

RecordCovid19

RecordCovid19

Historicizing Experiences of the Pandemic

Edited by
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Kristopher Lovell

Introduction: *#RecordCovid19*

The *#RecordCovid19* research project, launched in March 2020, was inspired by an awareness of the growing international health crisis and an individual existential crisis. As the pandemic escalated, so did an insecurity regarding my own limitations and ability to contribute positively to evolving events. The heroic role of the historian during a pandemic is somewhat limited. There were no emergencies that required my particular skill set. As an historian of the wartime press, I was unlikely to be called upon to measure newspaper content. But as the international crisis unfolded – from the virus first being detected in December 2019, to being declared an outbreak by the World Health Organisation in January 2020, and then a pandemic in March, as the virus became more and more serious, with the British Government advising against non-essential travel in mid-March, to announcing the lockdown on 23 March – I wanted to contribute something. And so *#RecordCovid19* was established on 26 March 2020, the same day that the lockdown measures legally came into effect in the United Kingdom.

The aim of the *#RecordCovid19* project was to collect anonymous accounts from a range of people about their experiences during the pandemic. It was intended to be a future resource for generations to come. It hoped to record how people felt about the social and political responses to the virus. People's reactions to new stories from all over the world would depict how they coped with the prospect and realities of isolation. *#RecordCovid19* invited contributors to submit accounts about any aspect of their experience that they felt comfortable discussing. Submissions could be short form or long. Accounts were submitted anonymously but were published with a brief description provided by respondents themselves, based on what they felt comfortable sharing: Age, Gender, Occupation, Location.¹

The aims of the project were inspired by my own research as a media historian of wartime Britain (1939–1945) in two ways. Firstly, it was inspired by the pioneering work of Mass Observation. Mass Observation was a social research organisation set up in 1937 with the aim of recording people's experiences of life in Britain by collecting diaries, accounts and questionnaires produced by volunteers. Mass Observation, as it explained to its respondents in 1941, sought to:

¹ For example: [*#RecordCovid19-1*] Croydon, Civil Servant, Female, 25, <https://kristopherlovell.com/2020/04/12/record-covid-19-1-croydon-civil-servant-female-25/>, accessed 13 April 2023.

salvage history, both literally from the tin dustbin outside your door, and metaphorically from the equally ignoble end which it would suffer if it were allowed to lie fallow in people's memories until such a time after war as it became fashionable to write it up.²

#RecordCovid19 thus sought to provide people with the opportunity to contribute their accounts, based on their own experiences as they happened, to a repository that would record and preserve them, providing a collection of primary sources for historians and sociologists.

Secondly, the project was inspired by the works of Angus Calder (and by extension Roland Barthes), insofar as it sought to help future researchers trace the development of Covid-19 mythologies through time.³ In the aftermath of the Second World War, as Calder demonstrates, individual wartime experiences were subsumed by a broader national narrative: nationally, the Myth of the Blitz suggested that wartime Britain was united, 'all in it together', and stoic in the face of war. Yet individual accounts written at the time reveal that for many in Britain, the war was a time of fear, racism, and division. Witnessing first-hand the days before lockdown in Britain, it seemed clear that several myths about life in the pandemic were starting to emerge in much the same way as the Myth of the Blitz developed, and some of the Covid-19 myths were even directly connected to the Myth of the Blitz. Grand narratives started to overshadow some of the smaller narratives. People claimed that the lockdown would show how Britain was once again 'all in it together' and how Britain with its Blitz Spirit would remain stoic in the face of Covid-19. Yet in the weeks and days before lockdown, pictures were being circulated of empty shelves in supermarket, stripped bare as some people were hoarding toilet rolls and pasta for themselves, often collecting food and goods that they could not possibly need (and much of which was later consigned wholesale to waste), at the cost of many others in need. By collecting accounts of life during the pandemic as it happened, the aim of *#RecordCovid19* was not to judge, disprove or debunk myths, but, it is hoped, to help future historians trace the development of these myths over time as they emerge.

2 Mass Observation File Report 869: 'Salvaging History', 11 September 1941, 9, <https://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-869?login=true>, accessed 15 March 2023.

3 Angus Calder, *Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 2006).

Themes of the Collection

This volume developed out of the themes that emerged from the *#RecordCovid19* collection and comprises chapters cultivated from an interdisciplinary range of contributors. Contributors were invited to submit chapters that were inspired by, but not limited by, the subjects that emerged from the submissions to *#RecordCovid19*.

The first chapter in this volume, by me as editor of the present volume and creator of the *#RecordCovid19* archive, seeks to provide an overview of the accounts submitted to the *#RecordCovid19* project in order to provide a greater context for the remaining chapters. It discusses the demographics of respondents as well as explores some of the themes that emerged from the accounts, with a particular focus on how respondents reacted to the realisation that they were living through an historic moment in time and places this incredulity within a wider context. In so doing, it also highlights some of the challenges that historians still face in convincing individuals that their voices are important to history.

The rest of the edited volume is divided broadly into sections that reflect this contextualisation: experiences, rhetoric and narratives. The work builds from discussions of the practical implications of living through the pandemic, to the official and unofficial ways in which the health crisis was communicated before exploring the ways in which these stories shaped, and were shaped by, the pandemic.

The first section starts with Josephine Hoegaerts' examination of an often-overlooked aspect of historical experience: one's relationship with the soundscapes that make up the background of our quotidian existence. Through a detailed examination of accounts submitted to *#RecordCovid19*, Hoegaerts explores how people's relationship with sounds changed during the pandemic and explores how perceptions of sound and space are often culturally and historically framed. It also critically raises some key questions about how accurately sound (and the perception of sound) can be recorded and the exciting challenges these pose to historians of sounds.

Chapter Three analyses the impact of the pandemic on the various stages of pregnancy and early parenthood. Elizabeth Benjamin and Sarah Turner use socio-cultural and auto-ethnographic approaches to demonstrate that while the pandemic imposed great changes upon us all, those shifting their familial composition were particularly strongly affected. The chapter focuses on parental roles while recognising the disproportionate burden put on women both during and outside of the pandemic, and both within and outside of motherhood.

In the fourth chapter, Iro Filippaki and Alexandra Palli employ an interdisciplinary, psycho-historical perspective to examine, through an exploration of responses to questionnaires from Greek psychiatric patients, the varying emotional responses to the pandemic, and the ways in which this might affect people's response to other

illnesses. It particularly focuses on the role emotions have in narratives of resilience, examining the role of empathy in the development of narratives of resilience.

The second section critically examines the rhetoric surrounding Covid-19 in Britain's responses to the pandemic. Christopher Smith explores, in the fifth chapter, the political use of references to Britain's experience of the Second World War in the UK government's narratives aimed at the population. The chapter builds on a discussion of the Myth of the Blitz, and demonstrates a thematic paradox, namely: that while the use of war myth narrative was strong in government messaging, the resonance was surprisingly low among the participants in the *#RecordCovid19* project.

Chapter Six, by Franziska E. Kohlt, engages in a critical examination of how the British political responses framed the pandemic around religious rhetoric and how the religious framing of the pandemic often emerged from the rhetoric of war. Kohlt highlights how whilst these rhetorical references might have chimed with the British public in the short-term, they often had a detrimental and dangerous impact long term. In so doing, this chapter provides some insights into how future pandemics and health-crises should be communicated.

The final section explores the construction of narratives. In Chapter Seven, Darren Reid discusses how in extraordinary times ordinary people become storytellers as well as active consumers of stories. Storytelling during the pandemic became a form of catharsis: this catharsis was often characterised and influenced by wider narratives in popular media. The chapter demonstrates how escapism was often essential for many individuals to ground their historical experience of the pandemic.

In the final chapter, Arddun Arwyn offers an examination of the construction of narratives in times of crisis and the ways in which individual stories are rarely truly individual. Shared narratives often help individuals and communities make sense of the moments they live through but, as Arwyn demonstrates, researchers interested in using primary accounts taken during such times should critically be aware of the fact that these narratives tell us more about the truth of how people felt in the moment but do not necessarily accurately relate the facts of an event. This chapter historically problematises the *#RecordCovid19* archive through its discussion of narrative tropes that emerged from German expellees in the post-war era and provides a clear insight into how researchers should use these accounts.

These chapters, along with the accounts submitted to the project, reveal the wide range of experiences that people faced during the pandemic. They also show the extent to which a universal event is experienced differently by everyone involved.

From the conception of the project, the *#RecordCovid19* archive was always intended to be an open and publicly available archive. An archive that allowed

people to share experiences, by submitting accounts themselves or by reading through the accounts of others. The project wanted to avoid capturing people's memories only to lock them away in private archives out of the reach of the public – or worse, charge participants for the right to read the research derived from their contributions. De Gruyter, and Rabea Rittgerodt, have helped make that ambition a reality by allowing us to put together this edited collection that hopes to historicize the pandemic.⁴

#RecordCovid19 is a small project. It was intended only to record a small drop in an ocean of experiences related to Covid-19. It has, however, been immensely gratifying that some respondents found a few moments of comfort in contributing their words to #RecordCovid19. As one contributor wrote, 'Writing here kind of helps me to clear my thoughts and at least give me some motivation about the way life is these days';⁵ another commented that 'I hope this project gets published in some way. I have found relief in reading these entries over the course of the lockdown – thank you for providing that'.⁶

#RecordCovid19 is not intended to be *the* archive of Covid-19 experience – the project is intended record a moment of living history and collective memory. I hope that it provides an insight into the myriad of experiences that made up the pandemic and one that can be used in conjunction with other existing and future collections.

4 The accounts submitted to the #RecordCovid19 project can be read for free here: <https://kristopherlovell.com/category/recordcovid19-project/>.

5 [#RecordCovid19-112] Turkey, Student, Female, 20, <https://kristopherlovell.com/2021/01/31/recordcovid19-112-turkey-student-female-20/>, accessed 13 April 2023.

6 [#RecordCovid19-68] London, Female, Civil Servant, 25–30, <https://kristopherlovell.com/2020/06/25/recordcovid19-68-london-female-civil-servant-25-30/>, accessed 13 April 2023.

Kristopher Lovell

Chapter One

History Happens To Other People? Memory, Myth and History in *#RecordCovid19*

Introduction

At once exciting and exhilarating, traumatic and terrifying, history can feel very distant, or it can feel a little too close. For many, history is not something they feel they have to worry about. But as American author Philip Roth notes, ‘History claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not.’¹ As Covid-19 spread throughout the world, many who had felt that history normally passed them by increasingly felt a part of it. In our ever-mediated world, people simultaneously witnessed and experienced historic events as they unfolded.

This chapter provides an overview of the *#RecordCovid19* project, drawing upon the themes and issues presented by individual contributors and detailing what the project tells us about the gamut of experiences of respondents living through history within a wider context of cultural trauma and collective memory. The first section discusses Covid-19 as a moment of historic memory and cultural trauma and the role of the modern media in shaping, framing and sharing experiences. The second section provides a demographic overview of the respondents who submitted accounts to *#RecordCovid19*. Section three explores some of the dominant themes that emerge from the accounts. Finally, this chapter highlights some of the limitations of the project before considering some of the lessons of *#RecordCovid19*.

This chapter explores how – through the case study of responses collected through the *#RecordCovid19* project – people reacted to the realisation that they were experiencing a distinct moment in history. As such, it offers its own snapshot of time, assessing two years of responses to a global pandemic as it happened, as it relates to our collective framing of crisis.

¹ Philip Roth, ‘The Story Behind “The Plot Against America,”’ *The New York Times*, 19 September 2004, 10–12, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html?smid=url-share>, accessed 13 April 2023.

Memory, Cultural Trauma and Covid-19

Whilst memory is fundamental to how we perceive ourselves,² it is also essential for creating societal bonds.³ Memory is not static, however. As Schacter and Welker note, memory is ‘a dynamic, constructive process that reflects the goals and biases of individuals and groups, rather than a static or literal reproduction of past experiences.’⁴

The field of memory studies has noted the development of ‘memory booms’ that have coincided with developments in communication technology, culminating recently in the ‘connective turn’ which includes, according to Hoskins:

the enveloping of the everyday in real-time or near-instantaneous communications, including ‘messaging’, be these peer-to-peer, one-to-many, or more complex and diffused connections within and between groups, ‘crowds’, or networks, and facilitated through mobile media and social networking technologies and other internet-based services.⁵

The ways in which the media frames events shapes both individual and collective memory thereof. In fact, historically the media has often shaped the narratives that exist in collective memory.

The framing of events by the media includes what is referred to in cognitive psychology as ‘flashbulb memories.’⁶ This refers to a phenomenon with which we are now intimately familiar: the hearing or seeing of an event through the media. As Andrew Hoskins notes, ‘the potential influence of the mass media in shaping memory is related to the idea of a mass audience in forging a collective (often simultaneous) reception of an event.’⁷ This also establishes cultural trauma – when the experience of a tragic or momentous event ‘leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.’⁸

² Yadin Dudai and Micha Edelson, ‘Personal Memory: Is It Personal, Is It Memory?’ *Memory Studies*, 9:3 (2016), 275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016645234>.

³ Daniel L. Schacter and Michael Welker, ‘Memory and Connection: Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future in Individuals, Groups, and Cultures,’ *Memory Studies*, 9:3 (July 2016): 241–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016645229>.

⁴ Daniel Schacter and Michael Welker, ‘Memory And Connection: Remembering The Past And Imagining The Future In Individuals, Groups, And Cultures,’ *Memory Studies* 9:3 (2016), 241.

⁵ Andrew Hoskins ‘Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn’, *Parallax* 17:4, (2011), 20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605573>.

⁶ Andrew Hoskins, ‘The Restless Past: An Introduction To Digital Memory And Media,’ in *Digital Media Studies*, ed. by Andrew Hoskins (NY: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 17.

⁷ Hoskins, ‘The Restless Past,’ 17.

⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,’ in. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C Alexander et al. (University of California Press, 2004), 1, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/coventry/detail.action?docID=837285>, accessed 13 April 2023.

The combination of the connective turn and a pandemic has led to a moment of cultural trauma hitherto unseen. The incessant nature of the internet means that experiences and memories are constantly being recorded, erased and changed. As Geoffrey Cubitt notes:

From materials and messages that are transmitted within society, specific representations and larger understandings of a collective past are continuously woven. Events, experiences and personalities that have left an impact in people's thinking get incorporated into narratives or organised accounts of society's or the nation's past.⁹

However, when the broader narratives are developed they often overshadow – and sometimes erase – the individual experiences. The rise of the Global Village, as McLuhan put it, also allows memories to be shared in real time across the world,¹⁰ it also allows (or even forces) societies to share trauma transnationally. This is, of course, not restricted to the experience of Covid-19. Cultural trauma has been shared during acts of terror and violence – notably it was seen in the wake of the 2015 attacks on Paris, as global citizens of social media claimed ‘#JeSuisCharlie’ or overlaid the French flag over their usual profile picture.¹¹

Collective memories of historical events are often used by the media and government to frame current events. This was true during the Covid-19 pandemic in Britain, which saw the collective memory of the Second World War regularly invoked, in particular the notion of the Blitz Spirit: Britain's mythic resilience in the face of war. As early as March 2020, Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock openly invoked the memory of the Blitz:

Our generation has never been tested like this. Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort.¹²

A month later, the Queen similarly framed her broadcast to the nation with a rhetoric of war as she compared the imposition of social distancing to wartime evacuation, before promising the British public that, just like after the war, ‘We’ll

⁹ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), 199.

¹⁰ See for example: Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of this case, see Johnny Alam's chapter in Laura Macaluso (2019): Johnny Alam, ‘Transnational Social Media Monuments, Counter-Monuments, and Future of the Nation-State,’ in *Monument Culture: International Perspectives on the Future of Monuments in a Changing World*, ed. by Laura Macaluso (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 191–204.

¹² ‘News Story: Health Secretary Matt Hancock's Sunday Telegraph Op-Ed’, 15 March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/health-secretary-matt-hancocks-sunday-telegraph-op-ed>, accessed 13 April 2023.

Meet Again'.¹³ These were not isolated cases of the memory of the war being manipulated to this effect. British newspapers, the *Daily Telegraph* in particular,¹⁴ regularly evoked the spirit of the Blitz during the pandemic.¹⁵ This narrative helped frame the experience but as will be explored later in this chapter, it has overshadowed the gamut of experiences respondents have felt since 2020.

#RecordCovid19 Respondents

As Emil Durkheim notes, 'when society is going through events that sadden, distress, or anger it, it pushes its members to give witness to their sadness, distress, or anger through expressive actions.'¹⁶ People living through historic moments often feel compelled to record for posterity their experiences. The connective turn also allows people to use social media to share their experiences in real time. #RecordCovid19 was one project that sought to collect experiences and memories of the pandemic and the feeling of living through an historic moment.

As of May 2022, #RecordCovid19 has received 119 accounts. The majority of the accounts (71; 60%) were submitted by respondents who identified themselves as female, whereas 27 accounts (23%) were submitted by respondents who identified as male. 15 respondents chose not to disclose their gender, 4 identified as non-binary, 1 as genderfluid and 1 as genderqueer. Of course, one needs to be mindful that these figures include respondents with multiple submissions, so it is not necessarily the case that 71 women submitted accounts, but rather that 71 accounts were submitted by women. Still, it is clear that women were much more likely to submit accounts to #RecordCovid19 than men. This gender disparity is not restricted to this project. In fact, several similar projects appear to have corresponding divisions in gender. The Collecting Covid Questionnaire 2020, run by *Amgueddfa Cymru*, received responses from 1019 respondents, 79% of which were from female respondents.¹⁷ The Young

13 Caroline Davies, '“We Will Meet Again”: Queen Urges Britons To Stay Strong,' *The Guardian*, 5 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/queen-urges-britons-stay-strong-coronavirus-covid-lockdown>, accessed 14 April 2023.

14 Anon., 'Blitz Spirit is Back: Meet The Covid-19 Heroes,' *Daily Telegraph*, 28 March 2020, 5.

15 Deliberate referencing of the Second World War is covered in more detail in Christopher Smith's chapter in this collection.

16 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: The Free Press, 1995), 415. Translated Karen E. Fields.

17 Arad Research, *Collecting Covid Questionnaire 2020: Analysis of Responses: Final Report* (August 2021), 26, https://museum.wales/media/53025/Collecting-Covid-2020_English_Final.pdf, accessed 13 April 2023.

Foundation's *Covid and You* project received approximately 600 respondents, 75% of which were submitted by female respondents. In terms of age distribution, the average age of a *#RecordCovid19* respondent was 27 years, with the youngest account submitted by a 17-year-old and the oldest by a 75-year-old. Broken down by gender, the average age of a female respondent was 29 years and 24 years old for male respondents. The majority of accounts were submitted by women in their twenties with 96 of the accounts from women aged 30 or under.

Geographically, the majority of the entries were submitted by people living in the UK. At the time of writing, 76 of the accounts came from the UK with the majority (55) coming from England, followed by Wales (20), and only a single account from Northern Ireland. 12 accounts were submitted from Turkey (where it appears to have been set as an assignment by a teacher). 7 came from the US. 4 were submitted from 'abroad' and the rest were submitted from France, Australia, Germany, Iceland, Canada, Philippines and Finland.

In terms of occupation, 47 of the respondents were from various types of students studying a range of subjects, from history to medicine. 10 were from teachers across the country. There were a small number of civil servants, writers, engineers and diplomats. It is worth noting that this is a very self-selecting sample by nature. It seems that the average *#RecordCovid19* participant was educated, liberal, and young. This reveals a slight irony in the ambitions of the project (see introduction). In the attempt to emulate the work of Mass Observation, *#RecordCovid19* also emulated one of Mass Observation's shortfalls – its focus on educated, liberal and young diarists. But all projects of this sort are self-selecting – they depend on someone being historically minded and aware of the importance of the moment they are recording. It also relies on someone wanting to share their stories to be preserved for the future, which again tends to be a sign that someone has an interest in history.

Themes from *#RecordCovid19*

The experience of life under lockdown elicited a variety of responses from people. Accounts submitted to the project varied greatly in length, with some being little more than a few sentences and others being pages long. In total over 55,000 words were submitted to the project. This allowed respondents to submit accounts in a form that they felt best expressed their experiences. Respondents discussed a wide range of issues in their accounts and each account was idiosyncratic, even when they discussed similar aspects or covered similar themes. This section will introduce