

Newcastle University Library Special Collections & Archives

Statements on addressing potentially uncomfortable or distressing content in collections and addressing hidden or absent histories and voices in collections

In support of Newcastle University's [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#), and through our [Special for Everyone](#) project, we are committed to ensuring that Newcastle University Library's Special Collections and Archives is an inclusive space for all.

Our curation and approach are also in line with the RLUK Special Collections and Heritage Network's [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Statement](#).

Newcastle University Code of Practice for Freedom of Speech sets out how the University will uphold its legal duty to promote and secure free speech and academic freedom. Nothing in this statement should be read as undermining or conflicting with the free speech code of practice. In cases of perceived conflict, particular regard will be given to the legal duty to achieve compliance with this code.

Addressing potentially uncomfortable or distressing content in collections

Our collections include material that reflects systemic discrimination and oppression based on race, disability, gender, sexuality, religion or belief, age, and social class. While they offer insight into historical and ongoing systems of inequality, they can also be uncomfortable or deeply distressing - especially to people from communities that have been marginalized or targeted. We acknowledge the lasting impact of these injustices and are committed to handling such material with care, transparency, and respect, while working actively to challenge inequity in society.

In Special Collections and Archives, we are addressing potentially uncomfortable or distressing content in our collections by providing visible signposting to material in the collections which may contain uncomfortable or distressing language, attitudes or imagery.

In the interests of historical integrity, we have not removed this material from our collections, but we have included a prominent note about it in the collection's, or item's, description which researchers will be able to see before requesting access to material. We do this so that researchers are fore warned of material which may make them feel uncomfortable or potentially cause distress.

For example:

“Clarke (Edwin) General Archive

Please note that some of the material in this collection contains language and attitudes that you may find uncomfortable or distressing, including derogatory content relating to people of colour, people with disabilities, and people with non-conforming gender identities. Newcastle University Library Special Collections & Archives' statement about addressing potentially uncomfortable or distressing content in collections is available [here](#).

[date]”

Limitations to this work

Adding this signposting to our catalogue descriptions is a work in progress. We recognise and are transparent about the limitations to this work:

- The process of identifying collection material in need of signposting uses criteria based on a set of characteristics, namely race, disability, gender, sexuality, religion or belief, age and social class. We selected these criteria because we have judged them to be representative of the areas of life in which people have experienced, and continue to experience, systemic discrimination and oppression. However, the selection of these characteristics was inherently a subjective process.
- Although in identifying collection material in need of signposting we endeavour to be as detailed in our approach as possible, given the sheer volume of material we hold, time and other resource constraints mean that we cannot be comprehensive in our approach and some potentially relevant material may be as yet unidentified.
- Our book collections, in particular, present distinct challenges to effective signposting given their volume and usually varied content; we are currently developing our approaches around signposting their content.

To address and mitigate against these limitations, the process of identifying relevant material remains a live and ongoing process, to which we ask all Special Collections staff and users to contribute.

Feedback about this work

If you have any questions about the steps that we are taking to address potentially uncomfortable or distressing language and content in our collections, please contact us at libraryhelp@ncl.ac.uk.

Addressing omissions in the record and hidden histories and voices in Special Collections at Newcastle University Library

The attitudes and beliefs of those who controlled the recording and collecting of history have shaped what is preserved in - and what is excluded from - archives and historical records. This has led to widespread erasure, distortion, and marginalisation of the voices and experiences of many ethnic communities as well as those marginalised by gender, sexuality, disability, class, and belief. In particular, the recording of European history often reflects colonial ideologies that upheld white supremacy and imperial dominance. We recognise these absences and silences as a form of harm, and we are committed to addressing them.

We are taking the following steps to address absences and hidden/ less visible voices and narratives in our collections:

- Improving our Collection Development Policy for Special Collections by broadening our collecting principles to include supporting Newcastle University's commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in representing diverse voices: [\[link\]](#)
- Creating engaging content which illuminates less visible voices and histories within our collections, such as [\[links to various e.g. Finding their Voices, Listen to This Story, blog posts etc\]](#)
- Providing in catalogue descriptions visible signposting for historical materials with content relating to the characteristics of race, disability, gender, sexuality, religion/belief, age, and social class.

For example:

"Live Theatre Archive

This collection contains material relating to Live Theatre in Newcastle, many of whose productions include themes relevant to working class communities. Find out more about our work to illuminate the hidden histories and voices in our collections [here](#)."

Feedback about this work

If you have any questions about the steps that we are taking to address omissions in the record and hidden histories and voices in Special Collections at Newcastle University Library, please contact us at libraryhelp@ncl.ac.uk.

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