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A Snapshot of the Food Studies Community

By Christian Reynolds

From October to December 2019, the US-UK Food Digital Scholarship Network ran a community survey asking what (and how) food scholars are currently using analogue and digital material. We were also interested how the community thought US and UK libraries and archives could better support food researchers through digitisation and activities. (See previous blog post.)

We were overwhelmed by the response to the community survey with 200 respondents from the global food research community — despite there being multiple 'disruption events' including an eight day university strike for many UK research institutions, as well as the Thanksgiving Holiday period. We're really excited to have the voices of so many food researchers help us shape what is needed by the community.

In the next few months, we are writing up the results of the community survey. But in the meantime, we want to share with you the headline descriptive results of the survey: who are we, what we want, and how we communicate.

Who? and **Where**?

Though the community survey nominally focused on respondents from the United States of America (41%), and the United Kingdom (28%), there were additional respondents from multiple other countries (31%). The largest other populations of these were Canada (9%), and Australia (5%). Participants responded from twenty-one countries in total.

There was a wide spread of ages, with the majority of respondents(44%) being between 31-50 years of age.
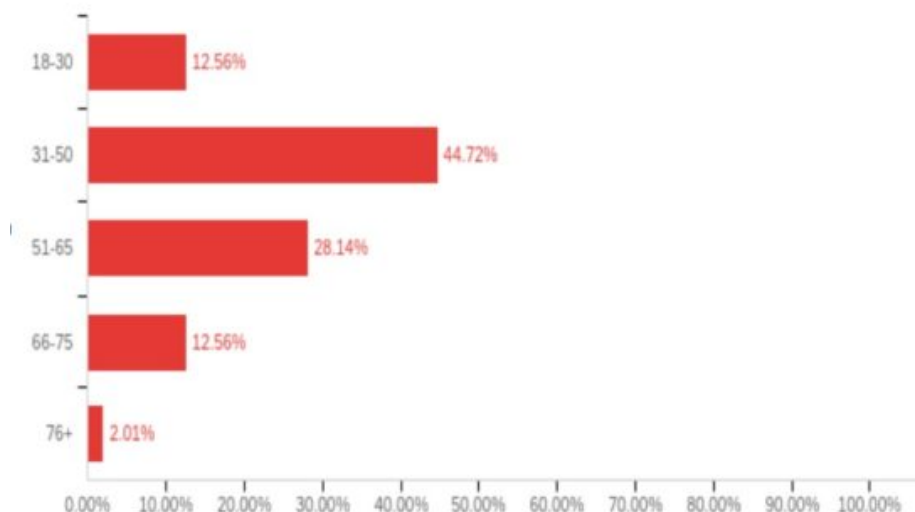
Age of respondents

Over 70% of participants were academics. This included Professors (16%), Early Career researchers (14%), and Students (17%). There was a wide range of other professionals (n=55) including independent scholars, cooks and chefs, writers and journalists, book sellers, and heritage professionals. The range of respondents certainly represents the diversity of jobs and roles within the wider the food research community! But also owing to such a breath of roles and ages of respondents, there was a lot of variation in the familiarity/comfort with digital and analogue research tools.
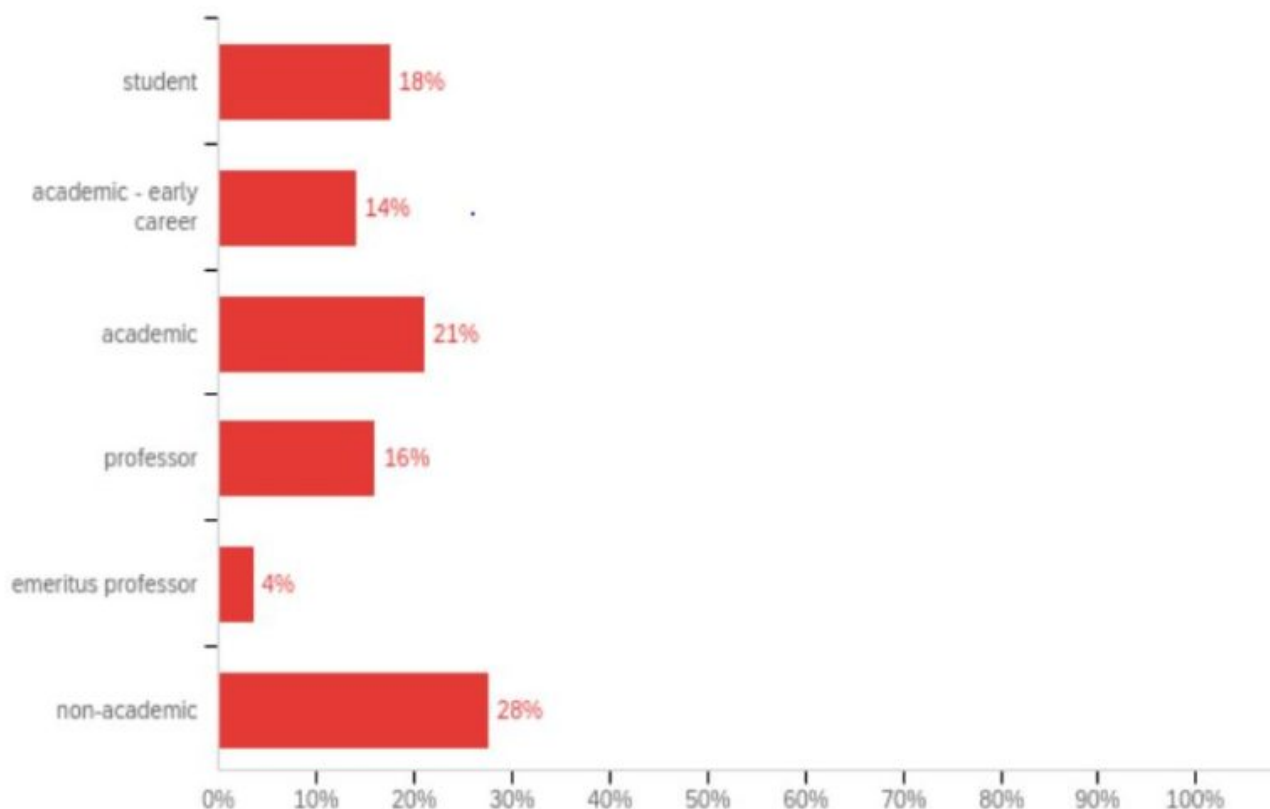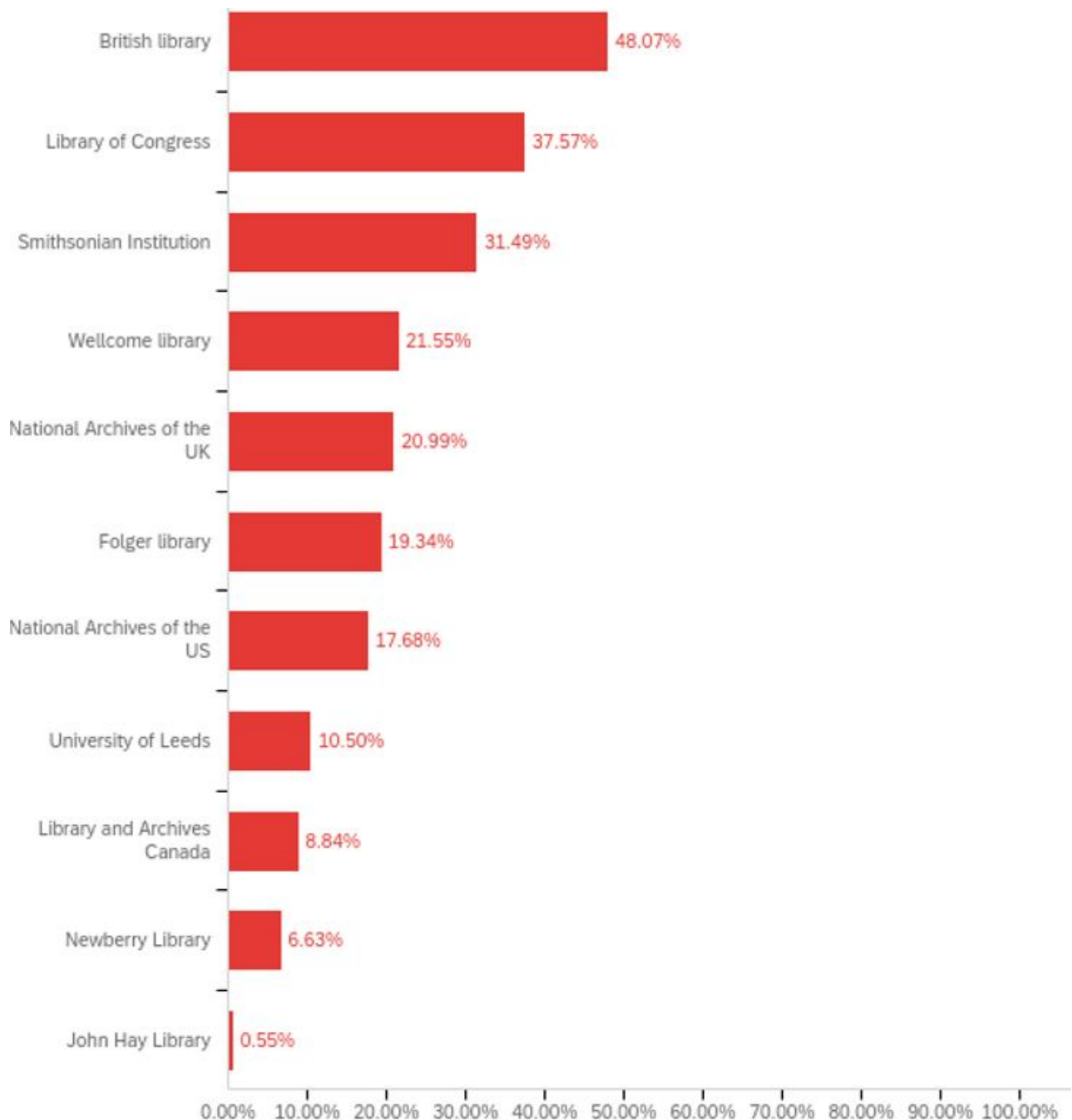
Type of Researcher

The geographic scope of food studies is truly broad, with most researchers interested in more than one geographic area. 125 (or 62.5%) respondents were interested in the UK region, while 133 (or 66.5%) were interested in the US region. Another 66 respondents were interested in Canada, 97 in the wider colonial areas, and 99 interested in multiple other places globally.

This geographic interest is also shown by the broad range of locations holding primary research material. 112 respondents mentioned UK archives and 118 mentioned US archives. Even so, Canadian, Australian, and European archives featured heavily — and many other global institutions were mentioned.

Results suggest that there is overlap in user-base between global (UK, US, etc.) archives, but we need to do more research to understand how the community fits into the wider food research community. By this, I'm thinking of where a researcher is based versus where their archives are based.

Institution	Percentage
British library	48.07%
Library of Congress	37.57%
Smithsonian Institution	31.49%
Wellcome library	21.55%
National Archives of the UK	20.99%
Folger library	19.34%
National Archives of the US	17.68%
University of Leeds	10.50%
Library and Archives Canada	8.84%
Newberry Library	6.63%
John Hay Library	0.55%

Percentage of respondents who use these cultural institutions

There were another ninety-four institutions were mentioned by name in the "other" text box. Multiple mentions include places like Yale University Library, Winterthur Museum, University of Toronto, New York Public Library, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bibliothèque nationale de France, National Library Australia, archive.org — and so many more.

What does the community want?

The most asked for service at 92% was… digitization of materials! The community also wants finding aids and catalogues (each 64%). These views were further expressed in

the free text "other" category.
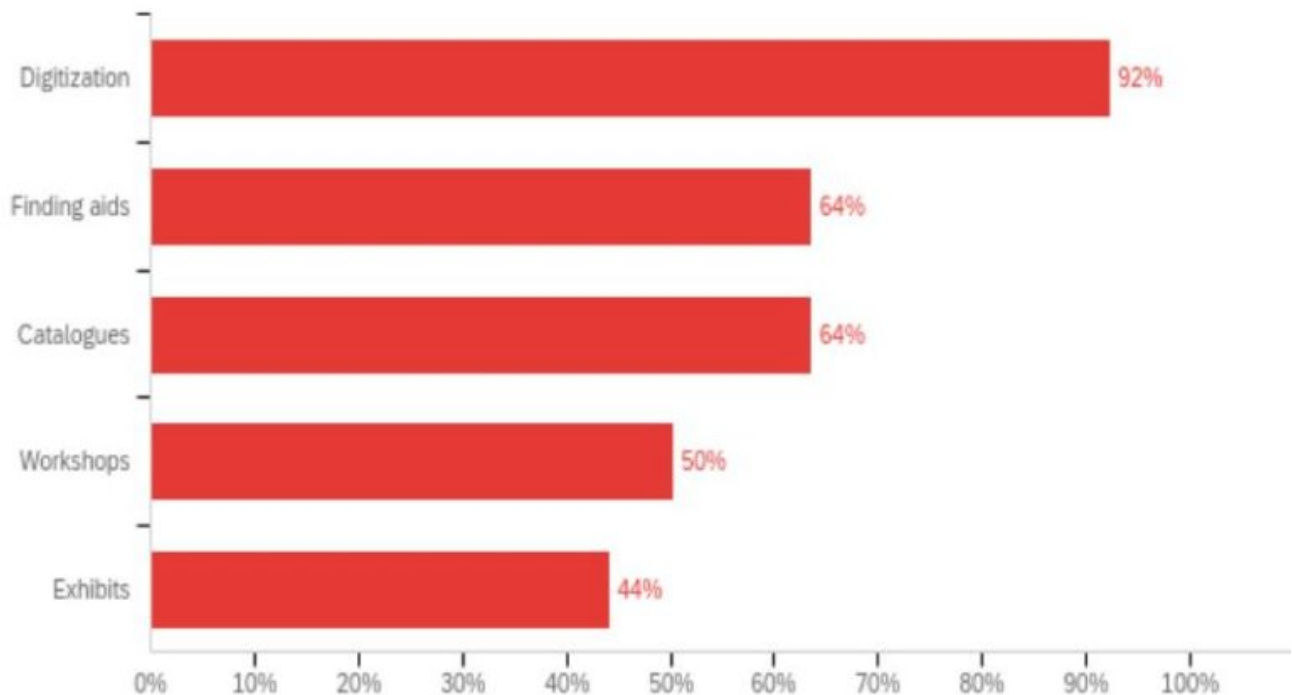
Priorities for content and services provision

What people wanted digitised most (184 respondents) was Printed Material (Books, Magazines, Advertising, Ephemera, etc.). In other words, researchers thought digitisation of these items would help their research the most. Printed Materials had a mean "importance" score of 85 (out of 100).

However, researchers also wanted to see more OCR text functionality (n=179) and digitised manuscripts (n=178); these had mean importance scores between 74 and 80. Additional analysis needs to be carried out to understand how particular types/themes of food research (and users of specific archives) can be prioritised.
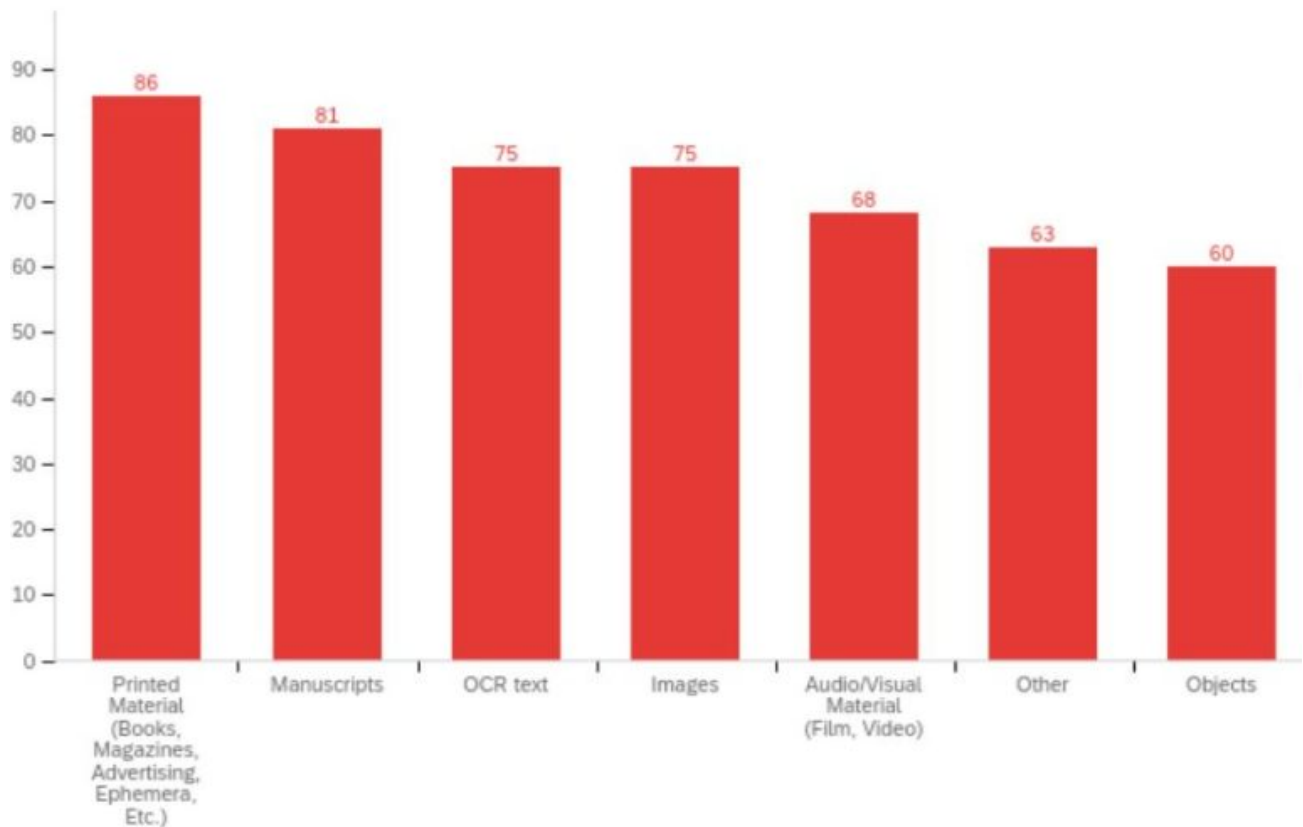
Mean importance score for increased digitisation and access of materials to help individual research activities

How do we communicate?

Email remains the most common method for communication between researchers and cultural institutions (n=178), with in person communication being the second most popular (n=115). A smaller community of respondents interacted with cultural institutions via social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram . We have yet to "cut" this with age based variables. Interestingly blogs and website messaging/chat, and WhatsApp services were mentioned in the "Other" free text response.

This, of course, is just a snapshot of our community of food researchers. There is still so much to explore in the survey results! Please do contact me (c.reynolds@sheffield.ac.uk) for if you would like to give additional feedback or thoughts. We'd love to hear from you.

And to complement the wealth of information from the community survey, we are now conducting a follow up **2020 Archive Survey** — directed at curators and digitisation teams in cultural institutions. Please promote this Archive survey to any curators and digitisation teams in your own networks. We'd love to know more from cultural

institutions about the scope of their food-related collections, any barriers to digitization, and future ambitions. The Archives survey closes on **14 March 2020**.

Editorial Note: Christian Reynolds is the principal investigator of the the US-UK Food Digital Scholarship network **(@AHRCfoodnetwork** on Twitter). The Recipes Project is a partner organisation in the network.

COMMUNITY, CULINARY HISTORY, DIGITAL HISTORY, LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES & MUSEUMS, NETWORKS, POSTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING

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