

## Beyond Preservation: Embracing Participatory and Accessible Practices in the Archive

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### Abstract

As the rate of digitalisation of archival material continues to grow, accessibility to important historical records is a pressing concern for the heritage sector. Traditionally, trained professionals have provided transcriptions of archival material. This article presents a new initiative in Northern Ireland, in which a group of blind and partially blind people were invited to work on transcriptions of archival material from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) as part of the CollabArchive project (2022). Four participants with varying degrees of blindness were trained on how to transcribe audio and audiovisual material from PRONI's collection. Drawing on the concept of "access as a conversation" (Romero-Fresco/Dangerfield 2022), an individual access plan was created in consultation with each volunteer. In this paper, we will present the project, and its aims, after which we will detail the training, technical solutions and workflows followed, which facilitated volunteers in their archival work. Drawing on reflections from the authors as trainer and project coordinator, as well as those of volunteers, we will locate this initiative within the wider field of participatory accessibility (Di Giovanni 2018a), highlighting the evolving role of the end user, as they move beyond the role of consumer to producer of accessible content. Finally, we propose future research avenues and participatory practices that challenge traditional notions of the end user as a passive receptor of information and instead highlight their potential as access service providers.

### Keywords

participatory archive, participatory accessibility, transcription, training