

Shouting in the Library: the Radical Voices season at the University of London's Senate House Library

From its inception, the University of London has defined itself in opposition to the classical elitism of pre-Victorian academia. Described by Dickens as 'the people's university', its founding principles emphasized social inclusion, the betterment of the individual through education and the contributions to the national economy of innovation, invention and hard work. The university's central research library at Senate House holds a unique corpus of 18th- to 20th-century radical political collections, among which is the library of the Family Welfare Association, with its ground-breaking campaigning around disability, prison conditions, public health and child poverty. Senate House Library and the Institute of Historical Research hosted a season of public and online exhibitions, 'radical walks', talks, film screenings and sound installations between January and March 2017, which saw contemporary radical thinkers Ken Loach and Ron Heisler connecting with their predecessors, through their book and manuscript legacies, to tell accessible stories and encourage new audiences into dialogue with 'the people's university'. This article explores the successes, challenges and lessons learned from the programme, while the events themselves brought new audiences in to encounter the history of protest and reform in a notoriously inaccessible space.

Background

My presentation at the 2017 UKSG Conference addressed a paradox: can you celebrate and honour resistance, non-conformity and reform within an august institution which has membership rules, 'Silence please!' signs and hallowed spaces? That was the premise of our three-month free event season, involving an exhibition, tours, concerts, talks, 'radical walks' and film screenings around the theme of left-wing protest and radical thought. The Radical Voices season website gives more information on the events.¹

In some senses, Senate House is an obvious venue for such a theme: from its inception, the University of London has defined itself in opposition to the classical elitism of pre-Victorian academia. Described by Dickens as 'the people's university',² its founding principles emphasized social inclusion and betterment through access to high-quality education. However, Senate House itself was used as the wartime Ministry of Information, and among the authors working here were Graham Greene, Laurie Lee and George Orwell. Today, the University's central research library at Senate House holds a unique corpus of 18th- to early 20th-century radical political collections, from Charles Booth's original research papers from Tower Hamlets, which became *Life and Labour of the People of London*, to the library of the Family Welfare Association, with its ground-breaking campaigning around disability, prison conditions, public health and child poverty.

Our Spring 2017 season of public and online exhibitions, a conference, 'radical walks', talks, film screenings and sound installations saw contemporary radical thinkers such as Ken Loach and collector and prolific library donor Ron Heisler connecting with their predecessors through their legacy collections. Our ambition for the season was to tell accessible stories, encourage new audiences and challenge the library and archive professions into open dialogue about libraries as cauldrons and memory palaces of radical ideas about hierarchies – including within library science itself – in the form of challenging classification systems, categories, rules of engagement, barriers to participation and diversity.



CAROLINE KIMBELL
Associate Director,
Commercial Licensing
& Digitization
Senate House
Library, University of
London

'libraries as cauldrons
and memory palaces
of radical ideas'

Successes

What worked best were the conferences and film screenings – the rarely seen radical episode of *The Clangers* ('Vote for Froglet', available on the BFI-player website)³ stole the show, but Ken Loach was unsurprisingly the star turn with a talk and showing of *Spirit of 45*. Screenings also included Russian film and the 1956 Bette Davis classic *Storm Centre*, widely regarded as the first anti-McCarthy film. Davis plays a librarian embroiled in questions of censorship and book banning, and as our opening film of the season, encapsulated the issues facing libraries at a time when control of information, opinion and 'fake news' is all too current. One speaker at our Radical Collections conference connected to the film season by speaking on the development of the Bechdel Test, which seeks to measure gender equality in the film industry by asking 'Does the film have more than one leading female character? Do the female characters have names? And do the women in the film talk to each other about anything other than men?'

'the rarely seen radical episode of *The Clangers* ... stole the show'

On the more pragmatic question of attendance at public events run by a library, everything depends on timing – screenings or other events scheduled in the exam season, around a long weekend or outside term time just do not attract the audiences that a mid-week, mid-term but non-exam time can, regardless of pricing.

And misses (but not complete misses)

On the theme of libraries' role in times of censorship, the season has thrown into relief some challenges and assumptions about just how radical a library can be. The Radical Librarians' Alliance declined to participate in the 'Radical Collections' conference, preferring spontaneous and non-hierarchical 'un-conferences'. Calls for papers, programme committees, registration fees and sponsors are all identified as conformities to be rejected. What really did not work was an Ephemera Roadshow, intended to unearth radical memorabilia from the attics of London, which attracted an audience of two. They did get red-carpet treatment, went away very satisfied and have since made significant and very welcome donations (most notably of ephemera from the Greenham Common women's camp) to our collection, but it was not quite the audience figure we had hoped for. There is possibly just too much of a culture clash between cash-in-the-attic and Occupy for such a concept to work.

Our walks were popular and well attended, paradoxically most enthusiastically taken up by an East End walking historian whose guided walks business stood to increase bookings as a result, but while we had presumed that history and historians would dominate this strand, it was actually literature which generated the most proposals, interest and participation. Our call for papers gave deliberately multicultural examples, but the take-up was predominantly white and male. The keynote speech centred on questions of social class, and the closing paper addressed successive waves of immigration to the East End of London. Senate House is not alone in facing challenges reaching black, Asian and minority ethnic and non-traditional audiences even though our student body and staff are a model of diversity. Attracting female attendees and speakers was no problem at all – the professions are, after all, heavily female – and papers at all the external speaker events were evenly split between men and women. The atmosphere throughout the events was friendly and warm, feedback buzzy and positive – most gratifying perhaps from the trainee librarians who came away encouraged about joining a profession open to challenge and diversity. The most humbling feedback though was from some of the bespoke tour groups to visit the exhibition – students of public policy from Kazakhstan ended their tour with the comment, 'You're very proud of your freedom, aren't you? We don't have that'.

'challenges reaching BAME and non-traditional audiences'

Radical collections

Radical collections and collecting also enjoyed some time in the spotlight: our exhibition itself was as diverse as we could make it. After agonizing over the logic for presenting the material, we decided on format and medium as the guiding principle. We faced many questions on our choices – why this or that particular item on the Paris Commune or the Iraq War, for example – and the answers were usually purely pragmatic. It all came down to visual impact, design, colour or physical state of preservation. Several items from the Chartists were just too fragile to display for months. And when it came to today's ephemera, 'zines and uncured digital content is growing in popularity as research raw material, but bringing together collectors and librarians to talk about samizdat material and ephemera within the strait-laced copyright and reproduction constraints of a library surfaced some creative friction. How do you clear rights with an organization that does not believe in them – can you commercialize or license material that was created expressly to subvert capitalist structures?

'How do you clear rights with an organization that does not believe in them ...?'

Social media

We were determined to include social media content within the exhibition and events, as this is in many ways the best expression of today's underground, alternative communication platform, but of course the dominance of the sector by American tech giants Twitter and Facebook means that copyright issues here are, ironically, every bit as fraught as for print, film or broadcast media. Our solution was to work with four bloggers who gave us permission to exhibit screen grabs from their pages, and one academic wrote a piece for us on why he blogs, which appeared on our gallery touch screen. One strand to emerge from the season was the consensus that blogs are the new pamphlets as ways of reaching mass audiences with radical ideas. Our exhibition paired 17th-century Quaker campaigning pamphlets with early CND pamphlets and current CND blog posts – all share an underlying belief in pacifism while illustrating the evolution of the media through which ideas can be spread and campaigns waged. Of course, the flat screens also valuably increase the available exhibition canvas in a restricted space, and improve levels of interaction and dwell time for visitors too, helping to strengthen bonds between the exhibition host and new audiences. The Greenham protester who has now become a valued library donor or the renewed relationship with the British Film Institute were just the highest profile examples of how an on-site exhibition can act as a bridge-builder to individuals and organizational partners.

'blogs are the new pamphlets'

'an on-site exhibition can act as a bridge-builder to individuals and organizational partners'

Radical Sounds

While film nights are a standard part of any engagement season, working with a radical sound artist posed, as you can imagine, some cultural challenges: ours held a 'Radical Sounds' event with two poets and community slogan-shouting, which attracted an audience of 70, lasted two-and-a-half hours and was reportedly 'great, for certain tastes'. The main lesson here has been that an artist-in-residence eats a lot of time and resource – sound artists maybe more than visual – mainly because they have less background knowledge or experience of print and archival research collections, and therefore a lot of staff time is involved in 'show and tell' sessions explaining the treasures of the library, their stories, significance and how to find them. At least involving different media, performers and event types certainly allowed us as a core collection on the radical left in 20th-century Britain to explore and expose the subject within perhaps the least likely setting – the scholarly library.

As I write this, protesters have unfurled a banner at the top of Senate House tower, and pickets are drumming and chanting at the gate. Shouting around the library remains powerful and challenging, chiming ironically with our legacy collections on protest and revolt. Even if the shouting we orchestrated for the Radical Voices season was sanitized and licensed, and silence prevails within the reading rooms, there is still plenty of creative tension between the voices of our radical collections and the atmosphere in which those ideas are studied, critiqued and propagated, and plenty more interactions between activists and their heritage to come.

'plenty more interactions between activists and their heritage to come'

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

References

1. Radical Voices season:
<http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk/exhibitions-and-events/exhibitions/radical-voices> (accessed 5 October 2017).
2. Dickens C, *All the Year Round*, 1858; quoted in an article on the foundation of the University of London's External System for distance learning: 'The people's university [would] extend her hand to the young shoemaker who studies in his garret':
<http://www.londoninternational.ac.uk/150/history/index.shtml> (accessed 6 October 2017).
3. 'Vote for Froglet', BFI:
<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-vote-for-froglet-1974-online> (accessed 6 October 2017).

Article copyright: © 2017 Caroline Kimbell. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](#), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.



Caroline Kimbell
Associate Director, Commercial Licensing & Digitization
Senate House Library
Senate House, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU, UK
E-mail: Caroline.Kimbell@london.ac.uk

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4501-8370>

To cite this article:

Kimbell C, Shouting in the Library: the Radical Voices season at the University of London's Senate House Library, *Insights*, 2017, 30(3), 78–81; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.382>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 08 November 2017