Taking a historical website into the present.
User interaction with Hidden Lives revealed.

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**Abstract:** This case study describes the ethical issues raised by allowing user interaction with a historical website (‘Hidden Lives Revealed’) on the subject of children in care, and the practical steps which need to be taken as a result by those maintaining the site.

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**Background and stakeholders**
The ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ website presents information about the work of the Children’s Society (then the ‘Waifs and Strays’ Society’ and hereafter referred to as ‘the Society’) from 1881-1981, a period in which the Society ran children’s homes and arranged fostering and adoption. ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ was originally funded by the National Opportunities Fund as part of Citizenship Past, a consortium of three projects which all involved large-scale digitisation of documents from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Most of the content of the site was produced by the Children’s Society, though some of the teaching materials were developed by the Institute for Learning and Research Technology (ILRT, now IT Services Research and Development) at the University of Bristol. The site has since its inception been hosted and maintained by ILRT, though this may not
remain the case in future, and the author has been the developer and administrator, with some responsibility for editing content.

The site was first released in 2004, when the information presented was largely restricted to the period 1881-1918. The principal contents were a page of information and photographs for each of 172 children’s homes, about 150 ‘case files’ relating to individual children (including scanned and transcribed documents), digitised versions of the Society’s publications, a gallery of more photographs of the Society’s work, a ‘virtual children’s home’ for the visitor to explore, and related teaching materials. In 2005 ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ won the Society of Archivists’ Phillimore Prize ‘for excellence in the field of historical archiving’.

In 2011 the time frame covered by the website was extended so that it ended in 1981, when the last children’s homes run by the Society closed. As part of this expansion, information and photographs were added for a further 126 homes which were open in the 20th century. For many of the former children’s homes, ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ is the only online source of information about that home.

Two new sections have also recently been created. ‘Including the Excluded’ deals with disability, and ‘Unexplored Riches’ uncovers the medical history that can be extracted from the Society’s records. An associated blog, powered by WordPress, began in February 2012, and is regularly updated with articles by the Society’s archivists. Currently, usage of the site is running at about 7,000 visits a month, mostly originating in the UK though with a substantial minority of visitors located in other English-speaking countries. The site is entirely open access with no registration required; it is linked to by many genealogical and local history sites, and is also used in schools.

**Potential sensitivity of the content**

A glance at some of the subject headings under which case files may be browsed - ‘Abandonment’, ‘Alcohol abuse’, ‘Crime’, ‘Illegitimacy’, ‘Infanticide’, ‘Murder’, ‘Neglect’, ‘Prostitution’, ‘Suicide’, and so on – shows how sensitive some of this material can be. In some cases even the potential implications of the information provided may be sensitive if they apply to someone known to the reader; for example, one girls’ home in particular was used for girls who had been sexually abused, lest they ‘corrupt’ others. In addition, for many people there is still a perceived social stigma attached to having spent one’s childhood in care, or even being related to someone who did so.

In order to preserve confidentiality, the children whose cases are described in the case files are identified only by the first letter of their forename. Names of others in their family and the precise addresses where they lived when not in the Society’s care are also obscured, together with other details which might identify them.
Involving the user

The site is mostly concerned with presenting information rather than inviting feedback. However, the introduction of ways in which users can comment on the site or appropriate its content has raised issues of confidentiality, which have become apparent to those who maintain the site.

a) E-cards

A number of interactive features, including puzzles and the ‘virtual children’s home’ have been built into ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’. Among them, the ‘e-card’ facility has proved enduringly popular. This allows users to attach their own message to an image on the site and share it with up to ten selected recipients. The recipients are sent an email containing a link to the image and the associated message; the content is kept for a month in an SQL database.

An (invented) example of a typical e-card sent from Hidden Lives Revealed

On average, a dozen e-cards are sent each month. The content is monitored (by occasionally inspection of the SQL database) in order to check that the facility is not being abused, for example by being used to send offensive messages or advertising. (To date, this has not happened.)

Monitoring the e-cards also provides insights into why people visit the site and what they learn from it. Some e-cards are simply sent back to the sender, presumably as a
form of bookmarking a page in which they are especially interested. Others have no attached message. Of the rest, some carry messages unrelated to the site, while in other cases the photograph illustrates a message which does not relate directly to the Society’s work. An example of the latter type was a photograph of boys swimming in a dock, sent to wish a friend luck in a sponsored swim.

In the case of the remaining messages – and they are a substantial proportion of the whole - either sender or recipient, or possibly both, has a direct connexion to the subject of the photograph, usually a children’s home. One sender had just bought a property which was formerly one of the children’s homes. Many others are sent by people who were themselves once in a home, or by their relatives. These have become commoner since the site was expanded to include the more recent children’s homes, because there are more people who directly remember these homes. Some of these messages are neutral in tone, but others betray sorrow or anger at the experiences of the sender or of a family member.

The messages can be sufficiently personal that it can feel intrusive for the administrator of the website to read them in the course of monitoring their content, since the sender would probably have expressed themselves differently if they had realised that the message was open to a third party. (Some details of e-cards may also be revealed to administrators if an e-card cannot be successfully delivered to its recipient.) A further issue is what an administrator of the site should do if the content of a message gave rise to real concern.

Knowledgeable users of the Internet are likely to appreciate that email is insecure, and that messages sent by means of a website should also be assumed to be insecure; however, the general public are likely to be less aware of this. In fact, although it may be illegal in the UK to open and read physical mail that is addressed to another (‘if intending to act to a person’s detriment and without reasonable excuse’), the legal and ethical issues surrounding the reading of email and other virtual means of communication by anyone other than the addressee are unclear, even when the message originates in a UK website.

b) Blog comments

More recently, another means of communication has been opened on the site. The Wordpress blog which accompanies the ‘Including the Excluded’ and ‘Unexplored Riches’ sections of the site allows readers to add comments, which are seen by the administrator of the site and by two of the Society’s archivists. The blog does not attract a huge volume of genuine comments; however, it is clear that for some visitors it is their first point of contact with the Society in a quest to learn the care or adoption history of a family member. As a result, blog comments may contain details of par-
ticular adoption cases involving children cared for by the Society. This is testimony both to the popularity of ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ and to its value in raising awareness of the Society’s activities (as well as to the relative inexpertise of some users of the site, shown by putting such enquiries in a blog comment rather than sending them to the contact email address on the site!) It also demonstrates the sensitivity of the site’s subject matter and its direct relevance to people alive today.

It is important to remember that some users are likely to have difficulty with navigating the site, if they use the Internet infrequently. These could be precisely those for whom the desire to make contact with the Society is most important: a pressing need which has driven them to do something they normally avoid. These users should not be deterred from making adoption-related or other sensitive enquiries by any route available to them, however inappropriate the resulting comment would be for publication on the site.

**Actions**

a) *E-cards*

It was decided to show senders of e-cards a disclaimer, so that they will be aware that their communication may not be totally private. To this end, a note has recently been added to the page which a user sees before they send an e-card: ‘The content of e-cards may be visible to the administrator of the Hidden Lives Revealed site.’ It remains to be seen whether this will change the number of e-cards sent, or the tone and content of messages.

b) *Blog comments*

Naturally, all comments made on the blog are moderated. In the case of one recent message containing details of a particular adoption case, the details were removed from the comment, and another comment was added by the Society’s archivists with details of the Society’s Post Adoption and Care Service. In this case the edited comments were placed online, so that others could see where to address enquiries regarding adoption. In other cases, it might be more appropriate to communicate with the commenter privately by email (commenter’s are required to supply their email addresses).

The moderation process is a gateway which can be used to block sensitive information from going online. Blog comments differ from e-cards in that the sender is prepared for them to appear publicly and cannot tell who will read them. In theory, this should deter senders from including sensitive information, but one should not overestimate the public’s ability to handle such information correctly, as the example cited shows. If such comments become frequent, appropriate con-
tact email addresses could be added to the comments form; it has not, however, been thought necessary to remind users that their comments will be read by others. While the Society’s archivists are trained to respect confidentiality, the site’s administrators, who may be external to the Society, may also see comments and need to abide by the same standards. In practice, the handling of comments on the Hidden Lives Revealed blog is done by the archivists, but if they were only able to read comments infrequently or if the volume of junk comments were high, it might be better to agree to share this task with the administrator.

Conclusion and lessons learned
While ‘Hidden Lives Revealed’ is a historical resource, for some of its users this history may touch on painful family memories. This has become more frequent since the site was expanded to cover the post-WWII period. User interaction, in the forms both of e-cards and blog comments, raises the possibility of accidental disclosure of sensitive information; the site administrators, in particular, should be aware of the need to respect confidentiality while keeping avenues of communication open for possibly inexperienced users. Those sending messages or comments via the site need to understand that their communications may be seen by third parties, and in the case of e-cards an explicit disclaimer has been added. These conclusions are relevant to anyone who maintains a website with historical content which encourages user interaction, particularly where the content is of a sensitive nature.

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