

FIAT IFTA #ArchivalReads



In May 2020 the FIAT/IFTA Value Use and Copyright Commission (VUC) decided to publish a series of interviews and articles about the use of audiovisual archive materials. In this article Dale Grayson of Northbound Television gauges the reaction of the BBC Archival Editorial team to the worldwide coronavirus crisis. In particular, he asked them how a television archive can provide an added value in the search for mental peace, entertainment and a happy note in lockdown times.

By Dale Grayson, Managing Director at Northbound Television, in collaboration with Mark Macey of the BBC Archive Editorial team which is headed by Peter Rippon, Executive Editor of the BBC Archive - published on 22 January 2021.

*The **BBC Archive** is vast. The team there manages one of the world's largest multimedia archives with a mission to preserve content so that it can be re-used and a vision to have an open archive, fit for a digital world. Working alongside the operational teams that manage the many BBC archive collections is the Archive Editorial team based in London (8 people) and the Rewind team based in Belfast (18 people) who are responsible for mining the vaults and working with production teams and external partners seeking to unlock and use BBC content in new and engaging ways. Together the Editorial and Rewind teams include a mix of editorial and technical/developer roles.*

This article looks at ways in which these teams responded to the challenges of the 2020 Covid-19 crisis with a series of positive initiatives centred on the use of archive content.



The BBC Archive vaults at Perivale, West London

At the beginning of 2020, the Archive Editorial team already had its plans and priorities set out. As the crisis unfolded, the teams therefore needed to continue to work on products and services that were already in the pipeline (although inevitably certain planned projects had to be paused or reduced in scope) while ensuring that

their roadmap and future plans remained relevant and appropriate given a newly uncertain future.

A unique opportunity

Ensuring that team members were safe and well and could work remotely was an immediate priority. Thereafter, the team began to look at how they could support audiences in lockdown - be it the public or other organisations and institutions - by making more, easier-to-find content available to them, with a particular focus on content that could help with people's wellbeing and also ensuring that those in formal education had access to BBC content for remote learning.

This situation also presented a unique opportunity to increase awareness across the BBC of the value and potential of the archive. Programme makers quickly began to lean on the archive resource when their planned productions were paused or abandoned, with the Archive Editorial and Rewind teams supporting new lockdown commissioning efforts while the BBC Archive's operational teams were facilitating access to collections. In addition, colleagues from other BBC departments, who could not carry out their normal duties while working from home, could now be involved in archive projects -- with a welcome increase in collaboration across the organisation.

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The team also received ideas pitched by external bodies. One of these became the **Covid-19 Collection**. The power of music and sounds from the natural world are known to help during challenging times. To offer comfort and support during the pandemic, BBC Archive, BBC Music and the Natural History Unit offered a selection of calming tracks and soundscapes for patients, care workers and families affected by Covid-19. The page had a Mindful Mix introduced by Sir David Attenborough, designed to help calm and soothe and promote mental health. There were a series of natural soundscapes from world renowned sound recordist Chris Watson. The page

also showcased music tracks, from classical to soundtracks to classic BBC natural history programmes, all of which were chosen to promote wellbeing during lockdown.



'Mindful Mix', a classical music playlist, part of the Covid-19 Collection

Other projects in this period demonstrated the value of the archive to audiences, including:

- BBC [Programme Explorer](#) made over 200,000 programmes much easier to find and explore, and proved to be a great aid for BBC staff.
- The [Joy Of Sets](#) Zoom backgrounds were very popular with the public, given the exponential rise in the number of video calls people were making. It has had a million page views and half a million visitors since launch.
- The [BBC Archive Mega Quiz](#) offered thousands of questions to wile away the time during lockdown.
- Launch of the BBC's classical music archive, named [Experience Classical](#), a collaboration across Radio 3, Teach and BBC Archive teams.



The Joy of Sets: historical set pictures of the BBC's photo archive made available to serve as conference call backgrounds.

In addition, the team offers a non-commercial service making BBC archive material available to the public and galleries, libraries, archives and museums for exhibitions, events and screenings. Whilst the number of physical events and screening necessarily went down due to the virus, the demands for content to be made available online saw a significant increase and a rethink of the approach to clearing rights for these uses. The team also supported the academic sector with research projects by providing limited viewing access to selected content needed to continue their work, due to the BFI and British Library not being accessible during lockdown.

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Team members have proven to be amazingly resilient and adaptable. They have had to find new ways to collaborate, spark ideas and be creative without the benefits that come with those sorely missed face-to-face meetings and real life interactions.

However, to suggest that any of the innovative projects described above could be carried out simply and easily, would be wrong. The projects had to be delivered against a backdrop of significant logistical challenges that come with remote working - be that technological capabilities or needing to take into account people's personal home working circumstances and their day-to-day wellbeing and mental health support. In addition, restricted access to buildings meant physical film and tape collections were off-limits and there have been understandable delays in accessing non digitised paperwork and rights information.

The screenshot shows the BBC Programme Explorer interface. At the top, the title "BBC Programme Explorer" is displayed in white on a blue background, with the subtitle "Discover 213,901 radio and TV programmes from across the BBC, on BBC Sounds and BBC iPlayer" below it. A search bar contains the text "Gardeners' Question Time" and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar is a "Search Filters" section with three dropdown menus for "Media Type", "Genre", and "Availability". There are also "Help", "Reset", and "Apply Filters" buttons. The main content area shows "Showing results for 'Gardeners' Question Time'" and "Results 1 to 20 of 575". A pagination bar shows numbers 1 through 9, with 1 highlighted. Below this is a result card for "Gardeners' Question Time" featuring a small image of a man and the text "Gardeners' Question Time - Episode 1: April 1947". To the right of the result card is a "Programme Explorer Help" box with the text "Do a simple text search or combine your query with a..."

BBC Programme Explorer

Interests and skills to be used in future projects

In adapting to these circumstances, the team has learnt about each other and their respective interests and skills that can be used in future projects, and they have developed a new working dynamic and open culture. It is hoped that many of these learnings will stick and there will be continued collaboration and innovation across BBC departments in different geographic locations, with a blended model of remote and on-site working in the future.

It is clear that the BBC's archive content has proven to be of immense value during this intense period, both as an internal resource for the BBC itself but most importantly for the BBC's audiences placed in lockdown and hungry for content from their national broadcaster. The Archive Editorial department has risen to the challenge of these unprecedented times by finding ways to work differently as a team, being innovative and relevant in the use of archive content, and always aligned with the BBC's overarching mission to inform, educate and entertain.

Would you like to know more?

For more on the BBC Archive visit <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/>