

HIC Conversation with Thorsten Logge, Stefan Krebs, Mark Tebeau, and Tizian Zumthurm edited by Charlotte A. Lerg

Documenting COVID-19 for Future Historians?

Abstract: This conversation-style exchange explores the processes and practices of archiving different kinds of sources generated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teams behind three digital collection projects from three different national contexts reflect on their work and the challenges they faced and still face. The text contemplates theoretical and methodological questions, as well as issues of infrastructure, resources and technology.

Keywords: COVID-19; digital history; citizen science; archives

Historians study the past; but like everyone else, they live in the present and look to the future – including the future of writing a history of that very present. In line with this particular set-up, a number of collection projects¹ sprung up around the world when the COVID-19 pandemic began to unfold in the spring of 2020.² Using the opportunities of digital technology and building on previous examples that involved the public in source collection processes, all the projects engage with issues of participation, organisation and conservation. As such they not only speak to the current political and historical moment(s), but also tie into different methodological and theoretical questions that are very much part of a larger discussion within the field, such as issues of crowdsourcing and citizen science in the humanities, the challenges of rapid-response archives, and long-term use of born-digital material. All of these are key aspects to consider in discussing participatory structures and mechanisms in the generation, dissemination, and conservation of knowledge.

While documentation was (and is) the principal goal of these digital collection projects when they started, more than two years into the process, their work

1 Laura Spinney: What are COVID archivists keeping for tomorrow's historians? *Nature*, vol. 588 (December 24/31 2020): 578–580.

2 The International Federation for Public History has created a map that provides a good overview of the various collection efforts worldwide, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/3225>; see also Tizian Zumthurm, "Crowdsourced COVID-19 Collections: A Brief Overview," *International Public History* 4, no. 1 (2021): 77–83, accessed March 22, 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2021-2021>.

(sometimes indirectly) also sheds light on the dynamics of academic research and public engagement. Moreover, as the pandemic is still ongoing, the way we strive to document it is ever evolving. Besides juggling funds, personal resources and public communication, technological as well as legal issues also need to be addressed. But beside practical issues, we are increasingly seeing theoretical questions come into focus.

Having contacted the teams behind a number of projects in various parts of the world, we at HIC were delighted that three of them (from Luxembourg, Germany, and the United States) have agreed to contribute to what initially we conceived of as a “written conversation.” It has developed into a group reflection, which unfolded over two rounds of questions and commentaries between the summer of 2021 and the spring of 2022. It invites readers to engage with the ideas, challenges and methodologies that are being proposed, probed, and practised.³ Aiming to capture the liminal nature of the current situation and the work-in-progress character of these projects, we have opted for an open format that leaves room for descriptions of the experiences and of challenges still to be met, prompting reflection on possible avenues to explore and lessons learned.

Genesis and Infrastructure

A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19 (JOTPY), USA emerged on Friday, March 13, 2020, two days after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic (and one day after US President Trump did the same). As schools, including Arizona State University, closed and events were cancelled, Professor Catherine O'Donnell wrote to colleagues (Professors Richard Amesbury and Mark Tebeau) about working with students to create a “repository of this strange time.” She wrote, “students would be acting less as historians, admittedly, than as chroniclers, recorders, memoirists, image collectors ... but collecting materials ... that they think a future historian would want is thinking like a historian.” Tebeau immediately connected the dots to the tradition of rapid-response archiving that followed from the *September 11 Digital Archive*⁴ to the *Hurricane*

³ As this text was coming together, it became evident that the various uses of verbs with regard to how the sources and the collections came to “be” pointed towards yet another theoretical debate. After all, it seemed to be something over and above “collecting” but should we talk about “producing” or “manufacturing” sources? What about a more fundamental (or organic) term like “creating”? It is worth drawing attention to this issue, even if it was impossible, in this text, to follow up on such deliberations.

⁴ <https://911digitalarchive.org>, accessed June 27, 2022.

*Katrina Digital Memory Bank*⁵ through the *Our Marathon* project. Within an hour, the team had launched the project, initially titled *A Journal of a Plague Semester*, ironically drawing on Daniel Dafoe's novel. Within weeks, as the scope of the pandemic became clear, we renamed it *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

We created our project using the Omeka content-management system largely because it both developed out of previous rapid-response collecting efforts and because it has been proven as a viable option for rapid-response collecting. We also began the project using a hosted version of Omeka, allowing the project to grow organically. Later, we transitioned to Omeka-S to integrate the many partners that became part of the collective. Omeka-S is distinguished by the ability to have many different views and approaches to the archive, while sharing a common data-set.

JOTPY grew organically from scholarly and community interests across the world, with partners in Australia, the Philippines, Canada, and across approximately 30 states in the United States, becoming a meaningful collaborative endeavor with a dozen scholars and archivists leading the effort collectively. Largely, our curators have been scholars including especially historians, but also sociologists, political scientists, cultural as well as language scholars, for example, from American studies; team members also draw from library, archive, and museum communities. JOTPY received funding from a variety of sources at ASU, including the public history endowment, the College of Arts & Sciences Humanities Dean, and the Institute for Humanities Research. The American Council for Learned Societies funded a post-doctoral fellow for the project, and the Arizona Humanities Council funded collecting of materials in Arizona. The archive has grown to more than 16,000 digital objects; it has had more than 10,000 individual contributors. Hundreds of students in both high school and university settings have also contributed.

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covidmemory.lu (Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History): After the first lockdown measures were introduced in Luxembourg in mid-March 2020, Professor Sean Takats launched the idea for covidmemory.lu, an online platform “to map and historicise the impact of COVID-19 in Luxembourg.”⁶ It was also inspired by rapid-response collecting projects in which he had been previously involved (the *9/11 Digital Archive* and *Hurricane Katrina Digital Mem-*

⁵ <http://hurricanearchive.org>, accessed June 27, 2022.

⁶ Description of the C³DH Slack channel that Sean Takats created for the coordination of the project on March 23, 2020.

ory Bank). Like those digital memory banks, covidmemory.lu runs on Omeka-S, a software application specifically tailored for online collections and exhibitions that has been developed along with the projects.

However, unlike the collection projects for Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, covidmemory.lu was not about an event that is finished; its focus was something that was still unfolding during the collection process. Within a few days, a team of designers, programmers and historians from the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) joined the project and Assistant Professor Stefan Krebs agreed to act as project lead. With all the project participants working remotely from home (using emails, instant messaging, and video conferences), covidmemory.lu was also a response to a novel work situation; it not only provided an opportunity for people to share their experiences but also helped to keep the team motivated. The main goal of the platform, however, has always been to preserve experiences of the pandemic for future generations.

The historians discussed the narrative framework of the platform and prepared the review and curation processes, and the designers and programmers developed a smoother and more inviting user interface than that offered by most Omeka-S websites. The team worked hard to create a collecting platform with four working languages, an essential requirement for a multilingual country such as Luxembourg.

Stefan Krebs (PI) and Sean Takats acquired a COVID-19 fast-track grant from the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR) for the technical development of the platform, which allows us to host additional collections and to curate and showcase small online exhibitions in the future. With additional funding from the C²DH, postdoctoral researcher Tizian Zumthurm is currently maintaining the platform on a day-to-day basis. Besides acquiring new contributions, we need to ensure accessibility, compatibility, and long-term archiving. The C²DH is first and foremost an institution for historical research rather than an historical archive.

The covidmemory.lu website was launched on April 3, 2020 and received regular radio, television and newspaper coverage throughout the year. So far, we have received some 350 submissions, about a dozen of which have not been published. Photographs make up roughly half of all the items, but there are also videos, diaries, poems, cartoons, and other types of content. While we had hoped for more resonance among the general public, it is worth noting that similar platforms in Germany and Switzerland, for example, have published about seven to eight times fewer contributions per 100,000 inhabitants.

The **coronarchiv (Germany)** is a digital born crowdsourcing project. Its goal is to enable the decentral collecting of individual everyday experiences, thoughts, media, and memories during the “corona crisis.” The archive was set up at the end of March 2020 by historians Prof. Dr. Christian Bunkenberg (Bochum), Prof. Dr. Thorsten Logge (Hamburg), Benjamin Roers (Gießen), and Nils Steffen (Hamburg). The coronarchiv is based on the free and open-source rapid-response collecting and publishing platform Omeka-S. The project is funded by the University of Hamburg, University of Gießen, Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Hamburg and Stiftung Mitarbeit. At the peak the team consisted of 15 people from different disciplines e.g., Public History, History, Turkology, Latin American Studies, and Performance Studies. To generalize the experiences gained from the crowdsourcing activities and to make them available to future crowdsourcing projects in a crowdsourcing manual, a temporary CrowdsourcingLab was established in early 2021 with funding secured until October 2021.

As of mid-September 2021, the *coronarchiv* has a total number of 6,230 items, of which around 4,433 are publicly available on the website. The non-published items can be used for research upon request. Most of the objects are images, but as the pandemic progressed, the number of texts increased. Videos, audio files, and objects that consist of several medias are also available in smaller numbers.

Within the first 16 months, the *coronarchiv* has become one of the world’s largest digital collections on the pandemic. It is available in five languages: German, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Turkish. You can also find the project on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Data about Data: The Role of Metadata

JOTPY

Viewed over 20 years, one sees the evolution of rapid-response crisis archive. Metadata strategies in these archives have grown more elaborate, as is evident in the evolution of such projects, from the *September 11 Digital Archive* through to the *Hurricane Katrina Digital Memory Bank* to *Our Marathon*—in which the metadata is more elaborate with each new project, comprehensive and systematically implemented. Even so, building rich metadata has not always been a prime feature of rapid-response archives, which have often emphasized collecting stories over fully curating materials in their archives. Without effective metadata, it can be difficult to discover materials in the archive. As a result, we prioritized a curatorial process through which we described digital objects in great detail, al-

most from the archive's inception and providing robust metadata became a fundamental ethic. It both facilitates discoverability and builds context for researchers and publics. We expanded that program of thick description to include asking contributors to assign tags to archival submissions, enhancing the depth and breadth of the metadata. As a result, JOTPY metadata is unparalleled in rapid-response archiving and should set a new standard for what we are doing in this field. Indeed, without metadata, archives risk becoming attics, their contents perhaps preserved but largely unseen and unused. With metadata, current and future researchers and browsers will be able to aggregate and sort materials across the innumerable dimensions of pandemic experience, making possible far richer historical analysis and policy prescriptions—as well as fostering deeper empathy for past experiences. Moreover, expansive metadata allows for users to identify materials and stories, including lengthy oral histories, that interest them and to discover similar materials. This also has the benefit of making the archive legible to new cohorts of interns and project curators, who can see the process of making meaning at work in the archival metadata.

covidmemory.lu

Our primary concern when establishing the platform was to keep the bar for contributing as low as possible. The submission form thus contains only basic metadata fields: contributors can indicate when and where the “memory” occurred. They can also provide their name, email address, and place of residence; this information is not made public. Omeka-S automatically saves some additional data, e.g. the date of the upload, an indication that at the moment does not appear on the website. If the curators decide not to publish an item, they note the reason for this in the backend. Future researchers will thus need access to the backend to obtain additional information.

We are currently reworking the web interface and the next version will publish more of the collected metadata that is currently only available in the backend. We are also adding curator tags to help retrieve meaningful entries when browsing the archive. At the same time, tagging already channels attention and might affect future research questions. In our case, we also have to think about which language we are using. Submissions are in Luxembourgish, German, French, and English. Prioritising one of these languages through tagging could influence the perceptions of other participants.

Finally, we observed that it is also possible to find additional metadata that have been unintentionally recorded in the properties of files that are frequently

attached to the contributions. This might include information that is not supposed to be public, such as the name of the creator.

coronarchiv

We are trying to balance the needs of curators, archivists, and historiographers for data quality, a maximum quantity of metadata and the usability of a platform that needs to establish as few barriers as possible to motivate contributions to the collection. The needs of historiographical practitioners and curators do not necessarily match the media practices and habits of the public. We always aimed at collecting as many objects as possible and set the barriers to contribute as low as possible. This then also leads to the fact that we collect by far not as much information on the individual objects as desired and expected by some professional stakeholders.

Methodological Thoughts

Rapid-Response Collecting?

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Contributions published on the *coronarchiv* website are medial speech acts that may contribute to the contemporary understanding of the pandemic experience. They can be used by the public to compare individual experiences with others and thereby help to classify and cope with one's own experience. Thereby the *coronarchiv* is part of "doing" the event: by documenting, describing, and mapping COVID-19 experiences, the rapid-response collecting and crowdsourcing activities and the *coronarchiv* are serving as a communication device taking part in the emergence of the pandemic as an event. This affects the nature and scope of the documentation process. The *coronarchiv* as a technical tool, its team, its communication activity and the media coverage during the pandemic need to be included into every source critique that deals with objects and items from the *coronarchiv*. The archive is not a post-event structure, but a communicative structure within the pandemic and therefore part of the discursive practices that make the event in terms of giving meaning to individual and collective experiences.

coronarchiv.lu

Right from the start of the project, historians in the team discussed the dilemma that we are concomitantly shaping the experiences of the pandemic that we would like to collect. The visual and textual framing of the website, our communications (e.g. posters and Facebook banners) and published contributions all inform visitors and contributions. The decision as to whether a submitted item is meaningful to the collection already influences the collection process, and the tagging of entries has an even greater impact. The fact that we have so many more contributions from the first wave is an illustration of this point. We find it difficult to assess to what degree we shape the event itself or the memory of it. Several factors should be considered: how representative can such a platform be? For example, are we reaching out to specific social groups that are close to our own socio-economic and political positions in society? What is the relationship between how the event is featured in (social) media and how it is framed on digital memory banks?

Moreover, what is already published on the platform influences what will be uploaded later. We have to bear in mind that with digital memory banks we are not simply archiving memories. People have specific reasons to contribute and they do so in specific ways. School assignments, which can be found on many of our platforms, are only the most obvious type of submission that has been created with a particular audience in mind. More centrally, human behaviour and self-presentation on any sort of digital platform generally follows certain conventions.⁷ Reflecting on how digital archives change modes of access and storage, media theorist Wolfgang Ernst underlines that “the so-called cyberspace is not primarily about memory as cultural record but rather about a performative form of memory as communication.”⁸ This shift forces us to rethink how historical knowledge in memory banks is epistemically constituted and how scholars can reflect and write about it.

JOTPY

Documenting the pandemic required that the team collect digital artifacts and build metadata on the fly. In many ways, this makes archives of the pandemic

⁷ Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

⁸ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 99.

fundamentally different in scope and scale from their peer crisis archives. The current COVID-19 crisis disdains temporal boundaries as it does the geographic; as it rolls on, talk of “spikes” and “waves” only heightens our unease about its formlessness and threatened endlessness. It’s true that all crises have long-term repercussions: the *Hurricane Katrina Digital Memory Bank*, for example, brilliantly documented ongoing economic dislocation as well as the rebuilding of communities and lives. But the COVID-19 pandemic happens and happens and happens some more, with no division between event and aftermath yet possible. The pandemic also unmoors us in a second way, obliterating the activities that drew us together and oriented us in time: morning rush hours, work schedules, classroom bells, sports seasons. This temporal disorientation can turn our faces toward each other: “When will it end?” we ask. And: “Do you know what day it is?” But it also threatens to heighten the mistrust incipient in all contagion, as we argue over what stage of the pandemic we have entered and how—even whether—to respond. In short, like the pandemic’s geographic expansiveness, its messy, temporal sprawl threatens division and thus requires collectivity.

Toward addressing these concerns we developed an approach that team members (Professors Marissa Rhodes and Katy Kole de Peralta coined it) call “rolling-response archiving.” Recognizing that the pandemic was not merely a moment but an ongoing societal crisis transformed our collecting efforts toward building specific “calls to action,” in which we solicited materials on certain themes. Also, this generated our iterative approach to team building that crossed traditional institutional boundaries. You see this rolling-response aspect in our approach to metadata collecting and curating, emphasizing both a depth and breadth of descriptive terms. At the same time, we also drew upon the rapid-response literature, in terms of thinking about process and practices; in terms of ethics we drew upon *Documenting the Now*.⁹

Crowdsourcing: Digital History “From Below”?

coronarchiv

Crowdsourcing in the humanities is a means to enhance evidential material for curated and narrated historiographies in the present and in the future. It adds to the official records and the mass-media documentation of discourses and happenings. In this regard, crowdsourcing in the humanities connects to the de-

⁹ <https://www.docnow.io>, accessed June 27, 2022.

mands of everyday history and the need to cope with the experiences of “ordinary” people.

Crowdsourcing engages the broader public and can raise the number of voices heard. By offering participation in the collecting process, it starts at the very beginning of the historiographical process: the production of the source material. Therefore, crowdsourcing can serve as a practical gateway for theoretical reflections on the very nature of historiography itself: the sources. If participation is enhanced to curatorial and narrative practices, the selection, curation, ordering, and narration of the traces as sources can serve as an entry to theoretical reflections on the nature of history production in diverse forms and formats.

Crowdsourcing can help to transfer traces and sources from the private to the public realm. If used to preserve subcultural, marginalized, or less recognized individuals, groups and processes, it can serve as a hub for raising of valuable and necessary resources for historiography and/or new histories beyond master narratives. However, we experienced that the providing of a technological solution to contribute memories or digital artifacts does not automatically lead to more contributions from all parts of the society. It also needs self-esteem and a conviction of one’s own importance to deem self-documentation important and necessary. To reach all sections of society without authoritative access seems unattainable and should not be the goal of such a project. To encourage people to see their own lives as worthy of being handed down and documented is a challenge that needs reflections on communication strategies and engagement in general.

covidmemory.lu

Digital memory banks are instruments that enable the production of sources “from below.” Finding such voices is deeply rooted in the academic tradition of public history and related initiatives like the *Geschichtswerkstätten* (history workshop) movement.¹⁰ What is comparatively new is that crowdsourcing occurs digitally, which opens up new spatial scopes and allows material to be collected with unprecedented speed. For the discipline of contemporary history, crowdsourcing is rather unusual, especially crowdsourcing in and about the present. Historians normally rely on other collecting institutions like (state) archives

10 For the theoretical grounding e.g. Sven Lindqvist, *Gräv där du star* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1978); Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1989). See also: *The History Workshop Journal* (Oxford University Press) <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk>, accessed March 22, 2022.

and (university) libraries, and they prefer to allow a greater temporal distance to assess the relevance of the material at their disposal.

For us crowdsourcing is a method used to build an archive for future histories of the pandemic but this also raises questions about how these future histories can be told and how historiographies based on born-digital material can be written. A possible route of enquiry is to analyze how crowdsourced evidence as a core element of future historiographies is produced in the digital space. Another angle is to examine the material collected and its use in narrative and curatorial practices. We can study the potential impact of crowdsourced archives on historiography by analysing what sorts of narratives can be created through such projects and what gaps exist.

In addition, crowdsourcing is also a means for contributors to come to terms with what is happening (or what has happened). In this way it can also have a therapeutic effect. The collecting platform gives individuals an audience and offers them insights into the experiences of others, reassuring them that they are not alone in struggling with frustrations and fears.

JOTPY

Crowdsourcing continues to evolve in the humanities, from its earliest days when it meant simply taking materials from communities toward richer formats in the present when it also means that communities take a more active role in the co-creation of knowledge. In the case of JOTPY, the community is assigning metadata to the objects they collect, making them part of the process of metadata assignment. They are not merely providing a service—doing an activity or sharing a photograph—they are helping to interpret it.

More broadly, crowdsourcing has always been part of the humanities, as citizens shared their own materials with archives or wrote local histories. What has changed is that a broader range of citizens is now engaged in the process of archival creation. For example, JOTPY seeks stories from those whose stories and voices are traditionally silenced by archival collecting. This includes those on the margins of society whether based on social class, race, ethnicity, gender, or age. In the case of JOTPY, we have significant collections from the borders of the United States where too many people are invisible, and the majority of contributions come from women.

Also, in the field, we see the scale and scope of crowdsourcing continuing to grow. The future challenge will be to channel social media storytelling and archiving toward more formal archives that have staying power (and are not stored

or searched in commercial spaces, not merely stored by for-profit corporations but where the historical record itself is being monetised).

A Citizen Science Approach?

coronarchiv

When the *coronarchiv* started, it was a spontaneous endeavor that aimed at enabling a documentation of the open process of the pandemic. We wanted to provide a digital container that suits the everyday practices of the public without the economic interest and the discursive setting (followers, audiences, self-presentation) of social media platforms. The idea was to gain insights into temporary reflections and documentations of an open-ended process and without knowing the outcomes of the situation. At that stage, the project can mainly be seen as a citizen science project in the style of the numerous projects that engage the public as contributors of data (numbers of insects, animals, plants, temperature, or air quality measurements etc.). The unexpected great success, media coverage and inflow of contributions then overloaded the resources of the project team quickly and for a longer time.

In the winter 2020/2021 we established a more theoretical reflection by raising funds for the installation of a CrowdsourcingLab that worked on the creation of a crowdsourcing manual for the humanities. We also developed and submitted a transnational grant proposal with the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) in Luxembourg to research rapid response collecting, crowdsourcing and participative historiography as citizen science that is still under review.

Thus, the project grew from a spontaneous public history intervention to a project that explores crowdsourcing as citizen science, participatory historiography and theoretical reflections on traces and sources as foundational elements of historiographical practices.

covidmemory.lu

One problem with this notion is that definitions of “citizen science” are many and varied. In the sense outlined above by the *coronarchiv* team, *covidmemory.lu* (and other digital memory banks) are all citizen science projects, of course. In our conception, however, historical citizen science includes some degree of historical interpretation or analysis of data. We would thus characterize *covidmemory.lu* as crowdsourcing rather than citizen science. Contributors currently

have no possibility of interacting with contributions by themselves or others. Unlike other platforms, we do not offer comments or public tagging. So, the question here is: what exactly is the difference between crowdsourcing and citizen science when speaking about rapid-response collections? In order to understand differences between citizen science and crowdsourcing in public history and historical knowledge production we need to refine and clarify such questions. The envisioned joint project with coronarchiv aims to do so by investigating how historical traces and sources are produced in this context and what kind of narratives emerge from them.

JOTPY

We have embraced the idea that community curation represents a citizen science approach to knowledge production. However, there are limitations to our approach. Individual contributors often lack the knowledge to be sophisticated curators of their own materials. We would likely have to do more systemic and expert trainings for contributors but this may dissuade contributions. Regardless, the metadata we are getting from contributors is surprisingly insightful and incisive, if imperfect. But, then again, all metadata is imperfect.

Contributors (and communities broadly) have the ability to assign metadata to the materials through a plug-in that we are using in Omeka Plus. Unfortunately, most people are unaware that they can do this, as it is not obvious this feature is available, nor have we promoted this aspect of JOTPY very much. As a result, very few people actually add tags to the items.

Finally, our approach has been to build common cause with communities as a way to engage those communities traditionally silenced by archives but also as a more affirmative way of collecting. This is, by definition, a citizen science approach to building a crowdsourced archive because it transforms partners into co-creators of the project.

Structural Challenges

Silences in the Archives

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The main challenge is to fill the gaps in our archive. If the aim of the collection is to document a future everyday history of the pandemic, we have to acknowledge the obvious limits concerning the social groups we seem to reach, i.e. those who wish to share their experiences.

There are a number of archival silences that need to be overcome. The platform needs more contributions from underrepresented social groups, for example people who were particularly or even existentially affected by the pandemic. It also needs more contributions related to the “new normal” since summer 2020. We are encouraging people to contribute despite their apparent “pandemic fatigue” [as discussed further below].

coronarchiv

Long term digital preservation is an honorable goal but is complicated by the fact that all team members are employed on a temporary basis. Thus, the sustainability of the project is not only a question of technical means and resources but is also endangered by current employment policies. Hence, the project team cannot actively seek material due to manpower and resources. The project, therefore, primarily reaches members of social strata with the time and the technical means to participate in digital collecting, who consider self-documentation in what is perceived as an historically significant situation and actively strive to do so. To expand diversity in our archive has been a challenge from the beginning, though we tried to reach new communities by cooperation e.g., with the German Red Cross, local and regional archives, the activities of the CrowdsourcingLab and via our social media channels.

covidmemory.lu

We have opted for open calls for contributions aimed at everyone living or working in Luxembourg, instead of actively collecting memories among certain communities. The former reduces our impact as historians on the style and topics of

submissions, but the latter would allow us to directly target certain groups which we have not yet reached. Since we do not want to change our approach, the challenge is to reach out to these absent voices, for example with newspaper coverage and radio interviews.

Moreover, we plan to host other collections that are likely to expand our view of the pandemic in Luxembourg. Some of them have a similar approach with an open call to the public, for example the initiative launched by the Lëtzebuerg City Museum¹¹ to look for material objects that have been produced or have received new meaning during the pandemic. Other projects have produced knowledge in different ways, such as the impressive “Yes we care” oral history collection¹² initiated by our colleague Professor Benoît Majerus. Together with other C²DH historians, he has conducted more than 350 short interviews every two weeks with 21 people working in the Luxembourg care sector (e.g. nurses, doctors, directors of health institutions, a funeral home employee and a physiotherapist). These interviews are going on at a reduced pace and provide insights into dimensions of the pandemic (such as health effects and implications, suffering and death) that are largely absent from our *covidmemory* collection.

JOTPY

We have tried to confront the silences of the traditional archive. Archives, as we know, remain silent at a variety of boundaries—often based on present-day power relations. JOTPY has sought those voices that are often muted and distorted by contemporary injustice and inequality: people living in poverty, African-Americans, Native Americans, LatinX communities, and the elderly have been among those who have been infected, hospitalized, and died at higher rates than other groups. Communities with less social and economic capital also have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its economic impacts. Not surprisingly, these groups also have relatively fewer resources, less access to digital platforms, and less leisure time to document their experiences or participate in the (usually) university-based efforts at documentation.

To address these needs, project partners reached out directly to marginalized communities, providing them with training or direct support for uploading images. We also recognized that using digital archives is not self-evident, so we de-

¹¹ The Lëtzebuerg City Museum: Collecting in the Age of Coronavirus: <https://citymuseum.lu/en/news/collecting-in-the-age-of-coronavirus>, accessed June 27, 2022.

¹² C²DH: “Thinkering”: <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/thinkering/traces-et-memoires-dune-pandemie-en-cours-yes-we-care>, accessed June 27, 2022.

veloped forms and trainings that would make it easier for contributors to share their stories. Importantly, training people to collect is not just about technical matters; quite often it is about teaching ordinary people—especially those with less social and political capital—that they matter. Public engagement teaches both contributors and researchers how to add to the collections, helping to drive collecting forward. It also has forced us to think more critically about how the materials might be used for research in the future, shaping design (and redesign work). We built our programming out of topics and trends that we saw emerging in the archive, often leading to specific “calls to action” that invited contributions.

Misinformation and Hate Speech

JOTPY

We also encountered problems in terms of collecting and describing misinformation and/or hoaxes. Indeed, the pandemic also emerged in a variety of ways within the broader cultural and political sphere. It grew into a potent and central campaign issue in the United State presidential election. At the same time, the multi-year disinformation campaign that became a signal feature of Donald Trump’s presidency—with more than 20,000 documented false or misleading statements according to *The Washington Post*¹³—have complicated the team’s efforts to document the crisis. Broader discussions of truth, hoax, and misinformation—including the question of whether the pandemic even existed—have shaped the archive, though they remain somewhat unresolved.

coronarchiv

We do not see the project as a normative gate keeper, but at the same time we did not experience misinformation or hate speech as a major problem. There were only a few items of fake news or individual contributions that showed proximity to conspiracy ideologies, but, after all, these are part of the pandemic experience and need to be traced and documented, too.

¹³ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly “President Trump has made more than 20,000 false or misleading claims” *The Washington Post* (July 13, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-20000-false-or-misleading-claims/>, accessed June 27, 2022.

covidmemory.lu

We review all contributions before publication to ensure that they are legally compliant, e. g. concerning copyright or hate speech. We take these legal obligations seriously but try to approach them in such a way that they are not too onerous and frustrating for contributors. In general, however, the contributions that remain unpublished are those without any obvious link to the pandemic. As mentioned in our introduction above, about a dozen out of the 350 contributions do not appear on the platform.

Misinformation and hate speech are socially important aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and should also be included in our archives if uploaded by the public. However, these voices are absent from covidmemory.lu. Thus, future historians might obtain a distorted picture from our platforms. We can only assume that they will also look into other sources where critics of pandemic measures, conspiracy theorists, deniers, etc. are represented.

Privacy**coronarchiv**

On a conceptual level, one of the greatest challenges is to find a balance between user friendliness, data privacy, and digital preservation need. While we strive to make the uploading process as easy as possible for our users, data privacy rules and regulations force the implementation of restrictions that might discourage people to upload their corona experiences. At the same time, lower contribution barriers also impact the collecting of metadata. This affects the data quality for future research as well as digital preservation.

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When setting up the memory bank and creating the submission form we followed the principle of data economy, asking for only those personal data needed for the collection and curation process. Contributors may stay anonymous or submit some personal information that will not be published on the webpage. Overall, the submission process is more complicated than contributing to most social media platforms as participants have to fill out a relatively detailed form and accept the legal and technical terms every time they submit a post. This process might work as a filter that prevents people from uploading imme-

diate and emotional responses. Moreover, people who have grown used to being able to comment and post content easily, may feel discouraged from uploading something on our platform.

JOTPY

As we started collecting, we realized the potential danger of revealing private medical information shared by our users. We worried that laws and rules that govern medical providers might also be relevant to JOTPY. And, although we later learned that contributors sharing their own or others medical information did not put us in jeopardy, we nonetheless redacted certain private information shared by contributors about health issues pertaining to individuals other than themselves, especially in the oral history collections. Likewise, as contributors began sharing images of social protest, we also recognized that photographs of protesters could be used by law enforcement or other agencies to identify individual protesters other than those who contributed those images. As a result, we set in place a policy where our curators could redact or blur the public view of individuals (who were not the contributor) in photographs; we retained the original images in our database. Protecting privacy emerged as a central point of conversation.

Pandemic Fatigue

JOTPY

Pandemic fatigue can be understood in terms of growing weary of the pandemic, but also adjusting to what one might call the “new normal.” And, indeed, over time pandemic fatigue appeared in the archive, especially toward the end of the first year of the crisis. During the first several months through the summer of 2020, contributions to the archive poured in, including with renewed vigor in Fall 2020. By October, JOTPY had crossed the threshold of 10,000 contributions (in the first eight months). Following the presidential election in the United States, the rate of contribution slowed. By the new year the rate of contributions decreased further, with many of them being about the vaccination program in the United States, which began in earnest in January and February. As hope about the ending of the pandemic increased, our contributions slowed further, including as life seemed to be on the verge of returning to normal in June, prior to the emergence of the Delta variant.

The slowing of contributions forced us to think critically about the sorts of “calls to contribute” that our curatorial team, including especially interns, could seek. In particular, we have worried that as the novelty of the pandemic wore off, the relative slowing of the pandemic might give misimpressions to researchers about the trajectory of the pandemic. For example, the pandemic has surely disrupted supply chains across the globe (or led to impulse and bulk buying), leading to an early influx of photographs about absences of products—toilet paper or condoms, for examples—on store shelves. Contributors shared these early disruptions, often attributing them to irrationality, in large numbers. By contrast, as pandemic fatigue slowly set in, and life changed during the pandemic, other limitations of the supply chain, as well as changing social conditions, made their way into the consumer landscape. Plywood, for instance, drove up construction costs for homes. This happened as demand for houses increased and supply diminished (because people started spending more time at home)—all of which also served to drive up prices. The pandemic, as well as other externalities, also caused shortages of microchips, high chlorine prices (for sanitation), and of both new and used cars. Unfortunately, some of these subtler elements of how the pandemic shaped the consumer landscape are less well documented in JOTPY because pandemic fatigue set in and created a new normal in which such inconveniences and/or shortages seemed ordinary.

coronarchiv

Numbers of contributions seem to go down when infection rates decline, however, we have not had a chance to analyse our data in depth so it is impossible to say, at this point, if this observed correlation really holds true.

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When the platform was launched in April 2020, researchers and contributors alike were very much in the moment. The former were keen to provide possibilities for documentation which the latter actively embraced. With the transition from the first to the second wave of COVID-19 infections, the number of contributions decreased and the platform’s focus changed to providing a resource for future generations. As of January 2022, only 71 of the published contributions date from August 2020 or later. Moreover, a considerable number of them are still about the first wave; the second and third waves are somewhat absent, despite the fact that infection rates have been much higher than during the first wave.

The platform speaks to two audiences: researchers and the “public.” The latter needs to know that covidmemory.lu is still active and that we are still seeking new contributions. Every upload matters; nothing is too trivial.

Curating the Collections

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We would like to stress that for us the curation process already starts with the framing of the platform and outreach activities. On the introduction and submission pages, we list possible media types and themes that we find interesting. Such lists cannot be exhaustive and remain rather static, even though we have also addressed current topics through specific calls on our social media channels and pointed out gaps in our collection in interviews with journalists.

JOTPY

We developed programs that sought to teach people to use the archive (not just to contribute), allowing them to explore other contributions. This broader work of public engagement—during the pandemic and after—remains a central concern for the JOTPY team. For example, we continue to build and host workshops and lesson materials for teachers about using (and contributing to) the archive as a way to foster inquiry. From those conversations and from focus groups with teachers, we have learned that the search and use of archives is not intuitive, even in this world of digital savvy. As a result, we continue to experiment with design ideas, as we ask how to build an interface for the archive that spurs action, fosters questions, and allows for intuitive searching and discovery. After all, what good is an archive that does not get used?

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With the launch of the new *coronarchiv* website by the end of March 2021, we enhanced digital options to present the collected material. Next to making the website cleaner and user friendlier, one of the main reasons for the relaunch was to make more active use of our own material. We are now able to curate and host digital exhibitions and we established a project blog on the site.

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We plan to host small exhibitions on the new website (currently under construction), complementing the collected content from the platform with external contextualizing material. This is more like traditional curation and is intended not only to demonstrate the platform's relevance but also to encourage interaction. Finally, we are tagging the existing contributions. This will facilitate future research in the archive and also make it easier to use in the present by identifying specific themes.

coronarchiv

Online exhibitions are curated by different members of our team and contain between seven to 15 objects. The exhibition and blog module are open to diverse curators and authors: team members, from professors to students, all bring in their own take on the content. In 2022 we started a call for exhibitions to include citizen curators and their perspectives on the collected material. As we are still in an ongoing pandemic situation, the exhibitions aim to contribute to a bigger understanding of everyday life since we conceive of them as cross medial speech acts. At best, our own curated contents will widen a global perspective and contextualize the pandemic endeavor as a phenomenon that cannot be treated as national experience at all.

JOTPY

Almost from the outset, we actively curated materials as they have been ingested into the archive, using a process that has evolved through an iterative approach. Initially, only members of the JOTPY team assigned metadata, but we soon expanded that to ask contributors to assign metadata—and even studied the differences between contributor and curator tags. As we built workflows, we also recognized that it was important to assign metadata quickly as this satisfied our contributors' interest in seeing their materials/stories in the archive. We have balanced quick turnaround with a thorough vetting process—in which lead curators review the metadata assigned by interns and curators for consistency in the application of nomenclature and project guidelines.

Equally important, by providing wide-ranging metadata in a variety of fields, we create a context that fosters interpretation and dialog about the pandemic (and about our curators' metadata choices). The work of building context

through assignment metadata has been critical to our development of programs and exhibits. We have developed public programs around specific items or collections, creating linkages, connections, and contexts for discussion in public programs, classrooms and professional meetings. These contexts of meaning have generated ideas for exhibits, and provided exhibit curators with easy access to a wide array of objects, leading to student-, intern- and curator-created exhibits in digital format (within JOTPY) as well as physical exhibits on display in classrooms and cultural organizations.

Public Engagement and (Historical) Knowledge

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First, we should emphasize that submissions to covidmemory.lu currently represent knowledge of the present. It remains to be seen if they will also become knowledge of the past; that is for future historians to decide. In our opinion, we lack the necessary temporal distance to evaluate the historical value of the collected material from a more nuanced historical perspective and to analyze its usefulness for memory work.

coronarchiv

Instead of retrospective classifications and interpretations, the *coronarchiv* focuses on documenting experiences in the ongoing process. The contributors document what they perceive as relevant at the very moment of experience, without knowing the end or the results of the open process of the pandemic. And they can upload reflections and thoughts in hindsight.

Overall, the *coronarchiv* serves as a container for a broader public to leave and preserve traces of everyday experiences that they deem important enough to preserve. While neither the project team nor the contributors can predict the use of the preserved material by future historians or the use of single objects for historical narratives within or beyond academic historiography, the traces left behind may increase the diversity of perspectives on the pandemic, provide empirical evidence for local experiences, or supplement state and media records. It is important to understand that producing and collecting traces is not to be mistaken as producing sources. The decision about which traces become sources is up to future historiography. The *coronarchiv* thus provides a collection of traces that need to be contextualized, curated, and narrated later.

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We see the contributions as local or vernacular knowledge. This knowledge reveals how people experienced the pandemic and its multiple impacts on everyday life, and how they are making sense of living in a time of crisis. Through the material they upload, this knowledge is made explicit. This process cannot happen without some degree of self-reflection. In this sense, we provide an opportunity for both knowledge production and knowledge conservation. We propose to distinguish between snapshots and more thoughtful contributions, both of which have the potential to provide unique insights into local life.¹⁴

It will be the task of future historians to make sense of this knowledge. An element of historical source criticism will be to identify, for example, how much time elapsed between each submission and the actual event or memory. Scholars can then begin to analyze whether the contributions offer a window into everyday history and to what extent individual memories were shaped by media discourses or even other submissions to our platform.

coronarchiv

As founders and operators of the *coronarchiv*, the project team is part of the ongoing public processing of the pandemic and thus needs to be contextualized, explored and discussed by others. From the beginning we have been and still are an active part of the ongoing communication about the pandemic and cannot be separated or restrain ourselves from that.

covidmemory.lu

In our media contributions and research papers we have been transparent about the main weakness of covidmemory.lu: to a large extent, it represents the broader socio-economic milieu of the researchers, as seen in many of the contributions. Furthermore, it may seem trivial but it is important to highlight that digital memory banks always represent their creators' understanding of history. Of course, there is no way out of this: historians always practise in their present.

¹⁴ Examples of a snapshot, all accessed June 25, 2021, <https://covidmemory.lu/memory/906>; a stream of consciousness, <https://covidmemory.lu/memory/643>; and reflective writing, <https://covidmemory.lu/memory/1088>.

The idea that everyone's testimony is important for future histories might be considered not only democratic and emancipatory, but also individualistic and ego-centric.

When we decide to not publish a submission, we keep a record of that decision in the metadata of the item. Sometimes, there have been discussions among the curators as to whether or not a contribution should be published. So far, these discussions can only be retrieved in our internal communication channels. We have not yet discussed how to bring these different records together, how to archive them or how to connect them to the public platform.

JOTPY

Throughout the project, the JOTPY team has worked to make its practices and processes transparent, including evidence of our deliberations and curatorial choices in the archive. For example, the curatorial guides that we developed to process materials (and train new curators) are available publicly through Google Documents, as well as in the JOTPY archive. When teachers or community partners issue a "call to action," curating with their students or communities, those calls are included in the archive and linked (using the linked data feature) to materials submitted by (or collected on behalf of) community members. Finally, we used the team collaboration software SLACK to organize our disparate community and to share authority. We sought to create dynamic curatorial process for incoming materials, as well as a way to organize and iteratively expand our process. Conversations on SLACK transformed into the written guidelines for curators as team members produced two 40-page plus guides (Google Documents) outlining curatorial practices, including one specifically devoted to oral histories. This document became both a guide to our practices for team members and a tool for onboarding new curators, as well as curators from across the globe. To date, the SLACK channels have amassed more than 20,000 messages from our partners—revealing to us both our changing practices but also the dynamic process of shared authority that has driven our collaborative curatorial processes. Eventually, this SLACK conversation will be added to the archive to help researchers understand the transformation of our team's practices, as well as to position our work for researchers.

Thinking Beyond

JOTPY

The pandemic both coincided with and drove broader political, economic, and social change. Protest emerged as a central characteristic of the current crisis, first with demonstrations against mask ordinances and lockdowns. At the same time, in May, 2020, a broader array of national and international protests developed, led by the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers (one has been convicted and others are awaiting trial), was recorded and broadcast on social media. These protests developed from the widespread and deep inequalities that structure life in the United States, which themselves have been manifest in the impact of COVID-19 on Americans. In particular, working-class, poor, and non-white populations have faced death and hospitalization at greater rates than other Americans. For this reason, JOTPY curators recognized that in many ways racism intersected with the pandemic and that protests challenging entrenched political regimens tied to race, class, and state-sanctioned violence should be documented as part of the broader pandemic.

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The various collecting platforms on COVID-19 from all over the world offer a compelling basis for comparisons, as we discussed during an international workshop¹⁵ in November 2020. We remain interested in national and international cooperation and the creation of synergies. For this purpose, we also organized two round table discussions¹⁶ with other stakeholders in Luxembourg involved in collecting personal memories of and official documents on the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaboration might lead to a shared platform containing more sources related to how people in the country have lived through the pandemic, thereby enlarging the perspective of the covidmemory.lu core collection.

¹⁵ Tizian Zumthurn and Marco Gabellini. “Collaborative COVID-19 Memory Banks: History and Challenges”, *C2DH Thinking* (January 19, 2021): <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/thinking/collaborative-covid-19-memory-banks-history-and-challenges>, accessed June 27, 2022.

¹⁶ Tizian Zumthurn. “The Gap and the Future: COVID-19 and (Digital) Collecting”, *C2DH Thinking* (September 30, 2020): <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/thinking/gap-and-future-covid-19-and-digital-collecting>, accessed June 27, 2022.

The central question of which social groups and memories will be represented in COVID-19 online archives hinges on whether digital memory banks will be able to collect more of the unknown and unexpected rather than merely perpetuating the (upper) middle-class discourses that can be found in the media. We see the danger that digital memory banks are mainly expanding the middle-class bubble of communication rather than transcending it in terms of content or perspectives.

coronarchiv

We may think about possibilities and options, challenges, and means – but it may be way too early to measure (fundamental) transformation and changes. It gets easier to collect and store material from the everyday due to the technical development, but only for certain spaces and societal strata. We should not overestimate the western hemisphere experiences at all. But it seems likely that citizen engagement in the West becomes way easier due to technological changes, accessibility, and distribution of mobile devices as hubs for media production and distribution, the expansion of networks for mobile data transmission, the rise of digital literacy in certain societies, and the dissemination and impact power of social media platforms. This may rise the sheer number of voices that can be heard and documented—but it remains open whether and how this affects and changes the way we think about memory.

It seems that looking into hitherto unvisited or unseen social spaces and their communicative practices and contents unsettles the long-established middle-class bearers of public memory culture in Western societies. We need to understand that seemingly new emerging voices often have existed before, but that they become more visible and thereby accessible beyond the narrow, socially confined communication bubbles in which the middle class has established and partially isolated itself in the past. New ways of understanding are needed that go beyond the current wondering and downgrading of the unknown and unexpected. And by opening and rearranging participation in communication circles, the communicative production of knowledge and memories will eventually change without a doubt.

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Stefan Krebs is Assistant Professor and Head of the Public History research axis at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH). His recent projects investigate the industrial history of Luxembourg, the history of maintenance and repair, experimental media archaeology and the digital memory bank covidmemory.lu. His recent publications (co-authored with Tizian Zumthurm) include “COVID-19 Digital Memory Banks: Challenges and Opportunities for Historians of Education” (*Paedagogica Historica*, 2022) and “Collecting Middle-Class Memories? The COVID-19 Pandemic, Technology and Crowdsourced Archives” (*Technology and Culture*, 2022).

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