

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Greenwich</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: (UoA 30) - History</p>
<p>Title of case study: BECTU History Project</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The BECTU History Project has built one of the world’s largest archives of industry-related memory. Despite this it is under-used and not yet fulfilling its potential as an oral history project. Dawson and Holmes’ research has changed the way project members think and act through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stimulating serious debate, pinpointing strengths and weaknesses. 2. Intergenerational exchange, with HE students working alongside project volunteers to boost activity and new ideas 3. Diversity in the archive, including facilitation of a demanding new initiative to interview ethnic minorities 4. Reaching a wider public, encouraging the project to seek new users of its archive.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph & Theatre Union), UK’s film and television trade union, gave its name to an oral history project in 1986. The BECTU History Project (BHP) was started by a group of volunteers, mostly union members, who wanted to capture the testimonies of retired co-workers before they were lost forever. They went on to create one of the world’s largest archives of industry-related memory with over 650 interviews. Historian Andrew Dawson was surprised to discover its existence only in 2009 while in Hollywood, researching American film industry workers’ experiences. He and Sean P Holmes (Brunel University) assisted by Phil Windeatt, began researching the origins and development of the BHP in 2010. Members were enthusiastic supporters of what they called ‘the history of the History Project’. The findings were presented at academic conferences in Britain and Denmark and published in 2012.</p> <p>The BHP was conceived in the wake of the oral history movement which gave voice to hitherto unheard groups to build a fuller picture of the past. Dawson and Holmes assessed the project from that perspective: how representative was the archive of the breadth of industry members’ trades and demography? Could it be an alternative to the world-view assiduously constructed by Hollywood’s archives? More fundamentally, did the BHP have the will or intention to act as a counterweight to leading industry voices?</p> <p>Research findings:</p> <p>Three forces determined the volunteers’ approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union influence – democratic and inclusive • Artistic labour aristocracy – recognising creatives more than others • ‘Industry boosterism’ – desire to celebrate the industry, shared values and nostalgia. <p>Representation</p> <p>Volunteers tended to be white men, from ‘creative’ occupations, living in London and the Home Counties, which influenced the choice of interviewees: most were well established in their jobs or retired from the industry; relatively few were young, early career or women. Concern to record the experiences of British film industry pioneers meant the archive is top heavy with film-industry figures of the 1930s and 40s. More recently, attention has been focused on broadcasting but few</p>

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interviewees are from new media. While the BHP is rightly proud of its claim to include all crafts and both the famous and less well known, the collection over-represents directors, producers, writers, editors and directors of photography at the expense of craft occupations. Quantitative data pointed to a marked decline in the rate of interviewing in more recent years.

Content

No common interview format was followed, and the wide range of subjects, and volunteer interviewers, make it difficult to summarise the content of this vast collection. However, this research is being followed by projects to explore the experiences of specific groups including laboratory workers and women, using the archive.

Access

The BHP is ambivalent about public access to its collection. Members are eager that interviews are used by large numbers and not just film researchers and programme makers, but they share an industry concern to protect copyright. Audio and video interviews can only be accessed at the BFI library; some interview transcripts are available to the public.

3. References to the research (REF1 submitted staff in **bold**, **REF2 Output)

- **3.1 **Dawson, A.**, & Holmes, S. P. (2013). "Help to Preserve the Real Story of Our Cinema and Television Industries": The BECTU History Project and the Construction of British Media History, 1986–2010. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32(3), 435–448. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2012.699650>
- 3.2 **Dawson, A.**, & Holmes, S. P. (2013). The BECTU History Project: A Postscript. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32(3), 449–451. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2012.699630>

4. Details of the impact

The film and television industries have many stories. Which stories are granted credibility and gain public attention depends on the author's cultural authority. Industry figures, supported by public relations advisers and the state, are dominant voices. The majority of workers earning livelihoods in the industry are largely overlooked. All archives – as repositories of knowledge and narrators of the past – are inextricably linked to contemporary power relations and thus sites of contested memory.

Oral history has given us the stories of hitherto unheard groups, recognising their contribution and uncovering injustices, which enable us to make different choices about how we live today. By investigating the BHP archive and engaging the BHP and BECTU with the findings, Dawson and Holmes have helped to reinvigorate and redirect the project to better embody the principles of the oral history movement. There are four main impacts:

4.1 Stimulating debate

Dawson and Holmes insisted that their research was not just of academic interest but that it should be shared with History Project members. In December 2011 – ahead of publication in the *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television* – they presented a pre-circulated paper at a well-attended monthly committee meeting. Subsequently, their research reached a wider audience when the findings were summarised in the May-June 2012 issue of the union magazine, *Stage Screen & Radio*. The research paper pointed to areas that the History Project could rightly feel proud of, particularly its inclusive and egalitarian approach to building the archive. The paper also highlighted uncomfortable evidence of declining organisational vigour, especially since 2000 as the

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annual rate of interviews struggled along at a low level. Some at the December meeting thought the decline was inevitable as the pool of potential interviewees dried up. Others saw it as causally linked to changes in industry employment practices that left little time for the History Project's kind of voluntary activity. The chair, Roy Lockett, acknowledged the project's London-centric character, the under-representation of craft workers, women and minorities, and that the project's outreach strategy needed rethinking. But Lockett was not willing to accept what he saw as an implicit accusation of elitism because of the increasing trend to interview prominent industry members, such as David Puttnam, that ran counter to its 'democratic impulse'. Taking a different approach, Mike Dick thought the archive was expansive enough to accommodate multiple perspectives. Where there was unanimity was on the need for an infusion of 'new blood' to reinvigorate the project and take it in new directions.

4.2 Intergenerational exchange

Dawson and Holmes' research stimulated a debate within the project leading directly and indirectly to the creation of a range of new initiatives. The group set about reversing the long-term decline in interview recording by encouraging the creation of links with higher education. University students, working alongside experienced project volunteers, have conducted a number of interviews; others are involved in transcribing existing interviews. De Montfort, Brunel, Greenwich are already participating, while Royal Holloway and Christchurch Canterbury have asked to join. Some students assist on a voluntary basis while others gain credit for their participation. Either way, the group benefits from an infusion of young and energetic participants and increased attention to current oral history practices, which helps revitalise the project and expands the archive.

4.3 Diversity in the archive

With input and encouragement of BECTU's Black Members' Committee, the BHP has developed an ambitious plan to interview thirty-six minority industry workers over a three-year period and is seeking support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. At the same time, BHP now recognises the need to record more lives of younger media workers; plans are also under discussion to break the Home Counties monopoly on membership and interviewing, with the establishment of regional groups. A Scottish branch has recently been set up.

4.4 Reaching a wider public

Since disseminating the research findings among BHP members, there has been a growing realisation that the gems contained within the archive need attention from a wider public. BHP is holding a workshop on "Making Better Use of the Archive" in November 2013. Organised by Steve Tappin, BHP's publicity person, the intention is to draw together a range of oral history projects, some of which may be sitting on substantial archive collections, and invite an exchange of experiences. Christine Coates, TUC Library Collections librarian, London Met, has agreed to speak. Topics of other presenters include: the potential of podcasting, using Isadora software in the creation of sophisticated multimedia exhibitions, compilation DVDs, and combining BHP interviews with other audio-visual material.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Corroborative contacts are;

- Chairperson, BECTU History Project
- Secretary, BECTU History Project
- Marketing Officer, BECTU History Project

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Corroborative sources are;

- Andrew Dawson and Sean P. Holmes, “Contested Memory, Contested Archive: Media Workers and the History of Their Industry. Paper to BECTU History Project Committee members,” BECTU head office, Clapham, London, 21 December 2011. (PowerPoint presentation and mp3 audio recording.)
- History Project Committee Minutes, December 2011 (Word document available from the History Project)
- History Project Committee Minutes, January 2012 (Word document available from the History Project)
- Janice Turner, “History Project: Full Circle”, *Stage Screen & Radio* 12 (April-May 2012): 21. <http://www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/library/1129>
- Roy Lockett (History Project chair), “Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the British Film and Television Industry,” Heritage Lottery Fund application YH-11-02601.
- Steve Tappin, “Call for Contributors. “Oral History Workshop: Making Better Use of the Archive” BHP leaflet.
- Academic Research into the History Project
<http://www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/history-project/resources>