CHAPTER 11

Viewing ‘Africa Through a Lens’
Using Digitisation and Online Tools at the National Archives (UK) to Widen Audience Reach

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In February 2011, The National Archives launched approximately 10,000 images depicting Africa during the colonial period on Flickr, the photo sharing website.1 Using the title ‘Africa Through a Lens’, this was the first time The National Archives had attempted a project of this kind, relying on free social networking sites to host and promote a collection.2 This method was a vital element of the project, as it attempted to engage new audiences, including those across Africa, with the collection. The project aimed to gather knowledge of the people and places depicted within the images, exploring the possibility of harnessing the ‘wisdom of the crowd’.

Taking a pragmatic approach, this chapter discusses the project, explores its challenges and outcomes and begins to look to the future of approaches of this type. The chapter does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of such projects and their worth at this stage, but as The National Archives continues to expand and develop its engagement with users outside the United Kingdom, it provides food for thought for others considering adopting similar methods.

Digital technology has been an increasingly vital tool in archival resources over the past ten years. In 2004, Duff, Craig and Cherry debated the ‘promises and pitfalls of the digital age’ in the use of archival sources. The result was a questionnaire on the use of archival material by historians. In response to a question regarding the use of formal and informal sources to locate information, they reported that 45 per cent of respondents rated the web as ‘very important’ or ‘somewhat important’.3 The top three key barriers amongst academics to accessing information were given as geographic location, lack of finding aids and fragile condition.4 This response from one of the most prolific

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2 The landing page for Africa Through a Lens with a link to Flickr can be found at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/africa, accessed 6 June 2014.
4 Ibid., p. 15.
groups of users of The National Archives and other archives is significant. The advent of digitised resources, in terms of making the non-digital digital, has begun to address all three of these issues for both the academic and non-academic user.

However, this progress raises a further set of questions. For example, as archival material begins to increase online, so user-group size and diversity increases. While numerous new users are identified, many further potential users do not have the necessary resources to access and benefit from the internet – far from it – and thus the new user group is limited in other ways. Alongside this, the question over which collections are or are not selected to be digitised becomes a complicated debate for reasons of access, cost and historical distortion. While navigating these challenges, archives must be careful to preserve context, as users have increasing access to digital documents rather than the ‘original’ form, and must be prepared for the use and ‘mash-up’ of material in ways that have never been seen before.

In 2011, Paulus, quoting David Carr, described the role of archives in a world where digitisation of documents is fast becoming ‘the norm’, a far cry from the research results of 2004:

...linking and mediating between the past, present, and future, the archive is a repository of temporality...The archive, which David Carr says has the power to inspire and extend ‘the unpredictable reaches of personal knowledge and insight’; can be a potential place of ongoing temporal revelation. It can be ‘a site of imagination, creativity, production, as well as of documentary preservation’.

It was in this atmosphere that the ‘Through a Lens’ series was launched. Allowing free access to digital copies of the original African images, the project asked users to contribute any knowledge they had about the people or places depicted by leaving comments on the photographs, or uploading their own photographs. The hope was that the brief original descriptions of the images would be expanded.

5 Further information and advice regarding the challenges of accessibility online can be found at www.go-on-uk.org, accessed 6 June 2014.