'THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES OF LONDON’ COLLECTION
ORAL HISTORY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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This piece of research presents the process and outcomes of building ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection of interviews with current and former staff members of a few public libraries of London. The purpose of such endeavor was to address two main topics of interest: library history and research, by creating a collection of materials that can be useful as resource for future investigation; and digital archives, by housing the collection in the Layers of London website. An analysis of the literature provided insights into the format and contents of existing documents of people’s experiences of the public library. The methods used to build this collection of narratives about the public library involved: opting for the face-to-face, audio recorded interview as means to document; narrowing down the potential interviewees to public library staff members (rather than interviewing users as well); creating an open, varied, unspecific interview schedule; and housing the collection in the Layers of London website. Up until the point of conclusion of this dissertation, eight interviews had been conducted. The resulting collection was analysed as resource for library history and research, and as a digital archive in the Layers of London website. It was understood that creating documents about the public library by interviewing public library staff members resulted in rich, unique narratives that can prove themselves useful for research beyond library history. Additionally, it was concluded that even though Layers of London is a highly accessible digital archive that serves ‘The Public Libraries of London’ well, online archiving of oral history collections still pose many challenges to be overcome.
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NOTE

This research is presented in a conventional format: Introduction, Background Literature, Methods, Results, Conclusion. This pdf is hyperlinked: words underlined and in grey, like these, are clickable and redirect to webpages, when appropriate, as well as some of the images, when indicated.

It must be stated that I am not affiliated with Layers of London, and that the choice of investigating it for this research was mine, free and independent.
INTRODUCTION

This piece of research has Library History at its core. For a dissertation on Library Science, this is quite unusual; contemporary Library and Information postgraduate courses outputs that engage in historical enquiries or historical debates — in the way that research published in the Library & Information History journal do, for example — are rare. A few reasons for that can be traced. One of them is simply that historical investigation can be very laborious and may require long hours of research of primary sources in archives and libraries, being therefore inviable for postgraduate students who in their majority have less than a year to complete their research. Another, more complex reason, is that library history is not a discrete subject taught in Library and Information Science courses (these can go by many other different names), and library history themes and authors might be just timidly introduced in the LIS courses modules. It is then unsurprising that a field of knowledge that is not taught is not researched either.

A thorough look into LIS postgraduate courses curricula and how they have changed over the decades would be required in order to state with accuracy that library history had in fact been more present in the past than it is now, but the weakening of historical research in particular and of the humanities in general, associated with the increasing focus on the study of information and data in higher education, can be and have been identified in the LIS field. Historian Alistair Black, in his article New Methodologies in Library History, attributes the removal of library history from LIS curricula to the 1980s’ so-called ‘new vocationalism’ in education strategies implemented around that time in the UK, which prioritised the teaching of competencies and professionalising skills, rather than more academic or special subjects — like library history. According to Black, ‘new vocationalism is about doing things in society. Good library history is about understanding society and about fostering societal awareness amongst professionals’ (Black, 1995); library history does not seem to have been able to hold its place in the face of political and cultural pressure driving the new vocationalism in Library and Information Studies.
However, despite its absence in LIS courses curricula, library history as a field of research has not ceased to exist; on the contrary, it has diversified, widened and deepened its scope and questions, and it is the sole topic explored in some scholarly journals, conferences and special interest groups. Library histories being produced are richer as they turn away from descriptive narratives about characters and institutions to establish more and more connections with information science and history, book history, history of reading, sociology, culture studies and others, giving rise to more complex interpretations of a more contextualized library as apparatus, embedded in their specific social and political milieu.

A personal interest in history in general led my choice of library history as topic for the Independent Study module of the MSc Library Science course of which this dissertation is a product. From that independent study, I became aware of two significant aspects of recent Library History practice that I believed should be addressed by LIS researchers and practitioners. First, that the ‘cultural turn’ in history by the second half of the twentieth century meant, for library history, that libraries should then be considered as being part of a social and political context rather than an institution in isolation, and that this wider landscape for historical enquiry also meant a wider variety of resources which researchers could and should refer to in order to divert from traditional, dominating narratives: significantly, these would include ‘bottom-up’ testimonies from subjects who stood outside of positions of power or notoriety, to be found in oral histories, newspapers, diaries, and special archives, like the Mass Observation Archive (Mass Observation, 2015).

Second, and closely connected with the above: that the relationship between historians and archivists, and between society in general with archives, has been intensely debated as it undergoes structural transformations, as many new forms of documentation emerge rapidly; if a personal diary of an anonymous person turned out to be revealing and relevant for historical analysis, the innumerable ways with which people can capture and collect their everyday means an equivalent large amount of documents being produced that can also be of valuable use for historians and researchers both at present and in future. However, new forms of documenting and documentation come with great challenges for librarians and archivists, as they have to reevaluate their roles in the document-rich society. The Library of Congress, for example, understands that Twitter as a social media is ‘a primary method of communication and creative expression’, so it has been archiving all tweets being posted since 2006 to ‘enable future researchers access to a fuller picture of today’s cultural norms’ (Library of Congress, 2013). But not everything is so clearly important to record as Twitter is, and not every group or organization has the budget and structure necessary to keep such records as the Library of
Congress has. New possibilities but also new challenges and restrictions have been transforming the archive profoundly. What is the impact of and the relationship between new archival practices and library history investigation?

All these questions drive the present research. To address these issues, this dissertation then presents an attempt to build a collection of narratives from public library staff about themselves and the public libraries of London where they work or have worked. It aims at configuring a useful kind of document for future research about libraries; as these institutions dedicate to safeguarding and keeping documents accessible, it is not unreasonable to worry about whether the library keeps documents about itself. Put simply, this research discusses what such a collection of narratives, aimed at being a resource for library studies and library history, should look like; how one could go about building it; where should it be housed; how could it be accessed and preserved — having as reference the most recent debates on archival practices in the so-called digital age, and oral history practices in the digital humanities.

As hinted above, the purpose of developing such a collection is to create a documentation of people’s present views and perceptions of the public library, a bit as a testimony of the present, with the hope it will be useful in future — and perhaps even in the present as well — as resource for research on this institution. It is an oral history collection, but one that aims less at trying to illuminate past events through people’s personal memories of it, as a new interpretation of history, and more at shaping a documentation of what library staff are experiencing and thinking today, as records for the future. It attempts to respond to this demand from library history after the cultural turn for more resources that enable bottom-up approaches — or: to provide an example of what such resource could look like.

The public library, and the British one specifically, is an institution that can benefit greatly from this kind of initiative. First, the public library, more than other kind of library, for its very own nature, have its legacy scattered across the population that uses them, in the very personal way each individual experiences and uses it. Most common documents of a public library might include official files, performance reports and accounts, occasional newspaper appearances, photos in local archives; the individual perception and experience, essential to understand the role a public library plays or played at any given time, has to be carefully mined out from these resources. The personal experience defines the public library, but with few exceptions I will refer to below, records of it have been kept only by individual initiative and means. Projects aiming at collecting this kind of document, with some institutional support and a fairly large-scale scope, can only be welcome.
Second, it can be said that the British public library in its modern form has been a reference internationally in terms of policy, building, use; however, despite the success of library services in other countries, the British public library today seems to be facing a critical moment. While it is true that government funding for public library service has never been abundant and staff have always had to work with limited resources, the present political and economic scenario means especially stark and generalised pressure on library provision across councils and boroughs. According to Ian Anstice, ‘now, the sector is facing deep and sustained budget cuts, with hundreds of small libraries under threat of closure or passing to volunteers, ... Facing this disaster, the old certainties have been washed away, with the role of paid staff, council involvement and even the library itself being called into question’ (Anstice, 2017). Budget cuts are not new but particularly harsh right now, and the numerous challenges and transformations emerging with the so-called digital age complicate the present situation of public libraries even more, by adding layers of uncertainty and conflict between agencies. This seems to be a moment of great change in the British public library as service and institution — and we better be documenting it.

Apart from addressing this demand for documentation, with special concern for future research on library history, the other main purpose of building this collection is to investigate contemporary archival practices in relation to the digital humanities. If collecting oral narratives today is relatively easy as good digital recorders are small and accessible, it is a responsibility of the Library and Information scientist to think about the ideal ways in which to capture, collect, preserve, and make this kind of record accessible. If libraries are rethinking their role structurally, so are archives; building an oral history collection about the public library, to be stored in an archive of the twentieth-first century, addresses changes in both institutions in a hands-on way.

Finally, there is a more personal motivation behind this dissertation that is important to acknowledge, as it helps providing context and background to the collection. I come from Sao Paulo, Brazil, where local public lending libraries are very few and are not part of the lives of the vast majority of the population at all — it is certainly not an intrinsic part of the social an urban fabric of the city, as it is in London, nor it is part of the social imaginary. To have come here and see and understand the nature and workings of the public library has made me fascinated about this institution, and eager to learn more. I believe that many fundamental and basic benefits and impact of having such public library provision are taken for granted when it has just been there at your doorstep your whole life. The perspective I assume here, and I hope it is found to be useful and refreshing, is that of someone who does not take the public library for granted.
This literature review is divided into three sections. The first one reintroduces the cultural turn in library history and presents a few pieces of research that relied on ‘bottom-up’ narratives and people’s voices to investigate libraries historically, and public libraries in particular. The second section is dedicated to brief descriptions and discussions of existing oral history projects and collections of narratives of both library staff and library users about the library, again with a focus on the public library. The last part presents the debate on new archival practices in relation to the Internet and the digital humanities, considering the keeping of oral histories in specific.

1. People’s voices in Public Library History

American library and information scientist Jesse Shera, as early as 1952, referring to even earlier works of British historian R. G. Collingwood and American library scientist Pierce Butler, insisted on the idea of the library being historically investigated as one part of a wider social context: ‘The library is an agency of the entirety of the culture; more specifically, it is one portion of the system of graphic communication through which that culture operates, and its historic origins are to be sought in an understanding of the production, flow, and consumption of graphic communication through all parts of the social pattern’ (Shera, 1952). He was agreeing with the then recent criticism of early twentieth century library history, which presented ‘an excessive preoccupation with antiquarian detail and a provincial point of view’ and saw the library ‘as an isolated and independent agency existing in a social vacuum’; his pledge was for not only more library history, but one that explored ‘the relation of the library to its coeval social milieu’. In this specific article, he brought to attention a couple of cases which he thought inappropriate public library history helped spread misconceptions, and highlighted his view that a sense of library history was very beneficial to librarianship, even stating that the degree
of success of a librarian’s work ‘will be largely determined by the extent to which practical considerations are founded upon historic truth’.

When it comes to oral history in particular, Elizabeth Dixon’s article *The Implications of Oral History in Library History* (Dixon, 1966) gives a sense of an exciting field being developed in America at that time, with librarians participating in conferences, workshops and projects focused on oral history in general. But Dixon is interested primarily in oral history for library history; oral history as means for documenting libraries: ‘It is in specific application to personal narratives regarding library history that Oral History holds particular promise. The importance of a more detailed knowledge of library to the community would be difficult to overemphasize, for the library is the microcosm of the community and, therefore, knowledge of its history is essential to an understanding of the social and cultural progress of the community. The history of our libraries is the history of our roots, our heritage, our tradition’.

Those texts represent an early moment of what German librarian Elmar Mittler presented in his article *The Library as History* (Mittler, 2016) as the mid-twentieth century cultural turn in the humanities and its impact on Library History research. Mittler, like Shera decades earlier, describes conventional library history as stories ‘of the improvement and professionalization of their management, buildings, classification and user services’, which was in keeping with traditional approaches found in all other fields of history as well. He then exemplifies how Library History has been widened and diversified after this cultural turn, by benefitting both from microhistory perspectives — which provided a diversion from narratives about those on the top — and also from studies in other disciplines, through connecting library history to, for example, book history, gender studies, cultural transfer studies and so on.

American library historian Wayne Wiegand has made a balance of decades of American Library History in a chapter of the book *Library history research in America: essays commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Library History Round Table* (Wiegand, 2000), and confirmed that library history was a diversified field and that studies had done well in taking advantage of interdisciplinary approaches — but that more bottom-up perspectives should be explored, as the few existing examples of investigations with such outlook have proved compelling, and that still studies of theoretical approach were missing, apart from rare exceptions. Wiegand has himself written library history with a broadly-researched bottom-up perspective in the recent *Part of our lives: a people’s history of the American public library*, in which he adopted a ‘library in the life of the user’ approach, with an
interest in how the American public library supports and has supported the production of subjectivity (Wiegand, 2015). In order to do that, he had to ‘uncover these voices’: ‘some are published memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies of the famous; some are the archives across the country. The vast majority, however, are fixed in hundreds of US newspapers and periodicals digitised since the 1990s into huge databases’.

Also an influential library and information historian, British Alistair Black has brought attention to the value of library users accounts to library history as well. In the ‘Volume 3: 1850-2000’ of The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, which he co-edited with Peter Hoare, they point out that ‘User’s written accounts of libraries in autobiographies, diaries and social commentaries are invaluable source in library history. Such accounts are an important primary source for historians seeking to learn about the part that events, people, social practices and institutions have played in people's lives, as well as the meanings that autobiographers attach to these. Libraries have also featured in user’s life stories, a significant number written by members of the working classes. Notwithstanding these efforts on a “domestic” scale, library historians have been largely inactive in capturing the history of libraries in the words of users. Evidence of library use can be found in large-scale general oral history projects, but such references are extremely rare and difficult to detect. Unfortunately, despite the importance of the topic and the considerable potential value of the evidence, no systematic oral history of library patrons has been attempted’ (Black & Hoare, 2006).

In the article The Past Public Library Observed, Black made an analysis of the public library users’ accounts captured by the Mass Observation Project in 1988 and in 1999 from the directives ‘Regular pastimes’ and ‘The Public Library’ respectively, which were sent to the projects' anonymous volunteers so they replied in written form with their perceptions and memories related to the topics — the later data-collection was promoted by Black himself and Melvyn Crann as part of a commission involving the Leeds Metropolitan University, and its development and results were detailed in the report A mass observation of the public library (Black & Crann, 2000) and in the article In the public eye (Black & Crann, 2002). They described that ‘the project was conceived in purely academic terms as a study of an “everyday” social institution, the results of which could prove to be of interest in their own right and which could be said to reinforce the proposition that investigating the sociology of libraries tells us as much about society as it does about libraries’ (Black & Crann, 2002). Their intention with presenting the research as a ‘purely academic’ work was to oppose it to the more common form of collecting public library users' voices in most recent decades: through questionnaire
surveys, with the aim of assessing and improving library service; a more technical, quantitative approach.

Black has also relied on people’s documented voices about the public library for his most recent book, *Libraries of Light: British public library design in the long 1960s* (Black, 2016), using testimonies and perceptions about public library buildings published in newspapers and magazines, and the responses to a 2006 directive of the Mass Observation Project on ‘Public library buildings’. *Libraries of Light* represents well what Black himself had urged from library history in earlier works: that even though the diversification of the field in recent decades had been positive and prolific, more should be done to integrate library history with other fields of historical study (Black & Hoare, 2006).

Wiegand and Black, great historians of the modern public library in America and in the UK respectively, seem then to agree that people's narratives are a valuable resource for library history, as ‘assessing what happens in library places does not easily fit into statistical taxonomies documenting library use, yet anecdotes … demonstrate that public libraries help build community in multiple ways’ (Wiegand, 2015); and they also seem to agree that these narratives enable access to a more rich and complex social context of the library — but that library history welcomes more theoretical perspectives as well.
2. Oral history projects and other documents of people’s experiences of the library

Projects and collections that attempted to capture the voice, experience and perspective of library staff and library users take many forms; in keeping with the aim of this dissertation, which is more academic and focused on themes regarding Library History and digital collections and archives, the projects commissioned to assess public library services through questionnaires and surveys were not included in this literature analysis, even though they are acknowledged throughout this research when appropriate. For a closer look, I have chosen a few documentation works that are more closely related to this dissertation.

Oral history collections in the British Library

The British Library holds a great collection of 'Sound and Moving Image', being their oral history collections part of that catalogue. I did not get to know about their archived oral histories of libraries through browsing the British Library website; information about it is a bit tucked in, and it is found easily only if you really know what you are looking for — which was my case: in an essay, Alistair Black had mentioned a collection of interviews with librarians carried out in the 1970s as being kept in the British Library, so I looked for it in their website. Interviews with librarians is made of 18 interviews
recorded in the 1970s with prominent librarians who worked in British institutions throughout the twentieth-century; all of them had had a successful career in librarianship, even if some went to pursue other interests later in life. The interviews were carried out by David Gerard, an accomplished librarian and scholar himself, as part of Drake Educational publication ‘Librarians Speaking’ — now, this is information that only exists in the British Library catalogue, as I have not really found any related information about this publication anywhere across the Web.

Apart from that, the catalogue record for the collection and for each interviews do not give away much else. All but one of the cassettes corresponding to the interviews were not digitised by the time I made a formal request for digitisation to the British Library in April 2017 — the recordings must be digitised in order to be made available for listening by the public. As I later found out, the only interview already digitised was so by request of Alistair Black, who was studying the interviewee in specific, and thought that having requested the digitisation of that one interview would have led to the digitisation of the full collection — which lamentably was not the case. Anyway, having made the request, the British Library managed to digitise the recordings in four weeks, and by May 2017 all interviews became available for listening in the Reading Rooms using the British Library computers, through the Sound and Moving Image digital catalogue.

Just as so many other oral history collections that are not very recent, Interviews with Librarians has not left much related documentation behind, meaning consent forms addressing the rights of the interviews were not complete or not adequate to enabling online access — simply because it wasn’t even a possibility at that time, and that is why access is restricted to locality: even if the record is digitised, it can only be actually accessed and listened to inside the British Library Reading Rooms. The catalogue record for the collection hardly provides context (fig. 2), while the records specific of each interview (fig. 3) presents a little more metadata such as a brief summary and the duration of the audio recording — but still, little to no context.

The interviews themselves are primarily concentrated on the life of the interviewee, with a more biographical approach, even if they are asked to describe with more detail their time in libraries. It is an oral history with more traditional characteristics, namely the interviewees are people of prominence or importance to the field, and are already retired or are elderly, so many of their testimonies are memories and recollections. The content is incredibly rich; so many names, institutions and events are mentioned, making these interviews not only useful for researchers
fig. 2 (top) and fig. 3: Screenshots, British Library website, Sound and Moving Image Catalogue. Records of the *Interviews with Librarians* collection and of one of the interviews in the collection, respectively. Note the lack of information on context. [click on images to access].
looking at a particular person (as Alistair Black was interested in F.G.B. Hutchings in specific), but a surprising realization was that this kind of collection can actually be useful also as first port of research, as it concentrates so many themes and can incite many historical questions just in itself. Despite this great potential, it is not the type of resource that most researchers are used to go to at their first steps into a theme; oral histories tend to be regarded as a primary source as hard to reach out as dusted records in traditional archives — and unfortunately, conditions like restriction of access and low discoverability just contribute to that perception.

The British Library also holds two other oral history collection the **British Library Slavonic and East European Department oral history interviews** with library staff, and the **British Library staff oral history interviews**; evidently, their scope is the British Library staff, in an effort to capture documents regarding the history of the institution — different from the acquired **Interviews with Librarians**, which focused on prominent librarians that worked in various libraries across the UK. The aim of these collections is to capture and preserve staff’s voices, with memories and perceptions, with the hope they will be useful for researchers of the British Library at present or future. The British Library Slavonic and East European Department oral history interviews collection is specially well formed; even if the interface of the catalogue records of the interviews is hardly interactive or interesting, a clear context and purpose of the collection is presented (fig. 4): 'The British Library Slavonic and East European Oral History Interviews is a project aimed at capturing the experiences and memories of former members of the British Library Slavonic and East European department staff. The purpose of the recordings is to provide an oral history of a British Library department and as such may be useful for the study of British librarianship. British and international (Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian) accounts, voices and accents are represented in the project. The recording and usage of oral and written histories are in accordance with the interviewees’ wishes and the British Library Guidelines. They may be used for information and research purposes’ (The British Library). The ‘Collection Description’ entry also provides useful information when it comes to context, such as an introduction to what the interviewees roles within the Library and the structure of the interviews, and the summaries of the audio recording are very detailed — perhaps too detailed. However, even the most recent interviews can only be listened to at the British Library Reading Rooms, like the **Interviews with Librarians**, which restricts access to these materials quite a lot.

The collection British Library staff oral history interviews comprises more than 70 recordings of interviews with the Library staff, being collected since 1985. Unlike the **Slavonic and East European Department oral history interviews**, little context is provided, and the choice of who gets to be
interviewed is unclear; very few interviews are available to be listened to at the British Library, mainly some recorded in 2012 and 2013, and the rest present a variety of ‘Access Restrictions’: ‘interview in progress; refer to curator’ (but no contact provided); ‘refer to curator’ only; ‘closed for 20 years until 22 July 2035’; ‘temporarily closed’ (with no further details) etc., and cannot be listened to at all. Even if the actual content of the interviews in these collections can be very useful and valuable, the imposed access restrictions and lack of clear context and linking do impair their potential to be both discovered and used.

fig. 4: Screenshot, British Library website, Sound and Moving Image Catalogue. Record of the British Library Slavonic and East European Department oral history interviews. Context is provided through the ‘Collection Description’ and ‘Purpose of recording’ entries. [click on image to access].
According to their website, ‘The Mass Observation Project (MOP)’ is a unique national life writing project about everyday life in Britain, capturing the experiences, thoughts and opinions of everyday people in the 21st century. Launched in 1981, the project continues to commission new research and is a valuable resource for research, teaching and learning. It is one of the major repositories of longitudinal qualitative social data in the UK’ (Mass Observation, 2015). The MOP is part of the Mass Observation, which has been carried out since the 1930s; directives on specific themes with questions are sent to anonymous volunteers across the UK, who respond in an essay-like style, and their replies are archived by the Mass Observation Archive, primarily in The Keep, a newly built centre for preservation and study of archival collections in Brighton.

Three directives were related to public libraries: ‘Regular pastimes’, distributed in 1988; ‘The Public Library’, from 1999; and ‘Public library buildings’, undertaken in 2006. ‘Regular pastimes’ wasn’t focused specifically on libraries but contained many questions on reading habits and public library use, such as ‘How have your reading habits changed over the years as regards the amount of reading, or the time of reading, or the actual content?’ and ‘If you are a member of a public lending library how many tickets do you hold and, on average, how often do you change your books?’ (The Mass Observation Autumn directive, 1988). The most recent one, ‘Public library buildings’ (fig. 5), is a short and straight-forward directive; its results have been used by Alistair Black in his research and book Libraries of Light: British public library design in the long 1960s (Black, 2016):

![fig. 5](image-url)
The 1999 directive ‘The Public Library’ presented an extensive questionnaire about the respondents’ public library use, impressions and experiences; the data-gathering by the Mass Observation was requested by the Library and Information Commission, which presented a research report on this in 2000: *A Mass Observation of the Public Library*, authored by Alistair Black and Melvyn Crann.

According to the report, the aim of the project ‘was the generation of an extensive, open-access public commentary on public library activity and status’ (Black & Crann, 2000); written testimonies of 231 volunteers of the Mass Observation Project were collected, and are preserved in The Keep for public reference. The directive itself, however, is openly available online and is reproduced here (fig. 6):

![Mass-Observation Project Summer Directive 1999](image)

**PART ONE
The Public Library**

*As usual, please remember to start your reply with a very brief micro-biography: your A-Z number, [45755 name], sex, age, marital status, town or village where you live, your occupation or former occupation.*

It has been difficult to word this part of the directive without making it look as though we assume that everyone uses public libraries. We know that you may not – for a variety of reasons – use a public library, but we are still interested in your views. We would be grateful if you would at least answer the first set of questions.

**For everyone:**

Please start by saying briefly whether you use public libraries either now or have done so in the past.

If you have ever been employed in one, please say so at the beginning (with dates and a rough description of where it was and what it was like, if you need for precise details which might identify you).

Whether you are a current user or not, please describe your impressions of the public library. Do you think public libraries have changed over the years? One way of answering this question is to jot down ten words that you associate with public libraries.

What is your image of a librarian? Do you know any librarians personally and do they fit this image?

What sort of people do you think are most likely to use public libraries?

What kind of people do you think are Least likely to use public libraries?

Do you think public libraries meet the needs of the kinds of people they serve? You might consider what they offer to men and women, to people with special needs because of age or disability, to people in different age groups, to people from different educational and social class backgrounds or people from diverse religious, ethnic and cultural groups.

**If you are not a library user, or use the library only infrequently, is there anything your local library could do to get you to use it more?**

Do you think public libraries are a “good thing”? Do you, how would you like them to be, in a, say, ten years’ time?

For people who use public libraries:

Can you give us an impression of your public library – What does it look like? What does it smell like? Is it noisy or quiet? How does it feel to be there?

How please describe your use of the public library – covering things like:

- Frequency and times of visits
- How you get there
- How long you like to spend there
- Who goes with you usually
- What you (and your companions) do there
- Which services you use and why
- Which services don’t you use
- What sort of services do you pay for? How do you feel about the cost?

Do you use library services which are provided outside of the established library buildings eg mobile or house bound services, collections of books in day centres or residential homes. What is your experience of these services?

What sort of new technology does your library use? Is it helpful?

Has anything in your life (eg events, changes in circumstances, health and mobility) increased or decreased your use of the library or changed the way you use it? Has anything about changes in the library changed your use of it?

Have you ever seen the public library put to use (either above board or illigit) which have surprised you?

How do you feel library staff treat you (either above above board or illigit) which have surprised you?

**Personal experiences: stories please**

Can you describe:

1. One good experience you have had connected to a public library
2. One bad one

Black & Crann believe that this collection of hundreds of commentaries ‘will be useful to future researchers: in the long term to historians of the public library movement; in the short term to analysts of the institution seeking to contextualise their work with reference to a temporal benchmark of public attitude and use’. Even though I have not personally seen the collection, which is housed in
Brighton, it can confidently be said that 231 detailed testimonies configure an impressive and surely insightful account of public library use at that time in the UK. However, one can question the accessibility of these records; even though The Keep preserves this material for public reference, access to it is location-bound, so you have to actually go to a specific place to see it — to Brighton in the case. Parts of the Mass Observation collections are recently being made available online through the Adam Matthew repository, owned by SAGE, but this is a pay-walled online resource (which I was not able to access even with a login from a major London university). All these barriers to access do not seem to be in tune with the fact that all volunteers’ written contributions are actually anonymous.

‘Reading Allowed’, by Chris Paling

The book Reading allowed: true stories and curious incidents from a provincial library, published by Constable (London) in 2017, is the first non-fiction work of Chris Paling, a writer and member of staff of an English public library (the library goes without being named) — and his work there is the theme of this book, broken down in very short chapters, in consonance with his descriptions of moments and brief interactions with other library staff and the library users. It provides a privileged look into the everyday of a contemporary local public library through the perspective of a member of the staff, who is frequently wondering about the nature of his job and of the library. Many ‘regulars’, the users that come to the library every week or even every day, are presented as characters in the life of the library, but also as individuals or groups of people very much dependant on the library being there, so they can do whatever they come in to do: borrow or return piles of books or DVDs, use the computers to access the Web, participate in special interest group gatherings, chat with library staff (as one of the few interpersonal interactions some users will have during the whole week), bring their child to the children's activities etc.

His descriptions, anecdotes and perceptions give a very good sense of the local public library environment, and his personal thoughts and impressions represent the extremely subjective and individual nature of the experience of the library for each person — he presents his versions of the typical and atypical events happening in the library, but he leaves to the reader the feeling that these stories could have been told in a very different way by the other characters in them. If only one thing can be said from Paling’s accounts, it is that the public library is actually highly personal, despite it also being ‘the last’ public and collective place in people’s everyday life.
When it comes to the media which he chose to document his narratives, it is the traditional book: a conventionally published non-fiction book, with copyright asserted to himself, the author; it can be bought from chain or independent bookshops across the UK, and found in libraries for free borrowing or reference as well. Traditional books are known to have stood the test of time, and their preservation, organisation and accessibility are the subject of study and practice of librarianship for centuries. When looking for materials on the topic of narratives about the public library, it is very likely that the future researcher will find the reference of this book in library catalogues. However, despite the very good prospects in terms of preservation, this book is not part of a system; it is single-authored, brought about by the individual effort of a talented writer; and even though it provides great insight into the contemporary institution of the British public library, it is still one person's account. Is it a good resource for public library history? Yes. But it is a type of document that is unlikely to be replicated by other library staff or publishing houses. A question to think about would be: how to create this kind of valuable document in a larger scale, that is, covering more people, and make it less a closed work, and more an open collection?

‘Library Stories’ project and website

Library Stories was a recent project undertaken by the University of Sheffield and Our Favourite Places - Sheffield Culture Guide, and funded by the Arts Enterprise; its aim was to ‘discover how public libraries are used and valued in Sheffield today’: ‘over 200 library users got involved, sharing memories, illustrations and photos. Together, they create a striking record of love, appreciation and support for Sheffield’s public libraries’. The resulting website presents ‘a sample’ of the events, gatherings and interviews that took place in order to collect these records of people's experiences and stories (where is the rest?). It is divided in three sections, ‘Past’, ‘Present’ and ‘Future’; ‘Past’ presents materials retrieved mainly from Sheffield Archives, photographs and newspapers notes and articles in particular, in an attempt to recover the history of the public libraries of Sheffield. ‘Present’ displays a collection of ‘thoughts on and memories of the city’s libraries, shared with Library Stories on comment cards, at book clubs and reminiscence events, and in one-on-one interviews’; the ‘comment cards’ are scans of documents that library users wrote by hand, replying to the question on the top: ‘What does your library mean to you?’ (fig. 7). These testimonies are classified by content themes: ‘Books etc.’, ‘Family’, ‘Friends’, ‘Work & Study’, and ‘Pleasure’. The ‘Future’ section is still under development; the website visitor is invited to submit an answer to the question: ‘What ideas do you have for the future of your library? Please let us know...’.
The website is very simple and easy to navigate and access; from the ‘information’ button on the top, you can learn about the context of the collection: who is undertaking the project, with what aims, basic descriptions of how is was put together, and contact details of those responsible for it now. The images, most of them scans, are not in a very high quality; the ‘Present’ testimonies can be read relatively easily, but the images of old newspapers are a bit illegible, and the photographs are quite small. Overall, ‘Past’ is a useful gateway to the history of Sheffield public library service, and ‘Present’ is an impressive collection of users’ observations and experiences through their own words. The website is more of a record of the project than a tool of the project itself; content is added by administrators of the website, rather than being open for users’ contributions without mediation. In what ways could this website take advantage of interactive features? When it comes to the usefulness of this collection as resource for future research, as a project and website organised by the University of Sheffield, it can be expected that institutional support will guarantee this collection preservation.
3. Digital archives and oral history

in the digital humanities

As it has been presented above, capturing people’s narratives — being it in the form of an oral history project or distributing directives or paper cards with questions — will always involve the creation of a collection, which in turn has to be managed and housed somewhere appropriate, according to its aims and purpose and format of the records. Also, all collections I presented here have a different but crucial relationship with digital technologies, decisive to the ways that these collections can be accessed, discovered and used. That is why issues regarding current archival practices and the challenges that new digital information technologies pose to creation and management of collections is so essential for the debate of this dissertation.

In *Archive Everything: mapping the everyday*, Gabriella Giannachi presents a brief history of the archive, highlighting the emergence of the great diversification of its functions through time, and shows some of the ways in which the archive relates to digital technologies, attempting to answer ‘why the archive has become the apparatus through which we map the everyday’ (Giannachi, 2016). She uses and extends Michael Shanks’s concepts of Archives 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0, adding to that her own Archives 0.0 and 4.0, to tell the story of the archive, from ancient Greek and Roman empire use of archival repositories, to the present day, when the archives ‘operate pervasively within the digital economy’. Referring to Derrida’s groundbreaking *Archive fever*, she explains how the archive is not only ‘a tool for preservation, and a mechanism for dissemination, it is an ordering system for the production of knowledge’, and traces back to early modernity the idea that the archive is a public heritage, and the start of the still ongoing processes of its democratisation. Archives 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0, according to Giannachi, represent the increasing presence of the digital in the archive, which also means more records, more speed, and more openness; there’s a great shift in the role of the user, as they become crucial to the creation, production and dissemination of the archive. But she alerts to the fact that ‘while the responsibility for creating and sharing Archives 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0 is increasingly resting with users, their preservation remains a problem that is almost exclusively dealt with by organisations’.

This concern with the preservation of archives as they go digital is theme of contemporary debates on digital records and their future as resource for historical research: who should be in charge of keeping these materials? In the article *The Future of History: investigating the preservation of information in the digital age*, Bawden & Roland discuss that ‘Historians have traditionally been able to rely on
archives, libraries, and museums to research the past. For centuries, these ‘memory institutions’ have safeguarded our national and cultural heritage, our collective store of knowledge, as a legal and moral duty. Yet this system is in a state of flux and so responsibility for preserving much of the digital material created in the twenty-first century is undefined. It should be a concern, then, that few historians are engaged with the preservation of born-digital data, as they will be the records of the future. The necessary reconsideration of how the historical art is practised is not taking place universally or uniformly. Even if preserved, they are not likely to be contextualized, catalogued, or organized adequately; curation is crucial’ (Bawden & Roland, 2012).

In the book *The Internet Revolution in the Sciences and Humanities*, Gross & Harmon present the interesting argument that these conflicts between digital technologies, mainly the Internet, and the humanities can be at least partially attributed to the fact that the values of the ‘humanist as ideal type’ discourages the move to the Internet, while in the case of the ‘scientist as ideal type’ this move is encouraged. They exemplify with many websites how scientific research has embraced the possibilities of the Internet, in a way that ‘in the sciences, Internet projects are extensions of the mainstream, while in the humanities such projects exist in a parallel universe that seldom affects the mainstream’ (Gross & Harmon, 2016). The digital humanities, however, represent this break with traditional ideas of author, creator, originality, text and many others in the humanities fields, including history; it might well be though that projects in the digital humanities are exceptions in terms of its use of the Internet to enrich historical research.

When it comes to oral history in specific, there has been a great disruption caused by the new pervasiveness of digital technologies and the numerous new possibilities of the Internet; that can be partly explained by the fact that the oral history interview output was never the conventional authorial text, but an audio recording and often a transcription; that there has always been in the oral history project a ‘democratic spirit’, in common with the digital humanities, that ‘engenders a sense that the materials created, shared, generated, or parsed belong to everyone’ (Boyd & Larson, 2014). And beyond the nature of the oral history interview, now it is also much easier to actually record and store the record of the interview, which is in keeping with the notion that oral history can and should be carried out by anyone. Also, the digital technology of the .mp3 file means a structurally different kind of record when it comes to format; even if not yet free from obsolescence of the media able to read it, it is a much more flexible format, easily copied and shared, and playable by most of present computing hardware with speakers, which means its accessibility is exponentially increased if compared to the previous cassette. You do not need to go a library or archive that holds the tapes you
want to listen, if now the audio file can just be made available online and you can ‘click and listen’ (Boyd, 2014) from a personal device, anywhere with an Internet connection.

However, as the collections presented above show, and as Boyd & Larson present in detail in their book *Oral history and digital humanities: voice, access, and engagement* (Boyd & Larson, 2014), there are many steps and challenges to the apparently simple ‘click and listen’ possibility. The oral history interviews that the British Library holds that were presented here, for example, can only be listened to at the British Library Reading Rooms, most likely due to rights assigned to these records, which shouldn’t allow for online free access. Dougherty & Simpson, in the influential article to the field *Who owns oral history? A Creative Commons solution*, argue that applying a Creative Commons license for oral history interviews not only allows for much more free sharing online, but also grants the rights of the interview to the interviewee, who is, after all, the main contributor to the document — as an alternative to the conventional consent forms of oral history interviews, tailored primarily for the interviewee to just ‘sign over’ the rights for the interview record to the interviewer or organisation responsible for the oral history project (Dougherty & Simpson, 2012).

But the Creative Commons license, while actually presenting a formidable solution to the issue of copyright and enabling much increased accessibility and use of the oral history interview, does not solve all the problems regarding a collection availability and dissemination; even if it may have been licensed under a Creative Commons license, a collection can be hidden away in a poorly linked website, hard to discover; it may be just a collection of links to audio files in uninteresting catalogues or without clear context or provenance. These missed opportunities to utilise the possibilities that the Internet presents to enrich oral history collections in so many ways do undermine their value. There is a lot to be explored and experimented in terms of Internet tools to enhance the production of knowledge in the humanities, including oral history, and perhaps in that sense we should be looking at the more established practices in the sciences, as Gross & Harmon suggest, like crowdsourcing, collective or open authorship, rapid dissemination, large-scale projects, universal sharing etc. — all of which are already central themes of the growing field of the digital humanities.
METHODS

The analysis of the background literature, including the study of existing collections of narratives about the library, and the public library in particular, provides a crucial framework for making decisions about the methodology of building the collection at the heart of this research: a collection of people’s narratives about the British public library. Methods applied, and discussion about their advantages and limitations, are presented below in the form of answers for structural, procedural questions:

How to capture these narratives?

The method chosen here to record people’s narratives is through interviews, as in oral history practice. This is not an obvious assumption; documents of people’s personal experiences can be produced through different ways, resulting in various kinds of records. As presented in the previous section, existing documents from library staff and library users about the library include oral history collections of interviews, but this is just one among many means of documenting: Paling’s is a conventionally published book with non-fictional, authorial narratives; Library Stories project and website collected ‘comment cards’ with written responses to the question ‘What does your library mean to you?’; the Mass Observation Project collects written essay-like, anonymous testimonies as replies to thematic directives sent by post. A type of documentation that was not analysed here is public library staff activity on social media websites, because it is not produced with the main aim to provide a resource for future research; however, quite a few staff members keep blogs and update social media profiles with content related to their everyday experiences and impressions of their library work: a possibility for documentation would be to capture all this activity as part of a project especially focused on archiving online presence and conversation of public library staff — with all the complexities and ethical issues that come with archiving social media. But the chosen method for
capturing narratives for the present research is conducting interviews as in oral history, and producing the records from scratch, rather than collecting existing materials.

A known limitation of face-to-face interviews is that of the ‘contamination’ by the interviewer/researcher of the content of the interviewer responses; by being the researcher too directly involved in the production of the document, the replies to the interview questions might contain too much of the interviewer’s views, and the interviewee may feel driven to answer the questions in a way that they sense is expected or right or in keeping with the researcher’s aims. That might well be true, but then it is the responsibility of the interviewer to tailor questions and conduct the interview in a way that this ‘contamination’ is minimized and doesn’t invalidate the responses. This was a factor I had in mind when putting together the interview schedules. And placed in a balance, the ‘contamination risk’ limitation of the face-to-face recorded interview seemed less relevant than the advantages of the method:

The interviewee is likely to feel complimented and cherished by being asked to contribute, especially with a non-anonymous interview; interviewees might then become aware of other contributors whom they don’t know in person, but share similar experiences. In a face-to-face interview, there is also the possibility of interaction: as interviewer, you get to ask the interviewee to expand on something they have just briefly mentioned, or ask an unplanned question incited by a comment that emerged spontaneously; this flexibility is diminished in the case of written contribution, or in an interview by e-mail. The face-to-face interaction also provides the interviewee more of a feeling of involvement in the project, when compared to just answering a set of questions by themselves — so it is less a task, and more an experience.

One of the biggest advantages however is related to the resulting material itself: the audio recording is a rich document that contains a person’s voice, traits of speech, tone, voice and accent, that also carry information, beyond the actual contents of what is being said. Actually, the keeping of the audio recordings is a practice that has been made much easier by digital technologies: as cassettes were, and still are, impractical and unlinkable, it was common to throw away the recordings after a transcript was produced, as ‘text in the form of the transcript has historically posed the most efficient human interface for long-form oral history interviews’ (Boyd & Larson, 2014); pushes from the archival community and, more recently, the introduction of the digital recording, easier and less awkward to use and listen to, gave new life to the voice in oral history. However, a whole digital infrastructure, that contains text as metadata, transcripts and indexes, is essential to keep the audio recording away
from the ‘threat of obscurity’ (Boyd & Larson, 2014). Furthermore, considering public library staff in specific, so much of their everyday work involves talking and interacting vocally with library users; at the moment of writing, job descriptions of library roles in the UK will very often mention good communication skills, good interpersonal skills, and customer-oriented attitudes as essential attributes of candidates. Being such relevant aspects of their job, library staff actual voices and speech might prove themselves insightful of the contemporary public library environment to future research.

Additionally, by addressing management and preservation of a collection of oral history interviews, this research can contribute to current debates with a study of a well-known type of document — the audio recorded oral history interview —, rather than create a new one that may require unique solutions and approaches. Also, as presented earlier, even though the audio recorded or written interview is not the only means through which people’s experiences of the public library has been documented, it is a quite common one, so a new collection of interviews adds to an existing corpus of knowledge, and can be compared with previous ones.

Finally, interviews in the present research were captured with a digital audio recorder that produces mp3 files; the records composing this collection are then ‘born-digital’ documents, something to be carefully addressed when considering the archival management and preservation of the collection.

**Who to interview?**

*Interviews with Librarians* captured voices of prominent librarians across the UK; the British Library collections involved staff from different departments of the British Library. Library Stories project and website recorded testimonies primarily from the users of Sheffield public libraries, and the Mass Observation Project responses to the directives on public libraries were also from library users. The aim of the present research is to create a collection of accounts with similar nature of the one found in Chris Paling’s book *Reading Allowed*, by interviewing public library staff, and capturing their personal views and experiences of everyday work in the public library.

And why interviewing the public library staff member? First, these are times of uncertainty to librarianship in British public libraries, with a number of libraries closing down following funding cuts, or being passed from paid staff to volunteers or self-service technology — a deskilling process that has many faces. As detailed by Ian Anstice, ‘Along with library closures, the other response to budget cuts attracting high media attention is the passing of branches to volunteers. From a handful
prior to 2010, there are now at least 384 such libraries in the UK ... Although replacing paid staff with volunteers is rarely claimed to be an actual improvement, local library users may reluctantly feel forced to become volunteers in order to keep their libraries open’ (Anstice, 2017). In this scenario, it can be said that there might be happening a significant change in who public library staff in the UK is and what they do, if compared to ten or even five years ago. If library users have been teaming up to voice their libraries' importance to their community and their lives, the voice of the library staff themselves hasn’t been that loud nor that personal; many narratives highlight the importance of the public library to individuals who use them, but very few shed light on the staff personal perspective. Related to that, the average public library staff is someone who won't be usually very vocal about this crucial, and at times tragic, moment to local lending public libraries, for either fear for their own job, or feeling of having their hands tied. A common notion in historical studies on the public library is that the history ‘from below’ is the one in which the users' voice is at the very centre, as the character of less authority in the story of the library; however, the present picture is one where public library staff is much less of a figure of authority and agency, and more of a person whose role has been 'democratised', and who is closer to the user as subject to decisions from the top, than to the power of council or borough legislation. Second, over the years in the UK public library users' thoughts and experiences have been documented, surveyed and looked into at a number of occasions: The Arts Council England conducted a few studies on public library service, including for example the Envisioning the library of the future research in 2012, which involved workshops and surveys on 'understanding what people value about libraries' and on how people use and think of public library services (Arts Council England). The Carnegie UK Trust ran surveys carried out by Ipsos MORI regarding use of and attitudes towards public libraries in 2011 and again in 2016 (Peachey, 2016). Alistair Black, having identified a gap in the documentation of the users' perspective in the academic field, called attention to the Mass Observation Project; now, the responses to directives on public libraries available from the MOP offer detailed, diary-like accounts of public library users. Library Stories collects testimonies from Sheffield public library users. There has been a positive turn of attention to the user of the British public library and the value of their perceptions and experiences, both to projects aiming at service assessment and improvements, and to provision of historical record for future research. The voice of the common public library user is being amplified, but there is no evidence of the same happening to the common public library staff, whose personal experiences seem to have been left undocumented.

The greatest limitation of the interview with a current member of a public library staff is that they might hold back talking about certain issues in their responses, for fear of upsetting their employer,
which in this case is the public local authority, or perhaps just that library management. However, this collection is aimed at forming a documentation on the public library, and not a documentary; by being interviewed, it is the intention that library staff feel cherished and rewarded, and not threatened by being questioned. This can be achieved by asking open questions that the interviewee can answer in a very free manner, deciding for themselves how detailed or personal their response is going to be; the limitation is that more delicate or political issues, which are also important, might not be mentioned, or stay off record.

What to ask?

A generic, not specifically tailored set of questions was produced; ahead of each interview, the questions were adapted to match the particularities of the interviewee and their library, e.g. in the interview with Wendy from City Business Library, a question was added about similarities and differences between a public reference library, like hers, and a public lending library; in the interview with Helen from the Barbican Library, the question about the architecture of the library building was specified to refer to the Barbican Estate and Barbican Centre complex. The questions were written with many references in mind: they come from the examination of the previously analysed collections of interviews, and from Chris Paling's *Reading Allowed* accounts, which makes sense with the fact that I was hoping to get from interviewees accounts of similar nature; the book itself doesn't contain questions and answers, but questions here were tailored having his narratives in mind. The question 'What does this library mean to you; what part does it play in your life?' has been asked to library users and staff in various projects, and seem to provide an insightful, humane and personal perspective, which cannot be easily quantified; it is in keeping with this research aim to build a collection of personal and unique narratives, rather than create a corpus of data to be processed and interpreted statistically. The schedule is reproduced below:

- First, could you tell us a bit about your background? When did you start working at this library? Did you used to work in public libraries before? Have you studied for a professional qualification in Library and Information Science?

- What does an average day at work in this library involve? What do you most enjoy doing in your routine? What is the most important ability that you feel you have to master to carry out your work here?

- What are your impressions of the library collection? You are a member of staff, but do you also take advantage the library as user as well, such as borrowing books?
Have you witnessed changes or renovations of the library building during your time here? What are your impressions of the physical aspects of this library? How important do you think is the architecture of a library building to people’s experience of it?

How have new digital information technologies affected this library and also your work?

Regarding the library users, do you see many of the same faces each day? Is there any specific library user that you are usually in contact with? Are there any groups of people that you especially enjoy working with?

What do you think is unique about public libraries, and maybe about this library in particular? What do you think makes people value them?

From your experience, what role do you think this library plays in the life of the local area? What do you think goes missing when a public library is closed down?

Finally, what does this library mean to you personally; what part does it play in your life?

Historian Alistair Black comment on this interview schedule was that it is appropriately neutral, which is consistent with not seeking answers to specific research questions. Keeping these questions neutral was indeed the intention, and also as broad as possible, in order to build testimonies that touch a large variety of topics. As explained above, the focus of the interview is on the personal experiences and views of the interviewee, more than on obtaining specific information.

Where to store it, how to make it accessible?

This is a structural issue to consider when building a collection of documents, specially in a case like this dissertation, where I am not a curator in a library or archive, but a researcher undertaking this project independently.

From an early stage into this work, before running the interviews, but having already read about digital archives and the digital humanities, I determined that the interviews as a collection would be housed primarily in the Layers of London website. This decision comes from a look into current archival trends, new relationships between the Internet and the humanities, and the digital revolution in oral history; it is also resulted from a balance: after analysis, it was considered that the advantages of storing the collection in Layers of London, along with the website appealing nature and characteristics, outweigh the limitations and current issues it presents. This discussion is detailed below, for being regarded as essential aspect of the methodology:
First, an introduction of the project: Layers of London is a website being developed by the IHR, Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Studies of the University of London, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is currently in beta version, so even though it wasn’t officially launched yet, its main structure and features can be accessed and tested via http://alpha.layersoflondon.org/ (all information regarding the Layers of London website in this dissertation refers to its form on the 18th September, 2017). The website is essentially a current map of London, which can be overlaid with historical maps of the city, or pinned with notes with historical information related to that location (fig. 8, 9).

![Layers of London website](image1)

![Layers of London website](image2)

fig. 8 (top) and fig. 9: Screenshots, Layers of London website, Homepage and The Map, respectively. Note the Search button and the menu of Collections and Overlays on the top of The Map; ‘Add to Map’ and ‘Create Collection’ buttons on the bottom. [click on images to access].
The IHR is working in partnership with organisations like the British Library and the London Metropolitan Archives to collect, digitise and upload to Layers of London the city's historical maps; however, one major map is being built by the website out of the RAF 1944 collection of aerial photos of London: the website visitor is invited to be a ‘Layers of London Layer Maker’ by matching the photos with the present London map using Georeferencer (fig. 10, 11). The other way ‘to help document the evolving history of London’ is by adding pins to the map, with stories or any other type of account, in text form, image, audio, video, or even a dataset. This is a highly interactive historical and archival website, as it is open for anyone to contribute to its structure and content; engagement is essential. As Project Director Matthew Davies explained in the inaugural post of the Layers of London blog: ‘This will eventually be one of the largest public engagement projects on London’s history, unique because it involves digital technology to engage people with heritage for the whole of London, over more than 2,000 years of history. What makes it even more unique is that most of the content for our new website will be provided by the public, created by public engagement and schools programmes and by “crowd-sourcing”’ (Davies, 2017).

fig. 10: Screenshot, Georeferencer on the Layers of London website. Photos of the RAF 1944 collection of aerial photos of London are available for the website visitor to reference to the present map of the city. [click on image to access].
‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection in Layers of London is the one I have created to house the interviews captured in this research; the website visitor can find on the list of collections in the main map. By clicking on it, only the pins relative to that collection show on the map. The advantages of doing so are many: first, it is being developed by the Institute of Historical Research, which is almost a century old and is part of the University of London; this institutional support and stability means good prospects for the preservation of the materials being produced in the Layers of London project. Related to that, the public funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund also implies that the project will have to demonstrate a high level of commitment to not only producing knowledge on London’s heritage, but also to protecting it, and making it available and open to all. Another positive aspect about this is that, being inside a website developed by an Institute dedicated to the study of history, ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection has already a point of contact with people doing historical research; it is expected that, after officially launched, the website will receive a good amount of attention from the community of historians and researchers of London and its history.

Second, Layers of London is a historical and archival website that is in tune with the most recent trends in the use of the Internet to produce and disseminate knowledge in the humanities. As Gross & Harmon have argued, the humanities do feature examples of websites that innovate in terms of communication and visualisation, but they are far from representing the mainstream of practice in the
humanities, or of historical research. Layers of London, however, takes advantage of the Internet in many ways: it is free and open to all to access and contribute; it applies the crowdsourcing approach structurally, so visitors are invited to participate in georeferencing and building maps, or in adding stories and materials to the main map, or both; it has the idea of sharing and co-creation at its core, in contrast to traditional historical research; the production and the dissemination of knowledge happen simultaneously, and the creator of content is also its consumer. These attributes are described by Giannachi in *Archive Everything*, where she also points out some successful recent online archives that, similarly to Layers of London, encourage visitors to share their stories by attaching them to specific places, such as Findery and History Pin: ‘These projects confirmed that pinpointing memories and stories to locations, a tradition inherited from memorial culture, and using maps to prompt the telling of personalised stories in relation to these locations, is ... an increasingly popular and rewarding strategy to generate engagement with local history in that they can facilitate the creation of a sense of presence (and so also of belonging) within that history among a particular community’ (Giannachi, 2016). The qualities of the oral history approach, including its nature of a history built from a group of people’s narratives that may defy or at least complement established interpretations, and the idea that it has no single author but many contributors, is in great consonance with open and free place pinpointing and memory (self-)archiving — as enabled in Layers of London website.

![fig. 12: Screenshot, Layers of London website, The Map webpage. 'Add Note' window.](image)
Third, inside Layers of London, ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection becomes part of a thicker London, as in ‘thick mapping’, a concept of the Harvard metaLAB project HyperCities. The authors of the book about the project define: ‘Thickness means extensibility and polyvocality: diachronic and synchronic, temporally layered, and polyvalent ways of authoring, knowing, and making meaning. ... By eschewing any kind of universalism, it is a kind of analysis that is intrinsically incomplete, always under contestation, and never reaching any kind of final, underlying truth’. Hypercities: Thick mapping in the Digital Humanities, then, ‘is about the possibility of telling stories, of narrating places, and of producing new configurations of knowledge in which every past, present, and future is a place. In this sense, mapping history is about curating places, conjuring and caring for ghosts’ (Presner, Shepard & Kawano, 2014). Layers of London can be considered a project of HyperCity; inside it, ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection can build up one more layer on this thick London, and can be seen, accessed and interpreted within a number of different contexts: against a nineteenth-century map, a collection of architectural plans of buildings, or other people’s narratives about any topic; possibilities are as varied as what is added to the map.

Fourth, if licensed under a Creative Commons license, the audio recorded interviews can be very easily uploaded and then accessed through the notes in the pins on the map; it is just a matter of clicking and listening. The format of the note is such that you can add in the ‘Description’ field any information relative to the material you are adding, which is useful for detailing the Creative Commons terms, as well as adding the appropriate metadata and other context-related data. Also, there is the possibility of leaving the collection ‘Public’, which means anyone can add pins under that collection — keeping open the opportunity for people or groups of people to engage with the collection as they please.

The are some limitations and issues about storing this collection of interviews with public library staff in Layers of London. The obvious one is that it is restricted to staff from public libraries of London, rather than from the entire country. Alistair Black asked about this aspect, inciting thought: ‘What variables are at play in respect of London? In fact, London may not produce meaningful variables at all. And what about someone who had a career outside London too; is that part to be discarded?’ — all very significant methodological issues. Layers of London is about London; the interviews are then held with staff currently employed in public libraries of London, or with people that once worked in a public library of London, and the interview is then pinned onto the place of the public library in question. First, the ‘London restriction’ is not particularly unwelcome due to practical issues: this is a dissertation being undertaken individually by myself, for just a few months, and I am based in London, so limiting the scope to the city’s public libraries is not a bad idea. Second, I assumed that, being London so big, there would be enough variety of public libraries and of staff experiences, so that restricting the radius to London would represent less of a limitation, and more simply a narrowing down from all UK public libraries. Third, while it is true that London may not produce meaningful variables, it is also true that a public library is many times more impactful to its local area and community than it is relevant to London (or any large city with multiple libraries) as a whole anyway; in that case, it is then a good idea to pick London, as it is home to numerous different boroughs and neighbourhoods and local communities, each with their own specificities. Fourth, the main focus of the interview is on the bit of the interviewees’ career in a specific public library (of London), but everything else that did not happen there or not even in London is also asked about, and the interviewee can feel free to talk about that as much as they like. Elisabeth’s interview, for example, covers her years working in a public library in London in the 1980s, but also later developments of her career that happened elsewhere, and how those early years in the public library impacted the latter. Another example is Wes’s interview, where he makes many references and comparisons between his previous job in Somerset libraries and his current position in a library in Southwark. Fifth, if it might
well be the case that interviews with public library staff of London libraries will not show any specificity about public librarianship in London as a unique entity, it is though likely that what interviewees have to say will be relevant as a piece of layer of a London history from below; that their narratives might me telling of some aspect about living or working in London now — in which case it is interesting that their accounts are embedded in this website that aims exactly at collecting this type of material, in a way that bigger pictures may emerge.

Another aspect that should be addressed as a limitation in Layers of London being the archive of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection is that, as an open website with free access, where interviews will be shared under a Creative Commons license, it does require an extra level of involvement from the interviewee; they will be not only consenting to be interviewed, but also to have their non-anonymous, personal views and experiences published on the World Wide Web. The implication is that this probably means fewer people willing to participate — comparing to the case of anonymous questionnaires, or interviews given just as contribution to a dissertation and not disseminated online. Openly and freely accessible interviews might also mean that libraries from councils that are more politically unstable, that have recently closed branches or passed them to volunteers or third-party organisations, will be less willing to authorise their staff to concede interviews. So, even though every library service faces cuts, it is reasonable to say that, given the exposure of an interview made available online, currently employed library staff featuring in this collection is very likely to be from a borough that is better off in terms of its library service. The present scenario of uncertainty is an issue that interviewees will comment on anyway, even if it is not affecting them directly, because, as said before, every council face some level of budget pressure, and also because it is addressed openly in the interview question ‘From your experience, what role do you think this library plays in the life of the local area? What do you think goes missing when a public library is closed down?’.

Finally, Layers of London is a website that at this moment is still under development, which means some instability regarding the format of the information being displayed. Additionally, it is not a library catalogue, and it is not tailored specifically for housing this collection — on the contrary, it is supposed to be universal, able to fit any kind of material. On one hand, this does imply that the website will not meet every need and specificity of this collection of interviews, and some aspects of the interviews records and metadata will need to be adapted to fit in the website; on the other hand, in Layers of London the collection will be part of a much larger project, and feature alongside many different documents and collections regarding the history of London.
THE COLLECTION
OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSIONS

This section is divided in two parts: the first one discusses the collection in its content, and the second, the collection in its format. Essentially, it is about the outcomes of the interviews as they present themselves by the end of September, 2017, in relation to the two main themes that their collection aimed at addressing: first, Library History and library investigation and research; second, the digital, online archive and archival practices in the twentieth-first century.

It is planned that interviews to ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection will keep being carried out after the conclusion of this dissertation, and that the collection should reach the double of its present size by the end of this year. At this moment, the collection consists of eight interviews with library staff of public libraries of London, current and former; six of the interviews were audio recorded, and another two were done by e-mail, consisting of just text. These interviews were captured and collected between March and August, 2017. A list of the interviewees, in the chronological order of their interviews, follows below; click on the names to access the interviews at the Layers of London website:

1. Dave Walker, Kensington Central Library (current staff), audio recorded
2. Tim Reid, Kensington Central Library (current staff), audio recorded
3. Helen Tremaine, Barbican Library (current staff), just text
4. Wendy Foster, City Business Library (current staff), audio recorded
5. Elisabeth, Hounslow Library (former staff), audio recorded
6. Harpreet Dhillon, City Libraries (former staff), just text
7. Lucy, Dulwich Library (current staff), audio recorded
8. Wes White, Canada Water Library (current staff), audio recorded
1. The interviews: meaning, contents, emerging themes

What does this collection mean for library research and Library History; as resource, what potentials and possibilities it presents and enables? To answer that, another look into discussions on Library History is required. In his article *The Library as History: Library History Research after the Cultural Turn*, Elmar Mittler statements point to a Library History that has not changed simply in focus, from a narrower to a wider scope and interest, but also structurally, by the turning of the library from plain object of historical investigation, to the library as resource for historical — and cultural — studies: ‘the focus is now the library as history, rather than the history of libraries’ (Mittler, 2016).

According to him, this is possible through establishing connections with other disciplines, and being able to see how so many aspects of the library in history can be fundamental to understanding different historical and cultural issues, such as book history (including social history of the use of books, history of reading, book as cultural object etc.); class, gender and community studies; studies of memory and cultural transfer, among others: ‘The main focus of library history is changing with new research methods and the interests of cultural history. Library history as institutional or organizational history is really only of minor interest. Rather, the relevance of the library as part of the history of different fields of study is coming into greater focus’.

This idea of applying interdisciplinarity as way to give meaning to library history is shared by other researchers. Speaking to library historians, in the provocative article *Should We Write Library History?*, Kristian Jensen from the British Library argues that library history as a discrete discipline does not and should not exist; rather, that there is opportunity to write about libraries from a historical perspective, but if intrinsically related to other disciplines: ‘So even if there is no Library History as a unified discipline, there is space for historiography on libraries, the writing of the histories of libraries rooted within disciplines, be they political, economic, cultural history, art historical, the study of vernacular literatures, the classics, politics or sociology. We owe it to the importance of our subject matter to be ever more reflective of the field where our specific work is placed and aimed, who our readers are, and whether our method is appropriate’ (Jensen, 2016). He does believe in the importance of the subject of library history, but asks library historians to ‘redouble our effort to become an integral part of the discourse of others’, as that is where the real contribution of library history lies. In this same article, Jensen does express a disagreement with historian Alistair Black over the placement of library studies within the discipline of Information Science; however, it can be confidently said that Jensen would agree with Black when it comes to his views on the value of the study of so-called minutiae in library history: ‘precisely because they [libraries] are such highly
textured, idiosyncratic worlds of cultural activity, they can also be studied at the ‘micro’ level, with researcher addressing questions, for example, of how people behaved in libraries, the nature of disciplinary controls imposed, the detailed motives underpinning specific instances of library use and the nature of interpersonal relationships, whether between user and user, user and staff, or staff and staff’ (Black & Hoare, 2006). At this point of the text, an earlier work of Black is cited: ‘The study of minutiae in library history provides ammunition for fresh theoretical perspectives revealing the meaning of common, microscopic social practices and beliefs leading to the decoding of the discourses and practices of librarians, readers, benefactors or promoters’ (Black, 1995, In: Black & Hoare, 2006).

The interviews of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection, then, offer open and freely available documents on this minutiae, on personal perspectives that can actually prove themselves to be useful windows to a variety of studies in other disciplines (as exemplified further below), but that are also originated from enquiries on library history. It is believed and hoped that this collection is as relevant and useful to library research and Library History as the previously presented evidence collected from the 1999 Mass Observation directive on the British public library, put forward by the Library and Information Commission 2000: according to the authors of the report of the latter, ‘as a study of an “everyday” social institution, the results of which could prove to be of interest in their own right and which could be said to reinforce the proposition that investigating the sociology of libraries tells us as much about society as it does about libraries themselves’ (Black & Crann, 2002). The interviews in this research are telling about the present public library as much as they are telling about their whole social, political, cultural and economic milieu — fulfilling the purpose of Library History. This analysis of outcomes benefits a lot from Black & Crann’s report of the results of the Mass Observation 1999 directive, both as reference of how to look at the information gathered, and as comparison of what was said about the public library, 17 years on. The authors prediction about the Mass Observation collected materials had already proved to be correct: ‘these contemporary accounts will inevitably be transformed into primary historical sources, and as the years pass their value in this regard will increase’ (Black & Crann, 2002), as their use in the present research shows; the same is expected of the interviews of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection in future.

And just like Black & Crann affirmed about the Mass Observation of the public library, it is also true about ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection that it is ‘open to a multiplicity of interpretations’ (Black & Crann, 2000); and like theirs, mine presented here is just a ‘preliminary, exploratory analysis of the materials’, rather than a definitive evaluation of findings. The aim of this first analytical look
shown here is to ‘encourage further investigation’, offer an introduction to the interviews’ contents, as well as present a few examples of how the collection can be used.

It must be remembered that it was never an objective to provide a precise representative sample of public library staff experience through this collection, and the limitations of the sampling in this research was detailed in the 'Methods' section. In contrast, this collection attempts to reinforce the uniqueness of each narrative, and the value of the anecdotal or personal narrative to establishing meaning and discussing more macro-level issues, beyond surveys and analyses that make use of big data and statistics. As a collection, though, these interviews do give a glimpse of the work and experiences of public library staff of London in 2017.

Emerging themes

Many interdisciplinary topics emerged from the interviews, as expected. Some have been mentioned by a few of the interviewees, others by all of them; however, the intention here is not to determine what is typical from the information gathered, but rather look into these accounts with an attentive eye to potential relationships with other fields of research and interest: how these interviews can contribute to their understanding?

In an interview conceded especially for this dissertation, Seif El Rashidi, from the team working on Layers of London, said about ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection: ‘Your work is valuable; it’s original material; it doesn’t exist, I mean, it exists because you made it exist. I would never imagine; there is no easy way for me to find out that someone has done research on libraries, and has made it available; and by pinning it on Layers, once we properly launch the project, you will get loads of people, a very wide audience. Also, I think, the idea of our Layers is that, for example, you might not be interested in libraries, but you might be interested in a borough — Kensington, and your library interview could be interesting from that perspective, or from the perspective of who uses public institutions, or; so, I think it opens it up to a very broad field of people that might be doing a project on women working in the 1960s, or how do Saturday jobs lead to full-time employment; there are many themes in your work that all kind of, side to the reason that you are doing the project’ (transcribed from recorded interview). Having listened to the interviews in ‘The Public Libraries of London’, he illustrated the interdisciplinary nature of the content of the interviews; indeed, they might be of great interest for people who are not looking particularly at libraries. He mentioned
**Saturday jobs**, as it is a topic that appeared in some of the interviews: library work as a first job, as Saturday job; but independently from the specificity of the issue of Saturday jobs, all interviewees start their narratives by describing their background, how and when they have started working in libraries, whether they have had other jobs in the past etc; some also describe the difference between the general employment and careers environment when they have started, and now:

I started in Kensington and Chelsea libraries just over ten years ago. I was a Saturday Assistant in North Kensington Library, which is a small community library, which does sort of reference enquiries, lending collection and the children’s library, all in one small building; access to computers, that sort of thing. (Tim)

So, I started working in libraries in 1978; I had of sort of after college, I had a brief period of doing other stuff and then I started working in libraries. And like a lot of people in libraries, you start it thinking ‘Oh this will do me for a few years’, because it's quite congenial work; and in 1978, which is like history now, it used to be quite easy to find jobs. You know… I got my first job in a library simply by writing to a number of local authorities, saying ‘Have you got any jobs?’; and a couple of them called me for an interview, the first one was Kensington, and they offered me a job. Its wasn’t hard word, I mean, my wife started working at about the same time as me, just a couple years later; left school, did a number of interviews, a bank, post office, a library, and… she’s finally sort of plumped on a library. So, it’s quite different from the way the climate has changed over that whole period. (Dave)

So, I started in libraries when I was 16—well, actually before that, when I was 15 I did work experience in a library, which was in a leisure centre, so it's one of those kind of modern libraries, it was out in a estate, and I did my work experience there, because I had a contact; and then a year later I thought I would probably get a Saturday job, so went back and asked for a job; and it was easier back then than it is now: it was just a case of asking; kind of got it; so I had a Saturday job there, just as a general assistant; worked occasional Sundays – and I did that for five years, and within that time I went to university in Sussex; so I came back every weekend, and went to work, and then went back again – but it was worth it, and I really enjoyed it. (Lucy)

Another topic of interest that appears with prominence on the interviews is that of local studies, or local history. As hinted by Seif in his comment, there might be a few researchers looking at Layers of London with a broader interest, or for whom a seventeenth century map of London made available online is especially valuable; however, in general, for the majority of the audience of Layers of London, who is not necessarily part of the academic community, the greatest value of the website lies in more recent information: in what can be traced back to just a few generations, and in what can be seen around the area, the neighbourhood, the street of the very place where they live (or have lived) and work (or have worked) — the familiar, local places. The local public library, even if usually described as ‘heart of the community’, might not be the first thing one thinks of when starting to do research on a specific local area, or borough, but as ‘The Public Libraries of London’ interviews show, the local public library is very revealing about its location:
We get a 1000 people a day here, which is the busiest library I've ever worked in; and we get a real mixture; obviously being in a London borough, it is quite diverse anyway. But it's interesting being in Dulwich; it's very wealthy affluent area, and a lot of people around here are of retirement age, or they've retired early, they're very wealthy, they're quite well read, so we've got a lot of customers base like that; but we're also so close to Peckham and Camberwell and other areas which aren't the same, so we get a real mix: one minute you'll be speaking to someone from Dulwich who is in like, a few million-pound house in Dulwich Village; and then you'll be speaking to someone who's on jobseeker's; we have across the road like, an asylum place, so... We get all sorts of people coming in. (Lucy)

Some authorities of course have a more distributed kind of setup; there isn't one big library. But Kensington is not a large borough. But it is one that is fairly concerned with its own history and heritage, at a sort of, not only at a sort of council level, but I think that people who live in Kensington e Chelsea are quite conscious of it being a separate entity, and it being a special place. And... So it is the idea of sort of having a big prestigious building, you know, as part of that service is quite in keeping with Kensington and Chelsea, and generally; I mean, you know what sort of borough it is, it's a borough with buildings of national importance; it's... lots of famous and infamous people have lived in Kensington and Chelsea; it's been an artistic centre... The impression given in the media is often that it is a highly affluent borough; it is, but at the same time there is a social mix in Kensington and Chelsea; not only in North Kensington, but also in other parts of the borough; even in Chelsea you will find the World's End Estate, for example; When it was built, it was the largest council estate in Europe. So there is still a significant working class presence. And of course, another thing about Kensington and Chelsea is that it is an enormously diverse in terms of ethnic and cultural background of its residents. And there are sort of... my son went to Bousfield School in the sort of Brompton area, and 49 different languages spoken there at the time he was there; and this diversity is something that the council has supported over the years. (Dave)

These descriptions of the local area of the libraries from the perspective of the public library staff is an especially rich one, as they stand on a privileged position in terms of contact with the local community. And even when describing their own specific local area, an attribute highlighted by many of the interviewees was diversity, in ethnicity and income, which is surely a theme of great interest to the researcher looking at London:

So, Hounslow is very close to Heathrow Airport. And as a borough, it goes from sort of Chiswick, through to sort of Heston and Cranford and Bedfont, which are heading towards H A. So you've got, you even had back then, quite affluent areas, so it's in the West of London, through to perhaps less affluent areas, and I certainly lived in, it was the borough I lived in, and I was certainly not in an affluent area. And it had, even back 30, 35 years ago, a high percentage of population who were from ethnic minorities. So it's from that sort of area of London that sort of covers Ealing and Southall, which was always an area for a high number of Asians, so coming from the Asian Subcontinent, and certainly also coming, the Asians that had to leave Kenya, as part of that sort of mass migration away from the troubles there. So I grew up in a very multicultural environment, and the libraries reflected that. So when I was working in the libraries, I keep saying, a good 30, 35 years ago, we had collection of books in a range of Indic languages,
because obviously you’ve got these sort of, you know, first generation immigrants coming over, and wanting to be able to use the library, not just for the sort of assimilation or learning English, but to read books in their own languages!

(Elisabeth)

These accounts that detail perceptions of local aspects confirm that initial hypothesis that, through their narratives, unique and personal, public library staff would have quite a great number of things to say which would be telling about London — reinforcing the idea that this collection of interviews would benefit from, and also contribute to, being stored and displayed alongside other historical materials about London, in the Layers of London website.

The interviews are also a potential valuable resource for those investigating the **history of information**. This is a field of increasing interest and growing research community. Whether or not library history can be understood as completely inserted within information history is object of heated debate, but in any case, contents of the interviews of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ can be extremely valuable to information history, such as descriptions of the workings of information technologies used in public libraries in the 1980s, perceptions of change in reading habits and their relationship to public library use, accounts of the interviewees’ own library use, impressions of the libraries’ collection and how they have changed over the decades, and so many others.

Below follows an example of discussion in **library history** driven primarily by the contents of the interviews in ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection:

In *Part of our lives: a people’s history of the American public library*, Wiegand expresses his frustration about public library staff saying ‘Public libraries are not just warehouses of books anymore’, a statement he explains he hears often, and that it reveals the professionals’ lack of knowledge about their own history — once it only takes a little bit of research to conclude that public libraries were *never just* warehouses of books; from his own research, for example, he affirms that the American people has always reached for the public library for ‘information, reading, and place’ (Wiegand, 2015). However, it is possible to agree absolutely with Wiegand’s view, and at the same time be open to see that some variations of that statement, such as ‘libraries are not just about books anymore’, can actually be carrying a relative but important truth. Indeed, a glimpse into public library history makes clear that they have always functioned as a social and cultural apparatus, well beyond the storing of books, but certain realities about everyday public library work, as revealed in the interviews in this research, should not be ignored, and instead be considered carefully:
I think the library… Libraries have faced a lot of change as well over the sort of last 30 or 40 years. And… You know, I can still remember, it was just books, people would come in every week or every month, get their pile of books, and you know, then they’d go away again. And books themselves were often relatively expensive items in the past, and libraries provided a way of giving access to a large number of books that would otherwise be inaccessible to most people.

(Dave)

You had your regulars, who would come in every week; I mean, both my parents were like that, and still are to a certain extent, you know, this habit of going to the library, every week, or every two weeks, you get your stack of books, you read them, you take them back, and you always take out the full limit of the number of books that you can get, because, we’re talking about a generation of people who just read because there wasn’t anything else to do for leisure; you know, going to the cinema was expensive, there weren’t televisions, so my parents were brought up to read, that was all that they’d do for their leisure time. And my mum still does; still goes to the local library here in Harrogate, reserves the books that she wants by her favourite authors; even though, you know, she’s got a Kindle, she’s perhaps got a little bit more disposable income now, so she could buy books — but ‘why would you?!’ (Elisabeth)

What interviewees described looks like a process of great diversification of both library work and of ‘what libraries are about’. They give a sense that it is not the case that what public libraries were about before was just books, but rather that books were the main amongst few other different things that staff dealt with in their everyday, and that attracted people to the library; it seems that dealing with the organisation and the materiality of books was a very big part of library work. The emergency of other types of documents and new ways of producing and consuming them did diversify what the public library ‘is about’; while we should acknowledge that the place of the library, their social aspect, and information needs had always driven people to the public library, and still do, digital information technologies is now also what the library ‘is about’, ‘not just books’:

we’ve seen IT going from a little thing in the fringes of your work, to being a core part of what you do. And not being able to sort of function without that. (Dave)

Our daily routine consists of having regular sessions on the enquiries desk and then periods ‘off desk’ for us to complete our other tasks. Enquiries desk sessions involve assisting customers with finding resources in the library, accessing eBooks and other online resources or signposting to other resources. Sourcing books for reserves, joining new members, dealing with account issues, managing the public IT suite — dealing with technical issues and helping customers with online applications and printing as well as helping less digitally savvy customers find general information for example ‘where’s my nearest job centre?’ (Helen)

What is the agency that pushes digital information technologies into the public library? The first step to start answering that question is to discard the idea of a natural evolution of information technologies into pervasiveness, and consider the great influence of the ‘information society’ discourse and its relationship with the advance of neoliberal agendas. But the evidence from the 1999’s Mass
Observation on Public Libraries and the interviews of this collection provide clues. From the analysis of the responses of volunteers to the Mass Observation directive of 1999, Black & Crann concluded: ‘Generally, new information and communication technologies in libraries — referred to generally by users as “computers”, with little attempt to distinguish between functions — were seen by contributors as merely another tool in the public library’s armoury. Many retained the belief, in fact, that such technologies, including the Internet, are simply “peripheral to the main activity, which is still the lending of books”’ (Black & Crann, 2000). It is extremely insightful to compare these perceptions of the public library of just over 17 years ago, to the ones gathered today in ‘The Public Libraries of London’:

I already mentioned that with my own job being a lot about helping people to use the internet and use computers; when I first started working in libraries, we did have public use computers, but there wasn’t nearly as much expectation that we would be providing a service that would guide people through getting started with them; they were available for those people who wanted to use them. But at that point – we’re talking about 15, 16 years ago – it tended to be, there was still much more of a division between people who were already wanting to use the PCs, and people who were just interested in browsing the books and so on; whereas now, there are a lot or services that the council and other organisations provide, that they are encouraging people to, well, encouraging, stroke in many cases, insisting on people accessing those services online, so, filling forms in online, and we feel that we have the responsibility as information providers and helping people to access information, as well as, as part of the council service, with these public access computers, where people being asked to come and complete these tasks, to help people to understand how to do it; so yeah, that’s changed very much while I’ve been here; and I’d say that library staff member going back another 10, 15 years, very often you wouldn’t have even had PCs as a default part of what you’re offering in libraries. (Wes)

But yeah, we are encouraged, as you said, everyone is encouraged to do things online now, whether it’s like the government, the council, any sort of service encourages people to do online – some things you have to do online: so you’ve benefits; so we have a lot of people coming in and saying they need to claim, or they need to do this, and they don’t even know what a mouse does, so we provide those sessions and that’s a huge part of the job, is our learning engagement, and try and narrow that divide, with people being able to use the computers, and be digital... (Lucy)

What Wes and Lucy describe show that they understand that an important part of the interest and engagement with digital information technologies that they see in the public libraries is encouraged, and sometimes imposed, by external agencies, such as the local authority. This is in line with the well-known UK government move to turn as much of their service into online and digital as possible. So part of that diversification of the public library is accommodating into the service all these needs related to new digital information technologies, driven both from the top, the local government authority, and from below, the users — who, when it comes to digital technologies, come to the library
sometimes as subjects to external pressure, and other times as actors pursuing their free interests. The **role of mediation** of the public library and of the public library staff becomes then ever more prominent:

> We moved in that time, from that point where you go into the library, and libraries were the main information gatekeepers; although still, I mean, everyone used them; to a point when now, you know, a lot of searching is done online, and librarians are at pains to help people these days. You can’t always trust the sources, the first thing that the search on Google brings you, and you don’t take Wikipedia as the apple of the truth; you have to sort of judge your sources, and that still applies, and we still tell people to do that. And a lot of people say to me now, and I think it’s true, that there’s still a lot of general ignorance about how to find information out; even though you’d think it’s at your fingertips, it’s not, and people often need some guidance in the act of looking for information. (Dave)

> One customer who is sadly no longer with us, started to write a diary and memoir on one of our computers as he didn’t have one at home. We gave him a few 1 to 1 sessions then he was off — he was 92. Another one of our IT customers, in her 90s, is now using her tablet to access Facebook and email so she can keep in touch with distant family. (Helen)

> Like I said, it’s a community hub, so people come here for so many reasons, and... Almost becomes that, if we weren’t here, we get 1000 people a day, where’d they go? What would they going to deal with...? Because the sort queries we get are the queries they want to ask the council, the queries they want to ask someone in education, or... But every other service has been cut as well, so if they want to contact the council, they already have to sit on a phone for however long just to get an answer to a question; sometimes they just want to speak to someone, face to face, ask the question and get an answer, and we’re here to do that. (Lucy)

Mediation has deepened and diversified, and that impacted on what people value about the public library. A crucial aspect of the public library that has always been valued is the place, but what interviews show is that perhaps the **reason** why the place of the public library is valued might have changed significantly. Again, a comparison with the 1999’s Mass Observation is insightful; on the report about the findings of the data gathering, Black & Crann wrote: ‘The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, believes that the public library is “on the whole a place which people feel very happy about going into’. Evidence from our survey tends to support this observation. Far from being cold and formal places, libraries are seen as cosy — “warm and safe places for a person to while away a few hours” (D2829). A public library, commented one observer, is “a comfortable place to be with pleasant likeable people” (G2134). They are perceived, in short, as “havens of tranquility” (H1543), often “light, airy, and blissfully silent” (G226); a library is a “world of silence and intelligence” (L1504)’ (Black & Crann, 2000). Even though they do report some users’ insecurities about the then increasing commercialisation of the public library, including of its space, the value of the place seems to lie mainly in its **environment**. Interviewees of ‘The Public Libraries of London’
mention that being a nice place to be in is a good quality of a library, but there is an aspect about the public library as place that seem to be very new in people’s discourse: that it is ‘the last’ surviving public indoors space where one can go and stay and use, without having to spend any money:

Public Libraries are unique in that they are the only indoor public space I can think of that is open to all, is free and is somewhere you can have a very personal experience, shaped by your own tastes and needs, as part of the community. It’s private and public at the same time. In an art gallery you go to see the art and you’re aware it’s not ‘your space’. The library belongs to the community — it’s their space. It’s a truly democratic space and it’s a refreshingly non-commercial space. I think this is ever more important as there become fewer non-commercial public spaces in society. (Helen)

I think their uniqueness lies in the fact that they are related to a philanthropic ideology. They are not businesses, but institutions. They are not meant to generate income or make profit. They are meant to serve communities regardless of wealth or status. (Harpreet)

So... and for me... I’m trying to think, if I wasn’t a library staff, and I was, say, just in my area where I live, If the library went away... Suddenly access to a space where I can go and browse literature, and chance upon things without feeling any concern that the person behind the counter is hoping that I’m going to buy the book, or wondering how long I’m going to thumb through it before I decide to buy it or not, none of that is in the library; it feels strange if people didn’t feel able to just browse here. (Wes)

And I think also, it’s there aren’t many various places where you can go to now and find something that can be really entertaining, really informative, where you have a huge amount of choice, and you can access it at that point for free, and go away with it; you know, if it’s a bookshop, then you’re paying for it; if it’s... I suppose a comparable thing would be another public service like the NHS, but people don’t tend to use the health service for fun, so that’s a real thing that I think that people do value, that it can be... That there’s a lot of choice involved here. (Wes)

I mean, it’s the one thing that libraries offer, and that nowhere else does, where you can come in, you can sit down, you can read, study, not in your own home, and no one will challenge you. You know, in a cafe, there will always be an issue of, you have to sort of have a certain level of consumption of their stuff for them to be willing to let you stay on the premises. I mean, there are still a few, few other places where you are allowed... I mean, the only other real substantial public space like that would be museums, then of course they don’t have quite the same facilities for you to sit with a desk. (Tim)

‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection aims at being an enabler and motivator for discovering and formulating questions, more than a provider of answers; the question in library history that I, a library researcher myself, saw on this collection, as described above, is why the value of the public library as place seems to have shifted in perspective, and if so, how? It is expected that the collection will be able to incite investigation not only in library history, but in other fields of research as well, as exemplified in this section.
2. The interviews: Layers of London as digital archive

The aim of this section is to provide an analysis of the collection *inside* Layers of London, in a similar way to what was done with other collections in the ‘Background Literature’ of this research. The collection in Layers of London will be discussed in terms of the process of its creation, accessibility and discoverability, context provided, strengths and weaknesses, and possibilities for future developments.

Accessing and using Layers of London is free, and anyone can browse the map freely, but to be able to add content to the map, the visitor is required to create an account: to Sign Up, you must provide first and last name, an e-mail address, and create a password; when exploring the map, the ‘Sign Up’ window does not show up on the screen unless you attempt to add a pin to the map. Signing up is quick and easy; the collections you create and the pins you add to the map are attached to your identification — when accessing ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection, for example, a badge shows up at the bottom of the screen, saying ‘Showing The Public Libraries of London collection by Mariana Ou’ (fig. 14). So content in Layers of London is not anonymous; even though a false name can be provided, there is always an e-mail account linked to it. Compulsory signing in is an important tool to guarantee that content being uploaded is correctly attributed to the creator of the pin, as well as to inhibit anonymous content. Additionally, the website is still an institutional one; it carries the name of the Institute of Historical Research and of the University of London on it, and the credibility and reliability that this passes to the website cannot be undermined by anonymous or inappropriate content. Creating an account is the only requirement that the website imposes to participation, though; it is a free resource that is not for profit, so your data shouldn’t be used for commercial purposes. However, at the moment, the ‘Terms and Conditions’ and ‘Privacy Policy’ buttons on the homepage of the website redirect to pages with no content, so you don’t really have any information regarding those issues — which is a big thing to not have, despite the fact that it is very unlikely, for the very nature of the website, that your information will be misused. Evidently, this is something that will be addressed in later versions of the website, which is still in beta.

![fig. 14 Screenshot, Layers of London website, identification of content creator](image)

fig. 14 Screenshot, Layers of London website, identification of content creator [click on image to access].
Another tool used to try to guarantee regular sharing of materials is an ‘alert’ that pops up on the screen, when you are about to finish adding a pin to the map: it asks, ‘Using someone else’s stuff?’, and suggests that you go back to edit note details and add a link to the reference you may have collected the content from; or you may confirm that you have already done so, or that you do not need to reference anyone, and proceed to save the note (fig. 15). The ‘alert window’ is a good tool to raise awareness about sharing of copyrighted content, but is that enough to actually prevent it? My view is that Layers of London had to find a balance between enabling and encouraging sharing of a variety of materials in a seamless way, and preventing copyrighted content from being irregularly uploaded to the website. In general, very few people have a good understanding of online sharing and copyright regulations, and if this issue was considered strictly, no online crowdsourced project could be undertaken, for fear of copyright infringements. So solutions such as the one found by Layers of London are an attempt to address referencing and rights without hindering too much the process of free sharing.

![Screenshot, Layers of London website, attribution alert window.](image)

fig. 15 Screenshot, Layers of London website, attribution alert window.
On the Map, there are the buttons ‘Add to Map’ and ‘Create collection’ at the bottom of the screen. To create a collection (fig. 16), you must choose a Title, write a Description, and pick a type: Public, Personal, or Team; what each of the options imply is detailed, but it is primarily related with who has permission to add pins/notes to that collection: anyone, only you, or some selected people. I have kept ‘The Public Libraries of London’ as ‘Public’, in order to enable future engagement by others. Even if I am curating this initial stage of the collection, it makes sense to take advantage of Layers of London open nature, and create a support for anyone interested to use ‘The Public Libraries of London’ as they please.

By clicking on the ‘Add to Map’ button, you are requested to first pick a location on the map where the pin is going to be placed. Layers of London has a location-based approach: you are invited to share information that is somehow related to a place of the city. To ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection, that means that the display of the interviews is primarily pins on a map of London (fig. 17), rather than a list of records on a library or archive catalogue, or a list of names of interviewees you click on to access their interviews; the first and main contact of the user with ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection is through a map with pins that correspond to the place of the public library where the interviewee works or have worked in the past:

fig. 16 Screenshot, Layers of London website, ‘Create Collection’ window.
With this format, the collection is intimately related to London, by forming a new ‘layer’ on the city; the actual content of the interview can gain new meanings and interpretations by being considered in its location and context within London. Also, new relations between the interviews can be established; the collection can be seen against historical maps, and in combination with other collections that are initially unrelated in theme, but when seen together on the map can reveal and provoke new interpretations. In that sense, ‘The Public Libraries of London’ contributes by adding a new layer to the map, but Layers of London itself also adds to ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection of interviews, by offering an interactive geographical support and the rich company of other collections.

Accessibility and discoverability are then strengths of Layers of London as repository for ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection, even if it is not a conventional library catalogue. The map approach allows serendipity, meaning someone just browsing the pins on the map can accidentally come across ‘The Public Libraries of London’ interviews, which might interest them for some reason. This is a quality of Layers of London that Seif El Rashidi, the Project Development Officer of the website, mentioned as beneficial to ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection: ‘by linking it to a map, I could look into Canada Water; what I could do is think ‘What is next to me?’; find your post, then look and
find about all these librarians’ (transcribed from face-to-face interview); he mentioned how people tend to look at the map, and the first thing they do is zoom in to try and find their local area, their house or their street, and the pins of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ have good chances of being discovered this way. Also, compared to a library catalogue or any other conventional repository, Layers of London is more ‘fun’ and less ‘scary’ to access and explore, and the way it has been developed prioritises being easy to use and to upload materials, in order to enable engagement.

Not everything is totally positive about this high level of accessibility, though. I attribute partly to this great openness of Layers of London the fact that not all the interviewees agreed to have their interview audio recorded — perhaps they would if it wasn’t going to be so readily available online, for anyone to listen to? Two interviewees asked if they could give the interview just by e-mail, in text format; of course I did not oppose, as it is better to have their account in text than have none. The result was as expected: compared to the transcriptions of the recorded interviews, the interviews ‘in text’ contain around half the words of an audio recorded interview, which shows how the face-to-face interaction does impact on the interview; the longest interview ‘by text’ has approximately half the quantity of words of the shortest audio recorded interview. While it is true that the written answers are more direct and do not contain ‘useless’ words and expressions that transcribed speech does, such as ‘kind of’ and ‘you know’, the great difference in number of words cannot be fully attributed to that alone. Even if the written interviews are valuable and information rich, when interacting face-to-face, the interviewees gave in more information, and their accounts expressed a more personal tone.

fig. 18 Screenshot, Layers of London website, example of interview in written form (not audio recorded). [click on image to access].
Whether the interview was audio recorded or just a text has little technical impact in terms of adding the material to Layers of London. The ‘Add to Map’ button opens the ‘Add Note’ window (after you have picked a place on the map), and this is where you can actually insert the content that will show on your pin. Some fields have to be filled: Note Title, Description, Website URL, When did this happen?, the choice of type of document you are adding, and the indication of what collection that pin belongs to (fig. 19). Each note allows for one document only: it is either one video (YouTube link), image, audio (mp3), text, or dataset. Adding the interviews ‘by text’ in the note is easy: it is just a matter of copying and pasting the interview body of text directly on the note, after clicking on the ‘Just text’ option of type of pin. Even if at the moment there are currently not many possibilities of editing this text, such as adding italics or colours, the resulting text is still clear, direct and legible. Fig. 18 shows the example of the pin for Harpreet’s interview.

fig. 19  Screenshot, Layers of London website, ‘Add Note’ window.
fig. 20 (top), fig. 21 Screenshots, Layers of London website. A pin showing three different notes in it, and the note for the audio recorded interview with Wendy, respectively. To play Wendy’s interview, must click on the video screenshot. [click on image to access].
However, when it comes to the audio recorded interviews, a few complications emerge. As described, four interviewees have photographs which I wanted to have linked to the audio file, so their photo is displayed at the same time as the audio is played. As the website does not allow audio and image in a single note, I have created .mp4 files: a video with the interviewees’ photograph as stable background, and the .mp3 file of their interview as soundtrack. Currently, though, Layers of London solution to video capacity is ‘outsourcing’ it to YouTube, as it would be too heavy a content to have uploaded to their Map directly. That means the video has to be uploaded to YouTube first, and have the link to it copied on your note (fig. 22). This raises a number of questions. YouTube is a video hosting service that is owned by Google; even though uploading and watching videos is effectively free, the website generates revenue from advertising; also, to upload materials to it you must create an account, which is a Google account, and with that comes all the ethical implications of Google surveillance and use of data for a variety of purposes, many commercial, most unknown. The approaches to sharing of YouTube and of Layers of London are completely different; Layers of London is institutional and truly free, as does not aim to generate revenue or charge for any kind of service; the engagement it seeks is with people sharing, producing and using knowledge about London history in a collective way.

YouTube (and Google) does not fit in this agenda. In more practical terms, it is true that many people might already be used to YouTube and even to uploading content to the website; YouTube has enabled amateur and home-made videos to reach audiences, which in some way can be considered analogous to the Layers of London approach of encouraging everyone with a story to share about London, to do so through their map. However, their contrasting nature shouldn’t be ignored. The issue of having to store the videos in a separate repository, in order to keep the Layers of London map technically light and fast, must be solved by using a different repository other than YouTube. Another technical
Problem is with stability: a YouTube video in Layers of London is actually dependant on an individual’s account on YouTube; if this account is deleted, or if the video is removed from YouTube, then the video in Layers of London is also lost. Ultimately, there isn’t even any kind of certainty about the future of YouTube itself. But Layers of London is still under development, and despite the bugs, this can be a positive aspect: issues like this can be tested, rethought and elaborated in a different way; also, the team responsible for Layers of London is very open for feedback and suggestions. I have kept the videos on YouTube as ‘Unlisted’, meaning only those with the specific link to that video can access it, and that it does not feature as result to any search. On the pin on the Layers of London map, the video appears as a screenshot; you click on the image to ‘activate’ and play the video. For now, I will maintain the pins as they are; if it is decided that Layers of London in its definitive form will keep having videos linked to YouTube, I plan to then remove the videos of the interviews, and replace them with simple audio files (mp3), which, different from the video files, are uploaded directly to Layers of London map, and giving up having the interviewees’ photograph directly linked to their voice.

Apart from a privacy and a technical issue, the YouTube question is one of preservation as well, and one in many that Layers of London has to address with regards to the keeping and safeguarding of the materials being posted to the website. If YouTube is the issue with the uploaded videos, mp3 files are with the audios: what are the prospects for mp3 files readability? Layers of London project team must have this kind of concern in mind. Seif El Rashidi explained about the project’s current plan on preservation: ‘The files will be available for at least twenty years. That is not to say that they won’t be available after twenty years; it’s a minimum commitment. And I think that, with projects like this, what you find is that, especially if successful, is that they last longer than you think. So our twenty-year period of archiving of the material is related also to technology that, moving four years from now, there might be something that does not exist today, and the likelihood is that twenty years from now, there definitely will be different techniques and different tools. Obviously, we are an academic institute that has existed for a long time, and it’s important for us to safeguard the information that has been contributed, otherwise there is no point in doing the project if in two years from now it would all disappear. As you can imagine, the IHR has other information that it needs to archive digitally; we haven’t actively said “the librarians will be in charge of it”, but we have made provisions for the fact that someone needs to be there, and monitor, and deal with any enquiries, or whatever it is, that will happen. So basically, we have a twenty-year plan in place.’ (transcribed from a face-to-face interview). At the moment, then, preservation is very reliant on the stability of the Institute proper, on the fact that an Institute dedicated to historical research would not let historical information
disappear — however, a clearer plan to deal with all this born-digital materials has to be presented. Layers of London, a historical and archival website, being built up from digitised and born-digital materials, provides an ideal opportunity for librarians and archivists to work closely with historians in shaping ‘the future of history’ (Bawden & Roland, 2012), once it is being developed by the Institute of Historical Research which, does house its own library, the IHR Library.

As discussed in the ‘Methods’ section, Layers of London tries to be as universal as possible by providing a digital infrastructure that enables the upload of a variety of materials, but that also means that the specific needs of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection might not be addressed in an ideal way, and adaptations might be required. This is the case when it comes to context — or how to present as much information as possible about the circumstances, purposes, reasons and means by which the collection was put together, in order to facilitate better understanding of the collection in future; it is partly an exercise of putting yourself on the feet of the future researcher that comes across your collection. How to provide as much context as possible to ‘The Public Libraries of London’ in Layers of London? There are a few ways of giving context in the individual interview Note itself: there is a field where you add the date for when your content ‘happened’, and also the resulting Note automatically displays the date of the pinning itself — perhaps an equivalent to the ‘acquisition date’ in a library or archive catalogue. Precise dates are useful parts of context. Then, there is also a ‘Description’ field, that fits a long text in it; that is the field I have used to add some metadata which contribute to context. The latest version of the ‘Description’ text I have written to add to the interview notes/pins is the following (as found on the most recent interview pin only at the moment: Wes’s interview pin on Canada Water Library):

Interview with [role title] [interviewee’s name], from the public [name of the library], [name of local authority] • This interview is part of a growing collection of narratives from library staff about the public libraries of London, trying to capture experiences and perceptions of these beloved institutions • This interview is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License • The full conditions of this license can be found at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/ • Interview conducted by Mariana Ou • To acknowledge this interview, please use: ‘Interview with [role title] [interviewee’s name], from [name of the library]; interview conducted by Mariana Ou; part of The Public Libraries of London collection of the Layers of London project and website • Transcription of this interview available at [link to transcription, deposited at the Humanities Commons repository]

A few technical problems that I attribute to the website still being in beta are that, first, even though it is possible to add paragraphs to the text in the ‘Description’ field when you are creating the note, the
resulting field excludes the paragraphs and displays the text as one single long paragraph, undermining legibility and understanding (my way around that was to add the • symbol between sentences); second, inserted URLs do not display as hyperlinks, but as simple text, which diminishes quite a lot the chances that the reader will access the webpage being referenced; and third, editions are unfeasible at the moment due to a bug. That means that the first notes/pins I have added show an earlier version of the ‘Description’ I provided, and that only the most recent interview has the updated, bettered one; this inconsistency impairs clarity and understanding. It is expected though that these problems will be fixed in later versions of the website, so that editions can be made in order to keep all the interviews displaying the same kind and amount of metadata.

But a technical issue that probably will persist is the previously described restriction of one type of item only per note. To the audio recorded interview, that means no room in the note for the transcription of the interview. As it can be noticed from the ‘Description’ text above, the transcription file was deposited in the Humanities Commons website and repository, and the link to it was added in the ‘Description’ text. According to their own website, ‘Humanities Commons’ was designed by scholarly societies in the humanities to serve the needs of humanists as they engage in teaching and research that benefit the larger community. Unlike other social and academic communities, Humanities Commons is open-access, open-source, and nonprofit. It is focused on providing a space to discuss, share, and store cutting-edge research and innovative pedagogy—not on generating profits from users’ intellectual and personal data. The network also features an open-access repository, the Commons Open Repository Exchange. CORE allows users to preserve their research and increase its reach by sharing it across disciplinary, institutional, and geographic boundaries’ (Humanities Commons, 2017). At the moment, one of the interview transcriptions is deposited there, but the plan is to have all the files related to ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection deposited in the Humanities Commons by the time of the conclusion and assessment of this dissertation, including the mp3 audio files, the JPEG photographs of the interviewees, the pdf’s of the transcriptions, and the final pdf of this dissertation. If redundancy is essential to the preservation of digital materials, it is an attempt to guarantee the safeguarding of ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection by having it stored in more than one open access website. Layers of London and Humanities Commons have complementary, different characteristics; however, in this case specifically, the repository on the Humanities Commons serves more as a support for the collection in Layers of London: Layers of London is the main gateway to the collection, and those who wish to obtain further and deeper information, can be redirected and find it at the Humanities Commons. The transcription of the interview is an important source of context; apart from the link on its pin, Wes’s interview
transcription can be accessed through this link. Metadata on the first page has been written and organised in such a way as to facilitate cataloguing, in an eventual acquisition or collection of the item by a library or archive — which the assigned Creative Commons license permits.

Future possibilities for ‘The Public Libraries of London’ are numerous, and exciting. There is still room in Layers of London to have features such as adding tags and categories to the pins and collections, which would maximise navigation and discoverability. Each pin fits many notes in it; content can be added in order to enrich the interviews: for example, I have added a photo of the Kensington Central Library interior to the library pin, together with the interviews with Dave and Tim — who mention the physical aspects of the library a few times, so having images of what they are talking about can be insightful and useful; this can be expanded in many ways, with other photos, architectural plans, illustrations etc. But perhaps the greatest opportunity is in engagement, and in developing ways to take advantage of Layers of London openness: workshops and collective activities could be carried out in public libraries, to encourage staff and users to interact with the collection and add their own content. Using the crowdsourced approach within the collection itself means realising the full potential of Layers of London in favour of ‘The Public Libraries of London’, maybe even turning it from being just a collection to amplifying it to a ‘citywide conversation’, as in Sheffield ‘Library Stories’ project and website.

To conclude, ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection in Layers of London has an experimental nature. As presented above, the website itself is still under development, in beta, and hasn’t been officially launched yet, which means it does contain a fair number of bugs and of instability; new features are being tested, and it is hard to tell whether a new button you see today will still be there after a few weeks. However, it is understood that it is a very good archive for ‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection: high accessibility and discoverability; open access; very easy to use; institutional support and publicly funded; outreach nature, so not aimed at the academic community solely but at the population of London as a whole, and whoever else interested in London. The support of the Humanities Commons repository is very important, though, to guarantee the completeness of the collection, and to help provide the context that doesn’t fit entirely in Layers of London.
CONCLUSION

‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection of interviews provides a unique look into the work, views and experiences of public library staff. While it has been the public library users’ perspective that some urged to be gathered and investigated, the public library staff’s voice has been largely overlooked. Chris Paling’s book *Reading Allowed* exemplified how rich the personal perspective of a public library staff member can be — beyond the literary aspect. The public library work revealed through the interviews collected in this research is highly varied: not only the interviewees’ roles themselves presented a surprising diversity (‘Library Manager’, ‘Library Development Officer’, ‘Bibliographical Support Assistant’ etc.), but interviewees also described the wide variety of activities that they carried out throughout a single day as part of everyday work. With current trends of stripping down public library services in terms of funding, collection and professional, paid workforce, it is possible to say that staff members as the ones interviewed here are a bit of an ‘endangered species’; whatever the future British public library looks like, the interviews presented in this research provide a glimpse of what this institution looks like today, through documenting the words and voices of public library staff themselves. Even if the interviews are only eight in total at this moment, the unrepresentativeness of the sample of interviewees doesn’t impact the value of the accounts as unique, valid, rich documents of public library work.

‘The Public Libraries of London’ collection and the Layers of London project and website have natures that converge fundamentally: the narratives in the interviews with public library staff prove and provide the interdisciplinarity that currently sustains meaningful Library History; Layers of London enriches and enables this interdisciplinarity by positioning the collection literally among so many other resources and sources of information, in its maps and pins. Even if these interviews are very rich by themselves, in Layers of London they are deepened and amplified by their support.

Oral history is a documenting tool that has been structurally impacted and enhanced by digital technologies. If combined with the possibilities offered by Creative Commons, oral histories, and
audio recorded interviews in general, can be disseminated and accessed easily in the World Wide Web. Realised in its full potential, oral history can start being used more in research, not only in historical research but also in a variety of sciences and studies; not as a specialised, alternative resource, but more as a mainstream kind of resource for research.

But accessibility and discoverability are absolutely essential for the realisation of this inherent potential, as well as an adequate digital infrastructure to keep and disseminate the collections. Layers of London website provides a great example of what this kind of infrastructure can be like: institutionally created and supported, publicly funded, freely accessible, easy to use, and open for anyone to contribute with a large variety of materials and formats, allowing for all levels of engagement — from the casual browser to the curator/creator of full collections of items. However, such initiatives must address crucial issues of preservation and keeping of contents, not letting digital information technologies possibilities outpace the understanding and the control over what is produced. In projects like Layers of London, it is more than prudent to have at least one librarian or archivist in charge of preservation issues such as the updating of storage capacity and of formats.

There are certain records of our everyday that are believed to be of use in future, so moves are being made to preserve them; Twitter is a representative example. However, what other types of documents of our everyday could be recorded in order to serve future research? The Public Libraries of London' collection is an attempt to document public library staff’s voices and experiences, in a way that very unlikely would have happened ‘naturally’. The librarian and the archivist have been collecting, organising and keeping documents for centuries; perhaps the creation of documents should also be one of our main concerns, in a time when everything seems to be documentable, when storage seems limitless, and when formats are innumerable but never ever so fragile. The Library of Congress, for example, has a ‘Guide to Creating Preservable Websites’, which may not mean the creation of new documents, but it does imply a degree of responsibility and concern about the creation of documents. More similar initiatives are welcome, but the library and the archive must also be engaged in exploring new ways of creating documents themselves, as a way to have control over documents since their inception, and avoid just trying to keep pace with ever-changing technology.

This need is closely connected to the increasing significance of specialised knowledge of computing and programming for the librarian and archivist: it must be known what a TIFF image is made of and how exactly it is produced and read; it must be clear what are current methods of putting a website together are; there should be familiarity about differences between the various digital audio formats
and its implications to storage and readability. What is a digital object anyway? The librarian and the archivist must be more than aware of the answer, or of how to begin to answer such structural question, that regards the new (im)materiality of documents at the core of our work and science. Only by mastering the question of the existence and the materiality of the new forms of documents, librarians and archivists are then properly armed to preserve them. Thorough knowledge of digital information technologies in their workings and in their nature is also one of the very few ways available at present to minimise the inequality of power over digital information and data.
REFERENCES


