FIRST AHRC NETWORK EVENT
Our Criminal Past: Digitisation, Social Media and Crime History
17th May 2013, London Metropolitan Archives
Jo Turner[1]

This excellent, enjoyable and informative day was the first of three research networking workshops, each organised by Dr Heather Shore (Leeds Metropolitan University) and Dr Helen Johnston (University of Hull), and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The aim of this network is to bring together people from seemingly disparate professional fields: academics (historians, criminologists, sociologists, and legal scholars) as researchers and teachers; and those working in archives, museums and heritage as educationalists both collaborating with and outside the university sector. Having brought together this variety of professionals, the objective of the network is to generate discussion about how historians of crime and others involved in the preservation and presentation of the criminal past might work together in the future, and to explore and reflect on the development and future presentation, preservation and dissemination of historical criminal lives and practices.

This first networking day was held at the London Metropolitan Archives in Clerkenwell and, true to its aim, did indeed attract an eclectic mix of UK and internationally based scholars, and representatives from the National Archives and heritage organisations. To begin the discussions regarding *Our Criminal Past*, the emphasis of the day was on the exploration of the uses of digital histories of crime; the development of social media for communicating criminal and social histories; and the future directions and challenges this presents for those interested in the history of crime and punishment. The day was split into three sessions: session one was concerned with digitising crime and penal histories; session two was concerned with how social media is, and can be, used by crime historians; and the third session was a roundtable discussion on the current challenges and new directions for crime history.

After preliminary welcome statements by the London Metropolitan Archives staff and the network organisers, the morning session on digitising crime and penal histories, chaired by Dr Pam Cox (University of Essex) was opened by Professor Tim Hitchcock (University of Hertfordshire) with his paper entitled 'Digitising Criminal Justice: Past, Present and Future'

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and Dr Sharon Howard (University of Sheffield) with her paper entitled 'Bloody Code: reflecting on a decade of Old Bailey Online and the digital future of our criminal past'. In these two papers, Tim as co-director and Sharon as project manager of the Old Bailey Online, each reflected on the evolution of this groundbreaking resource, its impact on crime history and digital history, and on the subsequent development of digital technologies over the last 10 years. During his paper, Tim first talked briefly about the uses and development of the Old Bailey On-Line, and then about the wide range of resources, in particular digital databases that are freely accessible and currently available to crime historians, links to which are listed on the *Our Criminal Past* website. So from the public launch of the Old Bailey Online a decade ago when 'Big Data', APIs, 'Web 2.0' and 'social media' were in their infancy, we were brought up-to-date. We were then introduced to the evidently more resources that are now available, which both argued are imperative to address the urgent need for collaboration and audience engagement that is triggered by the pressures of today's economic climate. Both concluded with a consideration of and suggestions for the key themes and issues to be addressed over the next decade, including current and future prospects for creating digital resources, whilst keeping in mind funding constraints, technological developments, and the diverse interests of those who research crime and punishment.

Following Tim and Sharon, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (University of Tasmania) in his paper entitled 'Founders and Survivors: Using Digital Technologies to Explore the Long Run Impact of Convict Transportation' demonstrated how he uses digital resources in his research. Hamish explored the way in which record linkage algorithms can be used to examine the impact of convict transportation to Australia on recidivism rates and the health of both convicts and their descendants. As well as looking at the academic results of this work, Hamish also talked briefly about the way in which digital technologies have been used in order to disseminate the key findings of the research.

Following an excellent buffet lunch, the second session in the afternoon on how social media is, and can be, used by crime historians was chaired by John Carter Wood (IEG, Mainz). As well as being crime historians, doctoral candidates and higher education teachers, the speakers in this session are all proficient and regular social media users, bloggers and tweeters. All persuasively argued that blogs, twitter, and social media generally, are essential to reaching a wider academic and general audience. It was evident that for each though, these activities had not only this use of reaching a wider audience but also was a way to refining and testing their ideas. Although bound together by the theme of social

media, each paper took a slightly different tack to highlight different benefits social media can bring to crime history.

Zoë Alker (Liverpool John Moores University) opened the second session with her paper entitled 'Using new social media technologies in teaching Victorian crime'. Zoë discussed how the use of blogs and twitter in teaching Victorian crime can facilitate the engagement of others, especially students, with nineteenth century criminal records and can aid in communicating critical histories to the wider public domain.[2] In doing so, her paper drew on her experiences on undergraduate teaching and, reflecting on those experiences, Zoë considered the possibilities and limitations of using new social media for challenging myths about the Victorian criminal past. Adam Crymble (King's College London) followed with his paper 'How Blogging and Tweeting Make Me a Better Historian of Crime' arguing that blogging and tweeting are not just about dissemination, but rather that they are more about conversation.[3] Using these platforms, Adam discussed how social media can become part of an informal peer review and advisory process for those working on the history of crime who want to test out and refine their ideas in progress. Adam maintained that by capitalizing on the 'social' aspects of social media, (what Adam termed) the 'rabbit holes' can be avoided and the focus can be placed on building good scholarship.

Lesley Hulonce (Swansea University), in her paper entitled 'From the local to the global: Victorian child poverty and crime on the blogosphere' talked about how she uses her blog to disseminate her doctoral research. On her blog, *Workhouse Tales*, Lesley posts vignettes based on 'workhouse and poor law life and lives in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain'. Likewise, Lesley's paper discussed how the large numbers of pauper children in nineteenth century Britain generated widespread anxiety concerning their perceived criminal tendencies and how they were educated and trained to lose their 'vicious propensities'. She discussed whether, as the voice of the Victorian pauper child is really heard only via their contact with legal or poor law authorities, the use of new social media can open fresh avenues of enquiry or whether the voice of the child be even more drowned out amongst greater numbers of louder voices.

The final paper of the day was delivered by Lucy Williams (University of Liverpool). In her paper 'Writing WaywardWomen: A digital discussion of the history of female offending', Lucy gave a detailed account of not only of how she has used her blog "*WaywardWomen*" and

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[2] See *The Journal of Victorian Culture Online* http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2013/02/22/walking-the-streets-of-victorian-crime-and-punishment/

[3] The text of Adam's paper can be read at http://adamcrymble.blogspot.co.uk/

accompanying twitter account to disseminate her doctoral research on the history of women and crime in Victorian England, but also gave a step-by-step guide on how to use a blog and the information it can yield. Lucy's paper considered both the uses and benefits of engaging with social media in this context, and concluded by discussing some of the unique challenges presented by engaging with the history of crime in this way.

Rounding up on the day's papers and ensuing discussions, Barry Godfrey (University of Liverpool), Liz Hore (the National Archives) and Helen Rogers (Liverpool John Moores University) all spoke on the current challenges and new directions for crime history. In particular, the emotional engagement that Lesley spoke of in her paper that she encountered when researching poor Victorian children and the need to tell their stories, that had generated much comment, was further discussed. Historians of crime are probably more inclined to aim for emotional detachment, endeavouring not to pass judgment on the crimes and punishments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the aim of maintaining scholarly objectivity and neutrality. As this emotional engagement results in discarding anonymity to promote agency, the age old debate surrounding the ethics of historical research when telling someone's story became focal, and was suggested to be something that should be further discussed. As histories of crime are disseminated further and to a wider audience through digital technologies and social media, does anonymity become more or less imperative?

In conclusion, this networking day was highly successful in providing a stimulating mix of papers by motivating speakers in notable and relevant surroundings. Despite the disparate nature, the papers and subsequent discussions coalesced to form a coherent whole, bringing together a range of topics in order to begin the discussions surrounding *Our Criminal Past*, by exploring the uses of digital histories of crime, the development of social media for communicating criminal and social histories, and the future directions and challenges this presents for those interested on the history of crime and punishment. The second of these three research networking workshops will be held on 6th September 2013 at Leeds Metropolitan University and will be specifically concerned with the teaching of crime history.