# Call for HEI Partners/Academic Supervisors

## Research Theme:

## Online fan communities: collecting practice and inclusion in a national collection

British Library Co-Supervisors:

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**Context & Summary**

This project will explore the publication, collecting and preservation activities of online fan communities and fan archives. It will investigate the methodologies and practices utilised by fan communities in creating and archiving works, how these differ from current practices in libraries, and what can be learned to aid in the collection and preservation of relevant works.

Online fan-generated content is at high risk of loss due to technical, legal and geographical constraints. As a result, fan fiction and other fan publications are poorly represented in national library collections. Fan content is not just made by and for fans, but it is often also archived by fans themselves. This is done through personal archives, volunteer-run initiatives, as well as rescue-mission-style archiving of disappearing domains or software (such as the archival work done at Archive Of Our Own with the Open Doors project). Fan-generated content can also include content derived from and documenting original works e.g. playthrough videos.

This studentship will conduct research into archival practices within fan communities and compare them to those deployed by libraries. It will generate research to inform best practices for the inclusion of fan communities within collecting activity, including a legal and ethical framework, and consider how institutions can refine their collection methodologies to accommodate newer formats and content types. As part of this CDP, the student will be supported in documenting their research in the form of a curated web archive collection, alongside a more traditional dissertation. This will be a great opportunity to develop a contemporary collection of complex digital publications and document innovative use of technology in the UK publishing field.

This CDP builds on the British Library's work on collecting and preserving born-digital complex publications as part of UK legal deposit. Through this CDP the student will have a chance to explore both decentralised collection systems and institutional policy/practices, as well as build relationships with online communities and the collections they are curating. By doing so, they will actively support the British Library in fulfilling its mandate to collect as comprehensively as possible across the UK publishing landscape and make a significant contribution to the field of Library and Archive Studies.

**Research Areas**

The PhD student will be uniquely placed between institutional archiving practices from a national library perspective, as well as more grass-roots online communities, allowing them to develop new and holistic methodologies to digital archiving and preservation. While this CDP could be situated in a number of academic disciplines (such as Library and Information Science, Fandom Studies, Literature, Media History and Digital Culture), the central focus of the project will be research into online fan communities and archives, the assessment and comparison of different archival methodologies and related ethical considerations, as well as potentially collecting in the form of documentation or acquisitions.

As Catherine Grant notes in *Fandom as Methodology* (2019), fandom spaces have the potential to 'create oppositional spaces, communities, and practices, particularly from queer perspectives, but also through transnational, feminist and artist-of-colour fandoms'. Depending on the student's area of interest, there could be scope to focus on LGBTQIA+ voices, artist and writers of colour, and/or other intersectional identities.

There will be space for the student to define the line of enquiry that best fits their research interests, but potential research questions might be:

- How do the activities and outputs of fan communities relate to legal deposit, and what works should legal deposit libraries prioritise for collecting (especially related to digital publications, such as fan-fiction, electronic literature, etc.)?
- What archival and preservation methodologies are being used by fan communities (e.g. documentation, emulation, re-mixed works)?
- Are national libraries already collecting relevant material to document the work done in these spaces?
- What can we learn from the archival practices happening in these spaces? What methodologies could we adopt and how would they need to be adapted to work at the Library?
- What should national libraries collect to ensure that these spaces and their work are represented in national collections?
- What are the ethical and legal responsibilities that the Library has towards these communities? What legal and ethical framework is necessary to ensure collection practices will serve not only the Library's needs but also the needs of the communities we want to engage with?

Through research of fan communities and archival behaviour, the student will identify relevant groups to engage with. This may be through examination of online platforms such as Archive of Our Own or Wattpad, identification of communities who already engage with the cultural sector, or attendance at relevant fairs for fan publications (e.g. comic and zine fairs). This research will also support the development of recommendations and content for more broad communication with fan communities. Once relevant groups have been identified, an engagement plan for research will be developed with the supervisory team, subject to ethics approval. The objective of this part of the research will be to examine fan collecting behaviour and tools, to gain a detailed understanding of fan-created publications and how these relate to legal deposit, and develop the means to better support and include this work. Engagement with one or more fan communities may lead to a collecting case study: collecting a small number (expected to be no more than 3) of complex publications which otherwise the Library would not be able to collect.

The student will also be expected to use their research into fan communities more generally to support the creation of a collection or collections within the UK Web Archive. The student will learn about web archiving methods and tools and understand the role of web archiving within the context of legal deposit and national collections.

The successful candidate will be able to support the British Library's policy and practice, through learning from the collecting practices of archival communities run by fans and volunteers, and by considering issues of access and inclusion in national libraries' collections.

**Benefits & Training Opportunities for the CDP Student**

The candidate will be primarily based in the Contemporary British and Irish Published Collection team, with the possibility to receive expert advice and support from across the team, as well as access to the wider Contemporary British Collections department, Digital Scholarship and Digital Preservation.

The student will benefit from the expertise that Library's staff can provide around questions of legal and ethical framework and policies, as well as gaining direct access to the emerging formats collection, which is currently unavailable to Library's users in the Reading Rooms. The student will also engage and learn from teams involved in legal deposit implementation, for example publisher liaison and communications. The student will also be supported in meeting relevant colleagues and teams in other UK legal deposit libraries. This will be an important form of support in devising engagement plans with fan communities.

The supervisors and other members of the team will support the student in gaining an in-depth understanding of the policy context in which this research will be located. This relates to implementation of UK legal deposit, and in particular the extension of capability to new forms of digital publication. The student will benefit from being under supervision of a team with considerable relevant experience and will receive web archiving training, with an overview of different web crawling and curation tools.

This research project will also provide students with an opportunity to participate in a network of cultural heritage institutions concerned with the preservation of digital publications, as well as create contacts with authors and publishers in the digital writing community.

The student will be invited to share their research with a variety of audiences, both internally (through staff talks and blog posts) and externally (e.g. presenting at the Complex Digital Objects meeting, attended by members of other cultural heritage institutions). The student will be encouraged to present their research and progress at conferences and networks such as the International Internet Preservation Consortium's annual Web Archive Conference, iPRES, No Time to Wait, and UK-Ireland Digital Humanities Association.

**Application Deadline**

*Friday 29 November 2024, 12pm*

**Application Guidance**

Further information and details of how to apply can be found in the 'Information for HEI Applicants' document made available as part of this call.

**Contact for Queries**

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and

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