw on their own advanced understanding of the methods which social science researchers do/will apply to web archived content to support the UKWA in developing its content.

The project thus bridges, and advances, research methods in the social sciences, digital humanities and field of web archiving.

Main tasks:

- To formulate an agreed research project plan including a timetable mapped to specific outputs and a communications strategy for relevant stakeholders/audiences.
- To undertake desk-based and field research to generate and capture primary research data.
- To analyse and present research data and findings to internal and external audiences.
- To synthesise and report findings and recommendations based on those findings.
- To organise meetings, events, conferences and workshops to engage stakeholders at different points within the research lifecycle.
- To ensure a formal written record of the research, findings and any analysis, including data, is made available to the BL for long-term preservation and future access.
- To agree with the BL in advance external dissemination of the fellowship research, e.g. via publications, presentations or other external communications.
- To report to BL Supervisor(s), as well as any Advisory or Steering Group in place, on research progress, findings and outputs as requested.
- To undertake any additional fellowship-specific tasks.

To demonstrate a willingness and flexibility to take on a range of tasks and to develop new skills, as appropriate, to support the delivery of the fellowship.

Research Methods (max. 200 words)

This project will build on social science research methods which use the internet as a source for social science research. Much of the research in this area has focussed on using the 'live' internet as a research resource. This project offers a unique divergence from this in that the UKWA is able to show change in specific websites over time, offering the possibility to research responses to particular social, political and cultural events (for example, the EU Referendum). It therefore offers the possibility to draw on and develop research methods from within the social sciences, digital humanities and web archiving to help understand the potential of the UKWA as a major research resource for social scientists.

Person Specification

Criteria	Essential	Desirable
Qualifications and academic experience	Post-graduate research degree in a Social Science discipline.	Experience of managing research projects
Knowledge & experience of specific Research Methods	Research experience on web-based phenomena (e.g. online communities), using either live web or archived websites as sources. Analytical methods as applied to text or image-based corpora. Interviewing and use of interview data	
Knowledge & experience working with public sector		Experience of working with a cultural organisation, e.g. museum or library.
Communicating and influencing	Ability to write reports for different audiences (e.g. academic, professional, public) Skills in oral presenting to different audiences (e.g. academic, professional, public)	

Further details

Further details on this specific role can be obtained from:

Name	Jason Webber
Role	Web Archive Engagement Manager, The British Library
Email	jason.webber@bl.uk
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Further details on the application process can be obtained from:

Name	Alexandra Frosch
Role	NCRM Centre Manager
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