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Who are the Witnesses of the Covid-19 Lockdown?
The Case of France

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the COVID lockdowns implemented all around the world, and in particular since March 2020, private and public initiatives have emerged to collect diaries, testimonies, and perspectives on the pandemic from ordinary citizens. These calls for witnesses have been presented as a way to preserve traces of the pandemic for the future and to give a voice to all kinds of people confronted with the health crisis, in order to build an "ordinary memory" of the event. In this paper, we will study these social practices of witnessing in a time of crisis. Who were the people who answered these callouts? Who will be considered the witnesses of this pandemic in the future What social groups do they come from in terms of level of education, income, marital status, place of residence, birthplace, ethnicity, religion, and gender? This article will ask to what extent ordinary memories of crisis can really be preserved. It argues that institutional calls for witnesses of the health crisis cannot avoid reproducing some of the social inequalities that have been central in framing ordinary people's experience of the pandemic and the lockdown.

Keywords: Archives, Inequalities, Public policies, Witnesses.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, with lockdowns implemented all around the world, private and public initiatives have emerged to collect documents, drawings, diaries and people's perspectives on the pandemic (Orli and Gensburger, 2022). These calls for archives have been presented as attempts to preserve traces of the pandemic for the future and to give voice to all kinds of people confronted with the health crisis, in order to build an "ordinary memory" of the event. The goal was to enable societies to improve their resilience and to build a genuinely inclusive collective memory.

In this paper, we will study these archival practices in a time of crisis, highlighting to what extent the search for witnesses has been at its core. What were these calls for archives about, and who launched them? Who were the people who answered them? Who will the future consider the witnesses of this pandemic?

To answer these questions, we examined the French case, which we have been studying over the past years. We identified nearly 100 calls for contributions launched in France between March and June 2020. Our research has focused on the genesis, institutional frameworks, and geographical location of these callouts, as well as the archival collections they resulted in. To do this, we began with a systematic survey and around 30 interviews with some of the promoters of these initiatives, before accessing the people who contributed to most of them. We were then able to draw a portrait of these contributors in order to highlight the sociology of the witnesses and have an understanding of the type of voices that will be preserved for the future through these collections. Based on this material, we

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raised the following questions: To what extent can ordinary memories of crisis really be preserved? What are the educational and gender backgrounds of these witnesses? This article argues that bearing witness in this way may fail to prevent the reproduction of some social inequalities, which were central to ordinary people's experience of the pandemic and the lockdown. Rather than creating a shared memory, this heritage could reinforce the social divides it was meant to bridge.

This article engages in critical dialogue with two bodies of literature. On the one hand, it contributes to an empirical investigation into the already numerous studies looking at the implications of the health crisis in the field of memory studies (Hirst, 2021, Adams and Kopelman, 2021; Olick and Teichler, 2022) but which have not yet explored the question of inequalities other than on a theoretical level (Erll, 2021). On the other hand, and beyond the context of the COVID crisis, this article provides a critical perspective on the social and political expectations related to participatory archives (Benoit and Eveleigh, 2019) in order to explore the relations between the transmission of the past and social inequalities that have recently been the object of study in social sciences (David, 2020; Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020).

2. SEARCHING FOR WITNESSES: THE COVID MEMORY BOOM IN FRANCE

In order to study the origins of these collections and the perspectives of the archivists who launched them, we conducted a twofold study based on quantitative and qualitative methods. We prepared a questionnaire on the exceptional collections created during the pandemic, which was distributed to all archive centres in France. Besides questions about the organization, technical aspects and results, and the number of people who submitted contributions, we were also interested in the archivists' perspective: Namely how they managed the work on this extraordinary collection on top of their regular duties, and how it evolved over time. Simultaneously, our efforts resulted in approximately 30 interviews and, with the help of Tropes software, an analysis of the calls for contributions through March 2020. From this material we could determine the origin of these collections of "lockdown memories" and thus understand the motivations and intentions of those behind them.

2.1. The Memory of Lockdown collection

In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, there were just over 800 public archive centres in France. These centres had different territorial specializations: Three concerned the nation as a whole, around 20 were regional, 100 departmental, and the remaining 700 focused on the municipal level.[1] In spite of their diversity, these institutions had a shared purpose, to preserve and publish the documents produced by the administration and governments. To a lesser extent, they also aimed to collect private documents that had been given to them by (often important) families as well as economic or social actors, which they thought were important.

On March 18, 2020, on the second day of the lockdown (*confinement*) decreed by the French government, a departmental archives centre and a municipal one issued a callout for documents to preserve the "memory of lockdown". Via press releases and the use of a hashtag (#Mémoiredeconfinement) the general population was called on to send in texts, photos or drawings that reflected their life under lockdown. Very quickly, the idea was taken up by almost one hundred archive centres spread around France and situated at different levels (figure 1).

It is interesting to note that there were precedents to this callout. In 2014, during celebrations for the centenary of the Great War (Veyssière, 2020), a call had been made to collect family documents dating back to the First World War. In 2015, something similar took place, in reaction to the unprecedented terrorist attacks that had shaken France (Gensburger, 2019).

[1] https://francearchives.fr/annuaire/departements.

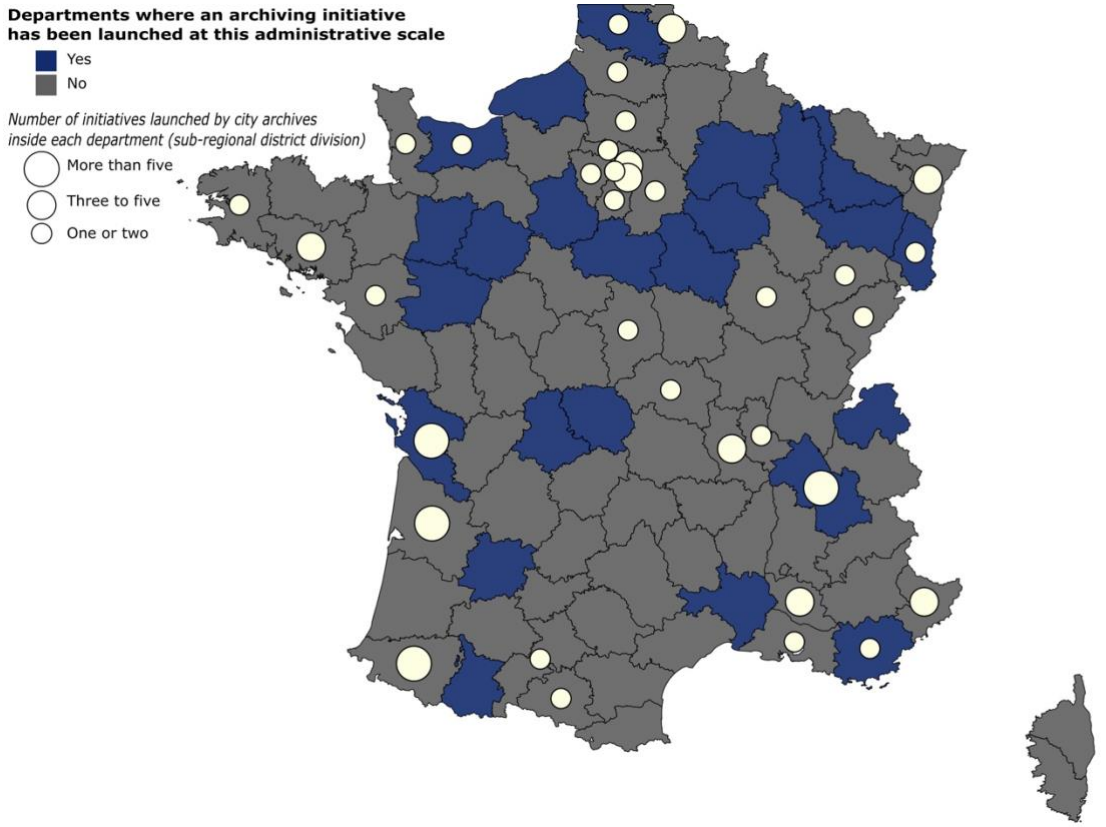


Figure 1. Map of the archival collections launched in France beginning in March 2020. Drawing by the authors.

In the interviews, the promoters of the "lockdown memories" collection did refer to these previous projects as their main source of inspiration. Their approach in 2020 regarding "public" participation was similar to that of World War I; and, as in the case of the terrorist attacks, records created by citizens had all been preserved by the time of the event itself. However, the "lockdown collections" differ from their predecessors in one important respect. The innovation was that the archivists anticipated the production of new memory objects such as lockdown memoirs of individuals families or everyday life, which for French archivists was rather radical and far removed from their professional culture. Moreover, these oral histories might not have existed without this new approach.

In France, oral tradition is underdeveloped and not considered legitimate by most public institutions dedicated to preserving traces of the past, nor by historians. Thus, the launch of this project provoked intense debates among archivists. Some were against, while others felt that the exceptional nature of the pandemic justified it. As one of the first responsible archivists, said:

"We are the ones who initiated the creation of these archives, most of the memories of lockdown, not all but most of these memories, we provoked them. People saw our callout in the newspaper and thought well, OK I'll send them an email to tell them about how things are going at home."

2.2. Looking for witnesses

Calls for contributions were very open-ended. Those promoting them had sought to make them as inclusive as possible. All kinds of artefacts, ranging from family photos to official documents, were accepted. And almost none of the institutions were selective or curated the collection in any way. However, it clearly seems that the testimony provided by ordinary people – vernacular narratives – were the ideal-type of contribution for professionals.

Words as "archive" and "lockdown" were used the most by the initiators, with respectively 276 and 229 occurrences. This is not surprising because the collections explicitly aimed to construct archives on lockdown. More significantly, it was the noun "testimony" (*témoignage*) that came first, with 203

occurrences, far ahead "memory" (mentioned 128 times), and very far ahead "drawing" (63 occurrences), and "photography" (46 occurrences).

In fact, these testimonies, accounts written in the first person, are what the archivists we have spoken to present as the most emblematic artifacts of their collections. In these extracts, two interviewees, a man and a woman, each manager of a departmental archive, describe what they consider the best piece in their collection (made up of 30 and 55 items respectively):

> "we have a diary that was kept by a little boy, well, a boy of around 12, quite detailed, on the lockdown, who describes his everyday life and it goes from general TV news, to really practical issues like keeping the fridge full […] and when I see an account like that, well it reassures me, a little, because it's really everyday stuff, a family during the lockdown, I think it will be reused, it is of historical interest, you know."
>
> For me, it's a lockdown diary by a teacher […]. Because he is very likeable and he really confides heart and soul. He doesn't record everything, but you understand a lot of things, it really is a narrative, there is some privacy, but you feel that it's a real diary, it's not meant to be read by anyone else. There is no showmanship, no representation, no playing at being an artist or a writer, or being pushed… So well, there's a genuine modesty, you know, a deep authenticity in his approach. And what's more, he gave us the original […]. So, it's really, you see, there's no ego in there at all… it's just authentic. A real testimony."

Preserving witness accounts is thus at the heart of these initiatives. But even more than that it is the "everyday life" testimonies in times of crisis; these ordinary commentaries on an extraordinary event, that are particularly sought after. The nature of the desired account is not limited to the "everyday" narratives. It also involves an ambition to reach the whole of the population. The search for the "ordinary witness" in the context of crisis is a reflection of the administrative instructions that archives received well before COVID. Indeed, nowadays archives are instructed to target a socially diverse public in order to democratise knowledge about the past. Those responsible for the "lockdown collections" seized the opportunity created by the pandemic to diversify their target audiences. As one of the first "lockdown" collectors said:

> "Even over the past three or four years we were told that the departmental policy would be to go towards different groups, particularly those who were prevented from coming to us, so you know. I had a manager at the time who has now left, she left her job which was really very focused on these new audiences. And I thought that's something that she would like, so I thought you know, why not."

In March 2020 the audiences were no longer those who came to examine archival collections. The archives were all closed and only a very small proportion were available online. In the context of the health crisis, the target groups became witnesses that had to be selected to fully represent social diversity. Several calls for contributions specified that these collections concerned everyone:

> "Whatever your age, or your profession, tell us about your everyday life, your thoughts, your initiatives for solidarity, at school or home, about the 8:00 o'clock applause…"
>
> (Call-out from the Departmental Archives in Haute-Vienne)
>
> "How can I participate?"
>
> Answer the question "how are you experiencing lockdown?"
>
> There are no right or wrong answers, the main thing is that your contribution reflects the reality of your life during these weeks of lockdown. Your uncertainties, your hopes, your occupations, your childcare, your work from home, or the new citizenship or solidarity initiatives around you- You can tell us about anything!
>
> Your answers will allow historians and sociologists in the future to understand what it is like to live through this unusual situation.
>
> Who can contribute? All *haut-savoyards*

When? Write your contribution at your own pace, each day or each week, as you would a diary. You can also write your testimony retrospectively at the end of the lockdown.

In what form? All forms of expression are welcome (written, audio, video, drawing, or photography). Contributions can be handwritten or typed."

(Call-out from the Departmental Archives in Haute-Savoie)

Finally the search for ordinary witness's went hand in hand with the repeated affirmation of bringing people together. In the callouts the personal pronoun "We" (*nous*, 173 occurrences) was almost as widely used as the plural "you" (*vous*, 188), which is surprising given that the latter is typical of the structure of a text written to call for the reader's action, in this case in a call for participation. Through this collection of contributions the archives bring people together. The act of bearing witness leads to the construction of a memory that, due to its process of creation, defines itself as collective from the very beginning. In other words, it is the collective participation in the preservation of an experience that is by essence conceived as shared:

"Since March 17 we have all been confined to our houses whether alone or in our households.

We cannot see our extended families or our friends and colleagues.

We cannot meet each other for coffee, to go to the restaurant, or to play sport together… Our outings are timed, controlled, sporadic, and based on a need for food.

Our children are at home and often we have to supervise their online schooling on internet platforms with their teachers!

We can no longer work, or only work from home.

The elderly are in nursing homes, or at home alone isolated from their families. Our everyday life has been radically altered.

However, we are the direct witnesses of an unprecedented event, and we have to record it for future generations."

(Call-out from the City Archives of Châteauneuf-du-Pape)

3. SEARCHING FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE: WHO ARE THE WITNESSES OF THE PANDEMIC?

Our questionnaire-based study with archival centres shows that these callouts were not very successful. On average only around 50 people participated in each collection and only a fraction of those genuinely recounted their experience. Moreover, this average conceals significant disparity because the median number of contributors per collection is 21, with a standard deviation of 61. We can therefore estimate that between 2000 and 3500 people participated in the collections. Given this number, it is important to question the representativity of this population, both in terms of the expectations of those who launched these collections and the demographic structure of the French population.

3.1. Witnesses as archivists

The interviews we conducted with the archivists demonstrate constant tension. On the one hand, the interviewees expressed their desire to preserve traces of the lived experiences of the French population in all its diversity, and their desire to include people working on the frontline of the fight against COVID. On the other hand, the examples that most respondents recall, suggest that they are limited to a particular group, and involve a certain amount of mimicry between the archivist's personal and professional life and the staff member they remember.

Indeed, the "we" in the callouts can actually be taken literally. In many cases, the contributions also come from archivists or their colleagues within departmental, regional, or municipal administrations. Moreover the contributions may come from their children or family members.

In this case, one archivist from the departmental centre in the South of France described some of the original documents she collected:

> "I have a colleague who works for the council, because it was also open to colleagues from the council if they wanted to collect public archives, so I have a colleague who brought me his workbook and as he works with me, he brought it to us in person. And then… what else do I have… well I, I also contributed […] two humoristic cartoons that were done by two journalists, cartoonists, one of whom I know because he works a bit with us doing funny drawings for the archives."

Another talked about photos that she particularly appreciated, saying:

> "We realised, but only after two months, they were taken by the son of someone who works in the department, someone who works in the archives, you know. And it was hilarious, we went to see her father and it was, like, incredibly funny. But it was totally by chance, so yeah…"

As we can see, the archivist seemed to have the clearest memories of contributions made by people who resemble themselves, and often talk emotionally. These are people who are highly educated, and whose work and/or leisure activities are related to writing; or who may have an aesthetic sensitivity similar to the archivist themselves. As we can see in the quotes above, the archivists who were interviewed are often surprised in retrospect about their social affiliation with the contributors. But this is presented as being the result of chance rather than the result of underlying social logics.

Finally, the narrative of those who promoted these collections presents "ordinary witnesses" – who were supposed to be from all walks of life – as being difficult to find. We raised the question of the socio-demographic profile of contributors during our interviews with the archivists. This issue was always seen as secondary, since the collection was aimed at all people. Moreover, the fact that the archivists identified with the contributions seemed to them as proof of their representativity or universality. One archivist told us, "in fact these people think like me […] this particular person went through the same thing", which convinced her that it was important to "keep a trace of that, of this exceptional period." This resistance to consider contributions originating from socially situated individuals, explains the reason behind the small percentage of respondents who were willing to act as mediators and share our questionnaire.

3.2. Social inequalities and witness contributions

To date, we have distributed our questionnaire to participants of three lockdown collections. The one that received the broadest response includes 600 different contributors. 184 of them responded to our questionnaire; a response rate of around 30%, which is high for this kind of study. This data allows us to provide a portrait of a first ideal-type group who became the "lockdown witnesses".

One of the first observations is that among the contributors there is a clear overrepresentation of respondents over 40 years old. Also, women represent 2/3 of those who submitted documents and testimonies for the archival collections.

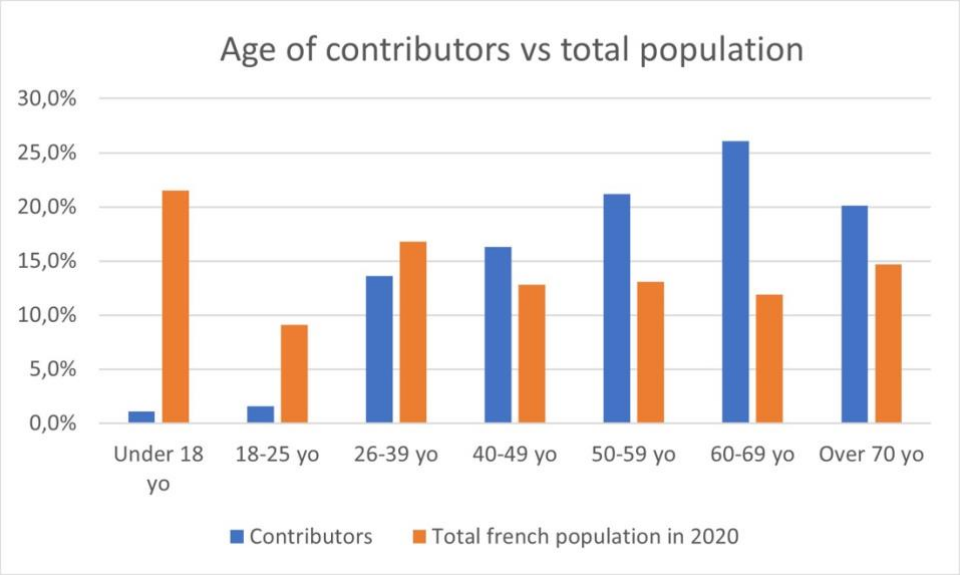


Figure 2. Contributors by age group compared to the French population as a whole. Source: Archicovid / Insee, estimations de population (provisional results late 2019).

"Lockdown witnesses" who decided to participate in these collections also had higher levels of education than the general population. Among French people, 18% and 13% of 45 to 54-year-olds and 55 to 65-year-olds have completed more than two years postsecondary education. By contrast, among those who contributed to the main archival collection of our corpus, 77% had at least this level of education. Moreover, among the contributors 58.2% had a master's degree and 6.5% had a PhD. These "witnesses" are highly educated people.

These individuals were also the most involved in cultural practices, which is the most legitimate form of culture. As a point of comparison, we used the questions on cultural practices which have been posed annually since 2018 by the Minister for Culture as part of a representative survey of the French population (9200 individuals).

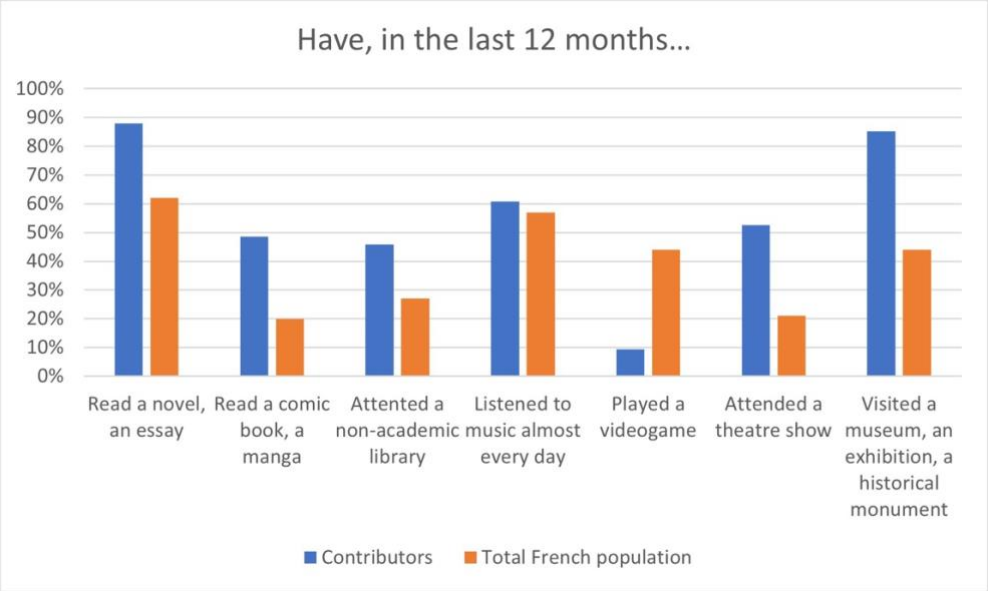


Figure 3. Cultural practices of contributors compared to the French population overall. Source: Archicovid / Enquête sur les pratiques culturelles, DEPS, Ministry of Culture, 2018.

When we look at the activities,, those who provided contributions in the last 12 months are characterised by the high levels of cultural practises, such as going to the theatre, museums, or visiting historical monuments. Inversely, these contributors are underrepresented in less socially legitimate activities, such as video games; which cannot be purely explained by the age pyramid of the contributors.

4. CONCLUSION

All around the world, the COVID health crisis resulted in the emergence of numerous highly diverse projects that aimed to preserve the traces of this period; which was immediately constructed as "historic". In France, around 100 archive centres launched calls for participative collections of witness accounts to preserve "lockdown memories." These initiatives primarily aimed to preserve narratives of lived experience from different elements of the French society. In the discourses of those who promoted them, the goal was to provide a voice for ordinary people in constructing collective memory. The sociological study of these collections and those who actually contributed, has shown the ways in which the social inequalities that normally structure cultural practices, provided a powerful framework for the construction of "lockdown witnesses". This research therefore encourages us to consider the importance of social continuity at the heart of crisis situations, including when it concerns memory (Gensburger and Severo, 2021). In this respect, it reflects identical conclusions established in studies on the memorialization of terrorist attacks (Craps and Gilbert 2021, Gensburger, 2019). In particular, it encourages us to go beyond the methods of memory research, which focuses almost exclusively on crises and trauma, and to consider the more traditional social framework of memory and testimony.

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