



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Library of Congress

Duration: 0:12:27

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- Interviewer: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council Podcast.
- I'm here with Mat Francis from the University of Leeds. Mat's studying for a PhD examining religion and violence, and he recently completed an AHRC funded scholarship at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.
- He's here to tell us about how he found the experience and how it's helped his PhD studies.
- So, Mat, how did you find out about the Library of Congress scheme and what motivated you to apply?
- Mat Francis: Well, it was something that I found out – I believe it was through a mailing from the AHRC, actually. So it was just something that I read about through that.
- The motivation for applying for it was just thinking about the sheer number of resources that I would find at the library and how useful they could be for my research. So I started off by looking at the catalogue at the library and sort of trying to find out if there were texts there that would be particularly useful for me. Because it's quite a long trip to make and then find actually I could have got all of these over in Leeds.
- But there were, so I identified a number of resources and said "Okay, yes this looks like it could be really useful and it would be a good experience." So I then approached my supervisors and said "What about this scheme? I think it would be a good idea to go." And they

were both very supportive. You know, they said “Well yes, absolutely. You could access a lot of work in one place.” And that was one of the big draws, is that as well as having a lot of books – you can get some of these texts over in the U.K. But in the Library of Congress I could get them all in one place, and that meant that I could be working with one source, and – “I think I read about that somewhere else, I’m going to cross reference that and check that”. And I could do it there and then without a trip to the British Library or a document supply.

Interviewer: Well the collection at the Library of Congress is second to none really. It’s one of the largest collections in the world, if not the largest. Is there any specific collections that really helped your research?

Mat Francis: Well, I used the general collection a lot. But also I accessed and spoke to the librarians who looked after the African and Middle Eastern collection quite a bit. So there were resources that came from that section which were very helpful. And also some works from the law library as well, which I wasn’t expecting. But there were some useful works on the periphery of what I was interested in from there as well.

But especially speaking to some of the librarians and some of the people who were there, that’s a very helpful resource. Both in the general collections and in the specialist collections.

I also used the multi-media collection as well. I managed to access a video over there, which I wasn’t expecting at all to find. But it came up on one of my trawls for information through the library catalogue. And, again, they were very helpful there and I would go and sit and work through some of their material as well.

Interviewer: And has anything that you researched at the Library actually changed the shape or the direction of your research, your PhD?

Mat Francis: Absolutely. When I went out there my intention was to look for material for the three primary case studies that I'm doing in my research. And one of those case studies that I'd highlighted was on the animal rights movement. And while I was out there, there was material relating to this, as you would expect. But there wasn't as much as I was hoping for. Not of primary data, of statements made by people involved in these movements.

But what I did find while I was out there was that there was a lot of work relating to a completely different group, that I hadn't really considered, but just a few pieces popped up every so often through collections that I was looking at, to do with a group called The Red Army Faction, in West Germany. And this was something that I hadn't considered at all up until then.

But actually there was quite a lot of material relating to that. So that whole chapter, the whole subject of that last case study changed completely from being one focussed on the animal rights movement to being focussed on The Red Army Faction.

Interviewer: Oh, and so that's gone on to form part of your PhD now?

Mat Francis: Absolutely, that's now one of the central chapters of the PhD. That had a big impact.

Interviewer: Yes, a big impact. And what about day to day? Explain a bit about how being a scholar at the Library of Congress, how it works. Do you have your own desk? And how do you access the books and the collections?

Mat Francis: Right, yes you get more than your own desk, you get your own cubicle. It's really quite nice and fancy accommodation that they have within the Kluge Center. So I should explain that the facilities that

were used there were within something called the John W Kluge Center. So come out of a pot of money provided by a benefactor. And this centre provides scholarships to senior scholars who are considered to be international experts within their field of study. And also to junior scholars who are early-career post-doctoral researchers.

And within that, those of us coming on the AHRC-ESRC scheme fitted in with the same sort of floor as the junior scholars. And so we had cubicles with our own computer, beautiful big L shaped desk, telephones, printing, faxing facilities. And of course ample shelf space. So, world class facilities in terms of just being able to get your head down and focus on your research, which were great.

How the process often worked: they were very flexible about when you could turn up and when you didn't. For most of us we were making a long trip coming over from the U.K, over there for several months and we wanted to use it as best we could. So you could get there from anything from eight in the morning until ten at night on some occasions.

And the process of working there would involve a sort of looking through the catalogue, ordering some books from the catalogue and then somebody would turn up with a trolley and bring the book to you. Which is really difficult to get used to, coming back to this country and going "I have to get my own books."

Interviewer: And how long did you keep those books for? For the duration of the stay, or did they have to be back within a few days or a week?

Mat Francis: Duration of the stay. And one of the great things about being within the Kluge Center there is that Kluge scholars are one of the three groups of people who can actually take books out of the library, because that's not normally allowed. So, along with Senators and Congressmen we were lumped in with the Kluge scholars, which was great. So you know you could take books home and read them at home.

Interviewer: Yeah, extra privileges.

Mat Francis: Absolutely, yes.

Interviewer: You mentioned as well as early career researchers based there there is also very senior scholars there. How did that work in terms of networking and opportunities to sort of learn from more senior scholars that are interested in similar fields to yourself?

Mat Francis: The senior scholars had their own beautifully apportioned offices just below our floor where the cubicles were. But, so while you didn't necessarily see them so much on a day to day basis, because you would be working in your cubicle and everybody's working on their own research.

There were formal opportunities, like every Thursday they have something called a 'Brown Bag Lunch' when everybody brings their own lunch and gets to sit around and talk to each other. And people were expected to go to that. Senior and junior scholars alike. So that was a great opportunity then, just to get to meet some of them and talk to some of them.

In addition, there would be, or there was a series of afternoon or evening seminars with some of these scholars who would be presenting some of their work and some of the research that they'd been undertaking whilst they were at the library.

And also generally speaking they were all very approachable people. So you could go and knock on their office and sort of say "I'm researching this and I know that you've written about this a lot, could we talk about this a bit more?" And they were really helpful in terms of suggesting different avenues to pursue or giving feedback on the work that you were doing.

Interviewer: Did you have the opportunity to present your work while you were there?

Mat Francis: Yes. So the Kluge Center likes you to present something about your research during your stay there. And that would often take the form of, towards the beginning of your time there, giving a very brief overview of what you were researching and what you were doing at the library. And that was also to help other people who were there to know what you were doing and to be able to say "Well actually I've just found something similar on this" or "You could talk to this person."

Interviewer: Share information.

Mat Francis: Absolutely, and the staff at the Kluge Center were very good at pushing you towards different people who they knew would be helpful to your field, who worked within the library.

And also there were opportunities to present in terms of what was called an incubation series, which was organised amongst the junior scholars. Whereby people would submit works like a chapter for an upcoming book or talks for job interviews, maybe, that were coming up. And this would be submitted in writing to the rest of the scholars beforehand. And then we would meet up and give feedback. Give constructive criticism on the research that was presented. And I used that for an article which was very much a work in progress at the time for a journal article. So yes, you do get opportunities to present your research as well.

Interviewer: Sounds like a very positive and beneficial experience. Is there anything that you found, well not so much negative but anything that you found difficult from the experience?

Mat Francis: The impending approach of your time finishing there. It's quite funny, you could always tell the people who were sort of coming up to finishing because they would be really frantically trying to get through books. And then sort of like going "I can't leave without having read this one." And there's so much stuff there that it's...

Interviewer: A bit overwhelming, towards the end, I suppose.

Mat Francis: Yes, absolutely. Before I got there, there was a little difficulty in terms of finding accommodation. Because DC itself is not a big place but with the surrounding area it certainly is. And a lot of the advice that I would get from people who'd been there over twenty years or so would be "Oh don't live there, that's really dangerous." And actually trying to get positive recommendations, and also just to sort out the legalities of sort of paying a deposit or signing contracts, was quite difficult.

But within the centre itself there's an administrator there called Mary-Lou, and she was very helpful. I emailed her and she emailed all the other scholars there, senior, junior and the other AHRC scholars there, and they were all very helpful.

So she passed on my email address and they sort of came back with suggestions of places they'd lived at and in the end I ended up moving in to a house where an AHRC scholar had just moved out of a couple of weeks previously. And we've passed that on.

So I think that landlady is now on her third or fourth AHRC scholar.

(Laughter)

Interviewer: That's brilliant. I'm sure she loves that. So you ended up lodging really with someone, with a local family or such like?

Mat Francis: Yes. Actually the lady who I lodged with worked at the National Archives. So it was really interesting. But the Kluge Center I know also has in plan some ideas for actually building a – I think it's an accommodation block where scholars could go up to – and at least even if it was just temporarily. So you could find your feet in the city and sort of work out where you want to stay.

And it's not just for the AHRC scholars, you know, that would be for the junior and senior scholars. Because of course they come from all over America and many of them have the same problems in terms of getting to DC and sorting out accommodation.

Interviewer: Would you recommend the Library of Congress to other PhD students or early career researchers as an experience?

Mat Francis: Absolutely yes. Definitely. I was already recommending it to my supervisors, sort of two weeks into my research when I was there. And also I think it's important to say that it's not just for historical-based subjects or for people who are interested in researching things about America.

So, you know, there was a wide variety of research taking place while I was out there. I talked to other AHRC scholars out there who were researching poetry. Who were researching studies on the Holocaust. And also archaeology as well, a researcher there looking at archaeology, I think in Sri Lanka.

Interviewer: Okay, so quite diverse.

Mat Francis: Wonderfully diverse, and certainly I wasn't doing any sort of historical-based research or America-based research and still found it very useful.

Interviewer: Mat Francis, thank you very much.

Mat Francis: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council Podcast. To find out more, please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk.

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