





The Communities & Crowds project aims to strengthen the relationship between the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM)’s concepts of participatory practice and the online crowdsourcing efforts within cultural institutions in the UK and US. In doing so, the project will examine how institutions can incorporate **volunteers** in the process of digitising collection collections – both locally and globally – with a focus on decolonisation and democratisation.

Following from previous volunteer phone interviews conducted at the start of the Communities and Crowds project, and a focus group which took place in early 2023, this research aims to understand the volunteers’ overall experience and to assess their response to the Zooniverse phase of the project. This report sits alongside findings from the previous two phases.

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* How did their experiences as an online/remote volunteer compare to their previous in-person volunteering?
* With the project nearing completion, what do the volunteers feel they got from participating?

# Methodology

All four volunteers were interviewed over the phone or Teams in summer 2023.

All participants consented to their interviews being recorded and notes taken and were given the chance to ask questions or raise concerns about the project and the methodology both before and during the session. Recordings will be deleted following the submission of this report.

# Headline findings

**Zooniverse phase**

1. All volunteers said that Zooniverse was very well explained to them and that they were eventually able to understand it.
2. Volunteers were given the confidence, having learned many new skills over the course of the project, to tackle the Zooniverse phase.
3. Volunteers were satisfied with their involvement in the Zooniverse phase as they were consulted and made decisions but were not as involved in the technical side of Zooniverse.
4. Volunteers had not had much opportunity to use the Zooniverse talk functions but were interested in doing this in the future.
5. Volunteers were pleasantly surprised by the public response to the Zooniverse project online as this exceeded their expectations.

**Overall experience**

1. All volunteers said that they had had a generally positive experience of participating in this project.
2. Volunteers had a keen interest in the material they found and felt a sense of privilege in being able to work with the *Daily Herald* archive.
3. The teamwork and social connection within the small group was very rewarding for all volunteers.
4. Volunteers praised the level of support they received from individual museum staff, in particular the thorough planning, good explanations of new concepts, continuity of support despite staff changes, and being respected and consulted.
5. Difficulty accessing online content due to unfamiliarity or lack of device or internet capability was a concern for some volunteers.
6. **Significant access difficulties** were a concern for one volunteer throughout the project, which had a negative impact on their overall experience.
7. Volunteers preferred in-person volunteering, though they understood the need for online sessions.
8. Volunteers felt they had gained new skills, social connections and opportunities to try new things as a result of their participation in the project.

### Legacy of the project

1. Volunteers hoped that Zooniverse contributors might be interested in working with the material further.
2. Volunteers particularly wanted to increase access and awareness of access to the archive for the general public.
3. Volunteers wanted more opportunities to go out into the communities, and local schools, to show them the material.
4. Several volunteers said that they would be interested in continuing to work with the material they’d found or in a similar project again.

# Things to think about

1. Ensure that volunteers continue to be carefully guided through elements of projects with which they are not familiar, such as Zooniverse. Through support, volunteers were given the confidence over the course of the project to tackle elements which were new to them.
2. Identify cases where volunteers may struggle to participate in online practices due to unfamiliarity with technology or limited device or internet capabilities and provide alternatives.
3. Ensure that physical barriers to working with the archive for participants with accessibility needs are removed, as this had a significant negative impact on a volunteer.
4. Provide opportunities for and promote the in-person social aspects of volunteering, as this was the most rewarding part of the experience for all volunteers.
5. Continue to provide opportunities for access to the *Daily Herald* archive, for both volunteer projects and wider communities, as volunteers reported an interest in this from the general public.

# Detailed findings

## Zooniverse phase

**Understanding Zooniverse**

Zooniverse was new to all volunteers before the start of this project. Most volunteers were initially unsure or concerned about their lack of understanding of Zooniverse and weren’t sure whether they would understand how it worked.

All volunteers said that Zooniverse was very well explained to them and that they were eventually able to understand what this phase would entail.

For most volunteers, the experience of successfully becoming familiar with each part of the project that was new to them (the archive, scanning, and digitising) gave them confidence that they would be able to master the Zooniverse stage.

*“When it came to Zooniverse, at first we didn’t understand it. In my head I struggled with how this is going to work. (...) We come from no experience to looking at the archives, to then learning how to digitise them. (... ) But when it all comes together it made good sense, then better sense, and we can see the fruits of our labours now that it’s online...”*

**Preparing for and using Zooniverse**

Some volunteers shared their experience of being consulted on their contributions, coming up with the title *How did we get here?*,alongside museum staff, and making decisions about what they wanted to be uploaded to Zooniverse.

*“There are lots of things to consider when you’re putting it in... We want to get as much as possible out of the image and people that are actually going to be looking at and*

*transcribing the image…”*

Volunteers felt that they had had a more limited role in the technical aspects of Zooniverse and had handed over the content when this time came. They were satisfied with this as they did not feel they wanted to or would have been able to do more with the technical side of Zooniverse.

*“So what we as a volunteer group did was we collated the images, took part in the digitisation process and then we handed it over to the people who were going to upload the images, to make it available for the general public…”*

Volunteers appreciated the live online sessions that they attended both before and after the launch of the Zooniverse project as they were able to see the project and their material in its final state.

Although they had all been on the site to look at their material online and view some of the contributions, volunteers had not had much time to take part in the chat function of Zooniverse at the time of interview.

*“I eventually will perhaps log in and take part in some of the chats or the blog posting that’s available. I will do that at some point, but as yet I haven’t done any of it…”*

**Online response to Zooniverse**

All volunteers were pleasantly surprised by the public response to their Zooniverse project, particularly the level of interest and how quickly the project was completed. They generally expected that there wouldn’t be a very high level of interest and that it would take longer.

Some volunteers felt there was a missed opportunity to provide Zooniverse contributors with more material because of the limited time they could spend on the project.

*“It’s a real shame in some ways that we haven’t had the time or capacity to digitise more stuff because obviously people became interested in it and did loads more than we*

*thought they would…”*

Volunteers hoped to be able to continue to engage with the Zooniverse community despite the completion of the tasks.

 “*I know there’s a talk facility and you can see that people have been adding information, talking about locations. We’re looking at a communities section, which we’re going to look*

*into, hopefully to build on…”*

## Overall experience

All volunteers said that they had had a generally positive experience of participating in this project.

For one volunteer, difficulties accessing the physical site significantly affected their overall enjoyment of the project (see **Continuing accessibility issues**).

**Working with the material**

As seen in previous stages, volunteers felt that it was a particular privilege to be able to work in the *Daily Herald* archive. One volunteer described themselves as having a history with the *Daily Herald*, and for them the best part of the project was getting to work more with the *Daily Herald*’s archive.

As shown in previous stages of research, volunteers continued to have a keen interest in the material and found it very rewarding to engage with the archive and its collections.

They felt strong personal and emotional connections to some of the photographs and felt it was important to accurately share the stories of people portrayed in the photographs, especially within the wider communities of Bradford.

One volunteer in particular described how the materials that they had found were central to their enjoyment of the project, as everything they had done centred on the moving and inspiring photographs.

*“They say a photograph is worth a thousand words. And for this project the photograph is the vehicle for us to go from the archive out into the community. (...) I’m just so thankful and grateful for having that privilege and it’s all come from that collection of photos…”*

### Working together

For all volunteers, the experience of working in a tight-knit group who shared similar values and ethos was very rewarding. Volunteers enjoyed the social aspect of meeting regularly and working together towards shared goals in the project.

*“The volunteering group have a really good connection as well. We want the same things and we just work really well. And not only that, but there’s also a social and welI-being*

*aspect to it…”*

Volunteers also felt that they had the opportunity to learn from each other as they all brought different skills and different levels of knowledge about their communities, museum volunteering, the *Daily Herald*, and photography to the project.

### Support

Volunteers particularly praised the support they had received throughout the project from museum staff. In particular, they mentioned:

1. High levels of professional knowledge which they were able to rely on
2. Frequent planning sessions with carefully outlined project steps
3. A thorough explanation of the Zooniverse phase
4. Continuity of support despite changes in project leaders
5. Being listened to and consulted by staff, leading to a sense of ownership

*“Our views and opinions were taken into consideration. We had the opportunity and we had a platform to share anything. We’ve always felt that we could ask (about) any queries or any worries. We were always allowed to express them freely…”*

Volunteers were grateful for the personal support they had received both from museum staff and from their co-volunteers.

*“*/ *would just like to say a big thanks for all those volunteers who worked on this project with me and I’d like to say to the managers, thanks for all the help and the opportunity that they’ve all given me and thanks for the inspiration they’ve all given those volunteers…”*

Some volunteers also mentioned the perks that they received for being volunteers, such as discounts.

Some volunteers also mentioned their participation in the three stages of research evaluation, having been spoken to multiple times during the project, and felt that these sessions had been a good moment to reflect on what they had done.

*“It’s great to share my experience. Because you don’t realise how far you’ve come, it’s been good to reflect. You get a chance to think about what we’ve got, what we’ve achieved and it’s really nice to look back and take stock…”*

### Challenges and difficulties

Volunteers did talk about some of the challenges they had encountered on the project.

Difficulty accessing online content due to unfamiliarity or lack of device or internet capability was a concern for some volunteers.

*“I think in person, because I certainly had problems with the online working because my computer is so slow, it just cuts out and I don’t know why or you lose the feed. I think I’m probably at that phase now where I’m getting old, so probably online isn’t for me. I’m not that online savvy…”*

Volunteers also mentioned that the project felt at times disrupted by the change in project leaders, and long periods where they were not able to meet due to a range of issues. However. they agreed that the continuity of the project had remained stable despite these issues and were grateful for the work of the project team in keeping disruption to a minimum.

### Continuing accessibility issues

In previous stages of this research it was noted that a volunteer who uses a motorised wheelchair had experienced difficulties in accessing the building. These ongoing accessibility issues affected this volunteer’s opinion of the support they had received from the museum, and significantly affected their overall experience of the project.

Although individual members of staff and project leaders had supported them well, they felt there had been an institutional failure in ensuring they could access the building when they needed to. They felt that they were only able to continue with the project because of their own particular effort, and that of individual staff members, but that it was made difficult by persistent access problems.

This volunteer said that it was difficult to know whether they would be able to access the archive on any given day and outlined several instances of stressful and upsetting access issues.

Because of these issues, this volunteer said that they weren’t sure if they would want to do another project like this one.

*“Sometimes it would be fine, and sometimes it wouldn’t be fine. It’s quite exhausting, really. If somebody got in touch with me and said, ‘Hey, we’re doing a new project do you want to come and volunteer?’ I would be thinking, ‘Well, possibly not, because it’s actually*

*too much hassle…’”*

### In-person and remote volunteering

Volunteers all agreed that they preferred in-person volunteering. This was for a number of reasons:

1. They enjoyed the social connection of face-to-face meetings with the volunteer group and museum staff
2. Some struggled with technology required for online volunteering, especially internet connections and the capabilities of their personal devices
3. They enjoyed the parts of volunteering which had to be in-person the most, for example, physically scanning images

Although volunteers preferred in-person meetings, they did acknowledge that some online participation had been necessary and were grateful that this provided them opportunities to engage with the project in different ways and when in-person meetings were not possible.

*“I have enjoyed in-person sessions, but the online sessions have also been very valuable, because we’ve had people from other projects come up on some of the sessions and talk*

*about how they might be able to link in as well…”*

### Volunteer takeaways

Volunteers felt that they had taken away a range of positive elements from participating in this project.

Volunteers all talked about how they had learned new skills and confidence in their skills over the course of the project. The main skills volunteers said they had gained were scanning, digitising and looking at the archive.

However, some of the volunteers also said that they felt they had gained knowledge of interpreting collection material for the general public, as well as organisational skills they could use to put together their own exhibition.

One volunteer felt that their participation in the project had helped them to develop further skills which would enhance their practice in photography.

*“I learned a little bit about flattening an image which I hadn’t learned to do properly.
That was a good lesson to learn, how you flatten an image and make it more aesthetically appealing…”*

One volunteer talked in depth about a conference they had presented at online. They were proud of this experience and were glad that the project had afforded them the opportunity to do this. They also mentioned that they had the opportunity to contribute to some other research projects, such as Rites of Passage: Sound Systems*,* during their time volunteering, and to community events for Windrush and Black History Month.

Another volunteer, who had previously worked with the *Daily Herald* archive, said that as this project had enabled them to work with the material once more, they felt a satisfactory sense of closure as the project ended.

## Legacy of the project

All volunteers had aspirations for the legacy of the project.

They were excited about Zooniverse contributors who might be interested in working with the material further.

*“We found another person that is doing some work in London with intergenerational work, and he’s quite interested. It’s a similar thing. He’s doing Windrush stories, and he’s quite*

*interested in linking up with us as well…”*

Volunteers particularly wanted to increase access and awareness of access to the archive for the general public.

*“Another thing that I wasn’t aware of was that they do open days at the museum where members of the public can actually come in and they have access to the archives. On one of those days, we did also have a selection of the photos laid out for the public. A lot of people weren’t actually aware that they could have access to the archives…”*

Volunteers were all eager to talk about the importance of the project and the images that they had uncovered. They particularly spoke about how important new narratives and resources are to the understanding of history for marginalised communities.

Volunteers wanted more opportunities to go out into the communities and local schools to show them the material.

*“I’d like for it to go out into the community and see the response from the
community. I think it’s important for the museum to reach out and engage
with their communities…”*

One volunteer particularly felt that projects like this would help members of their community to see the museum as a place for them, rather than somewhere that excluded them.

Several volunteers said that they would be interested in continuing to work with the material they’d found or in a similar project again.

Volunteers also agreed that they had barely scratched the surface of the *Daily Herald* archive, and that there were many folders that they had wanted to explore but had not had time. Most said that if another project in the archive was planned, they would be interested in participating or would encourage others to participate.

*“It would be so amazing if we could go back and take a bit more and make it so people from different countries and communities could have access to that. We just scratched*

*the surface…”*

**APPENDIX**

## Research questions and scope

Prior to the first stage of research, the audience research team agreed the following **core research questions and scope** with the project team to be addressed over four phases:

* + 1. How can we create a volunteer programme which starts with selecting and digitising collections, and ends with deepening the metadata information on those collections through a citizen science platform?
		2. How can we address questions of ethnic and racial (or other forms of) inequality in our collections through better classification and interpretation and by enabling volunteer-led input and leadership earlier in the process?
		3. How do we encourage engagement with audiences earlier in the typical process of creating and running online crowdsourcing projects (i.e. while the project is being designed/conceived, rather than post-launch)?
		4. How can we optimise the Zooniverse ‘Talk’ message board platform to encourage/nurture this type of collaboration between project leads (research/archival teams) and volunteers?
		5. What can traditional museum volunteer practices learn from online crowdsourcing projects, and vice versa?
		6. How do volunteers experience different levels of engagement and agency with collections in person and online?

### The Volunteer Community Researchers will explore these questions plus:

1. What untold and under-represented stories are there in the *Daily Herald* archive that you think are important to share?
2. How can we make these stories more visible and shareable through digital technology?
3. What would you like to/what can we find out more about these photographs by developing a project on the Zooniverse platform?
4. How can an international online community of volunteers help us answer the questions you think are important to explore?

### Objectives covered in Phase 1

* + To better understand the volunteers’ motivations for taking part in the project.
	+ To better understand their expectations of the project.
	+ To better understand if there are any concerns about the project that might be addressed/any specific support needed.

### Objectives covered in Phase 2

* + To better understand the volunteers’ experience of in person volunteering so far.
	+ To better understand the volunteers’ changing motivations.
	+ To better understand their expectations of the Zooniverse project development phase.
	+ To better understand if there are any concerns about the project that might be addressed/any specific support needed.

### Objectives covered in Phase 3 (this phase)

* + To better understand the volunteers’ overall experience of this project, including support they received.
	+ To better understand what volunteers felt they got from volunteering.
	+ To better understand volunteers’ experience in the Zooniverse part of the project.
	+ To better understand volunteers’ opinion of the response to the Zooniverse project.

### How will the research be used

* + Internally by the project team to improve the volunteer’s own experience on the project/adapt the project as necessary.
	+ Internally by the project team and volunteers to evaluate and reflect upon their experience, to improve the digitisation process and in planning future projects.
	+ There is a possibility that the research might contribute to an online or print publication (could be co-written or written by the academics involved). Quotes or naming of people involved would not be done without explicit permission being sought.
	+ Volunteers have signed an informed consent form for the duration of the project.