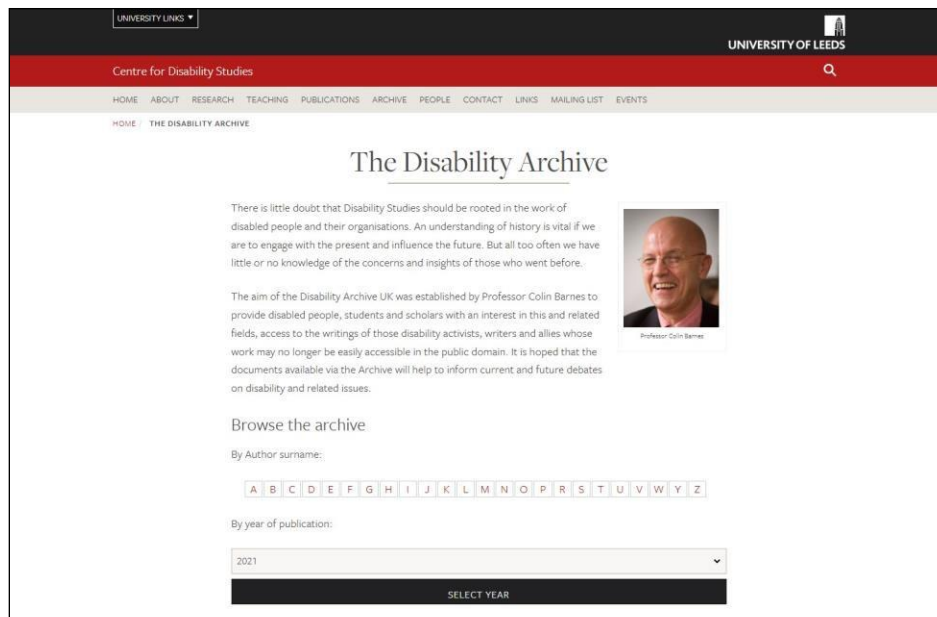


The Disability Archive UK

<https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library/>

Reviewed by Bailey Adolph, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections and Archives

The Disability Archive UK is an extension of the University of Leeds Centre for Disability Studies, which is an interdisciplinary network of STEM, humanities, and social sciences researchers. The Centre's goal is to achieve social justice and equality through work in the sociology of disability, inclusive design, deaf studies, disability law and human rights, and disability politics and policy. Professor Colin Barnes, a disabled person and special school survivor,¹ established the Centre for Disability Studies in 1990 and *The Disability Archive UK* in 1999 in order to "provide disabled people, students, and scholars with an interest in this and related fields, access to the writings of those disability activists, writers, and allies whose work may no longer be easily accessible in the public domain."² As of October 2022, there are over 900 works³ freely available in the archive intended to inform current and future discussions on disability and similar issues.



¹ Professor Colin Barnes, "School of Sociology and Social Policy", *University of Leeds*, <https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/staff/5/professor-colin-barnes>.

² The Disability Archive, "Centre for Disability Studies", *University of Leeds*, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library/>.

³ Barnes, "School of Sociology and Social Policy."

Figure 1. The home page of The Disability Archive UK features the mission of the archive and a photograph of the founder, Professor Colin Barnes.

The Disability Archive UK can be accessed by The Centre's main menu bar. The landing page provides a statement of purpose, followed by two methods of browsing for material: alphabetically by the author's surname or chronologically by the year of publication. The archive holds a wide range of articles written from 1951 to 2021, although these are bulk dates. There are some years for which the archive does not have any material, possibly because relevant material does not exist or has yet to be collected. The archive's scope is particular to the UK and materials are primarily academic in nature. At the bottom of the landing page are the conditions of use, which express that files may be freely downloaded but not used for commercial purposes.

When users select a letter of the alphabet to browse material, the results list is arranged alphabetically by author's surname, as seen in Figure 2. Each name is hyperlinked to a bibliography of their works available on the archive. Alternatively, if users select a year to browse, the results list is arranged alphabetically by titles published in that year, as seen in Figure 3. Users can download articles as PDFs, and sometimes as Microsoft Word documents, from either an author's bibliography page or the list of titles published each year.

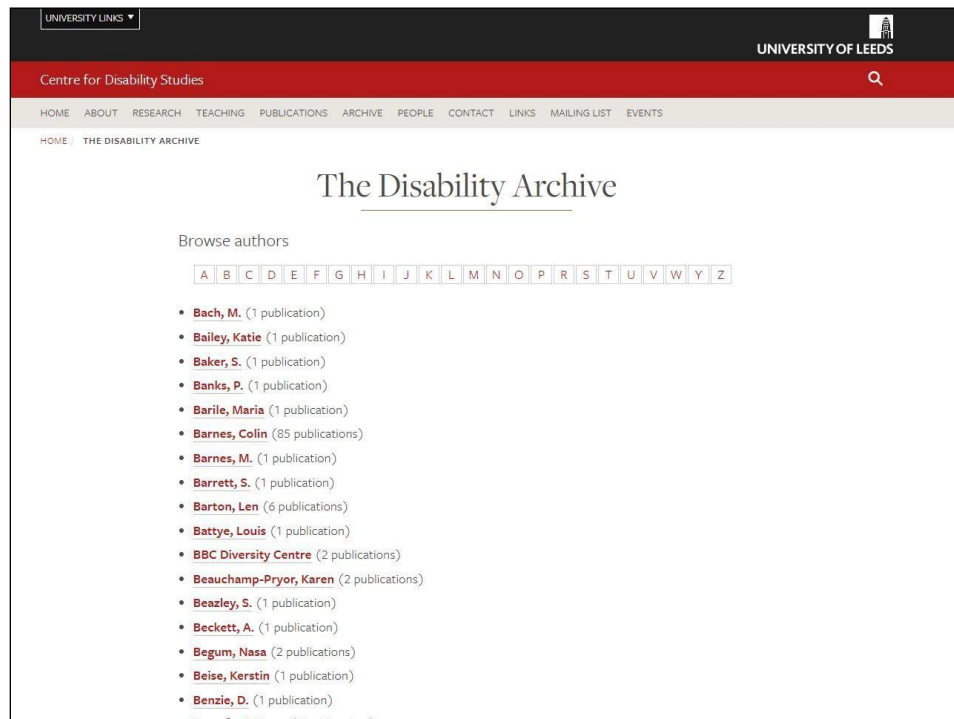


Figure 2. One method of browsing the archive is alphabetically by the author's last name.

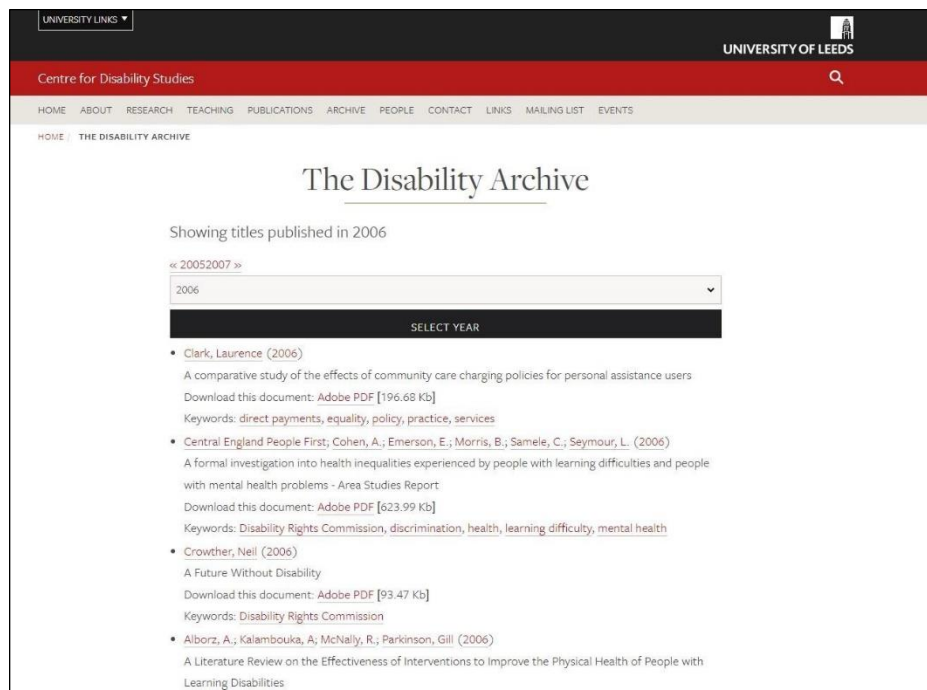


Figure 3. Another method of browsing the archives is by year.

Users can also browse by keyword once they are on the results page, as seen in Figure 4. Browsing by keyword allows the user to see the difference in how the keyword was applied to various articles. Keywords can be linked to articles that are scholarly in nature or personal reflection pieces. Diverse results can emerge due to specific keywords, which suggests that this feature may be too broad to be useful. For example, the keyword “attitudes” is linked to articles written between the years 1966 and 2012. The pieces from earlier years include titles such as “The Way I See Things,”⁴ which was published in 1966 by Mona Younis. Younis was diagnosed as “spastic” at age two after her family emigrated from Jamaica to the United States. In this article, she reflects on her feelings and difficulties as a disabled person but acknowledges that her point of view is colored by her own disability.⁵

Moving forward to 2007, another article tagged with the keyword “attitudes” is “Disabled People’s Experiences of Anti-Social Behavior and Harassment in Social Housing: A Critical Review,”⁶ which was written by the Centre for Education Research and Social Inclusion. In this piece, the authors discuss their findings following research on the antisocial behavior disabled people can exhibit in social

⁴ Mona Younis, “The Way I See Things,” 1966, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/younnis-way-i-see-things.pdf>.

⁵ Younis, “The Way I See Things.”

⁶ Caroline Hunter, Nick Hodge, Judy Nixon, Sadie Parr, and Ben Willis, “Disabled People’s Experiences of Anti-social Behavior and Harassment in Social Housing: A Critical Review,” August 2007, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/hodge-ASBO-Final-Report.pdf>.

housing because of their impairment. The article provides evidence, figures and graphs, a review of available literature, and a discussion of how the disabled community can move forward. The 1966 and 2007 articles consider attitudes toward disability and disabled individuals, but they do so from different perspectives. The first piece focuses on the hardships Younis faced due to her impairment, whereas the article written forty-one years later suggests possible improvements for people like Younis who live in social housing. This span of articles demonstrates the evolution of topics covered over time.

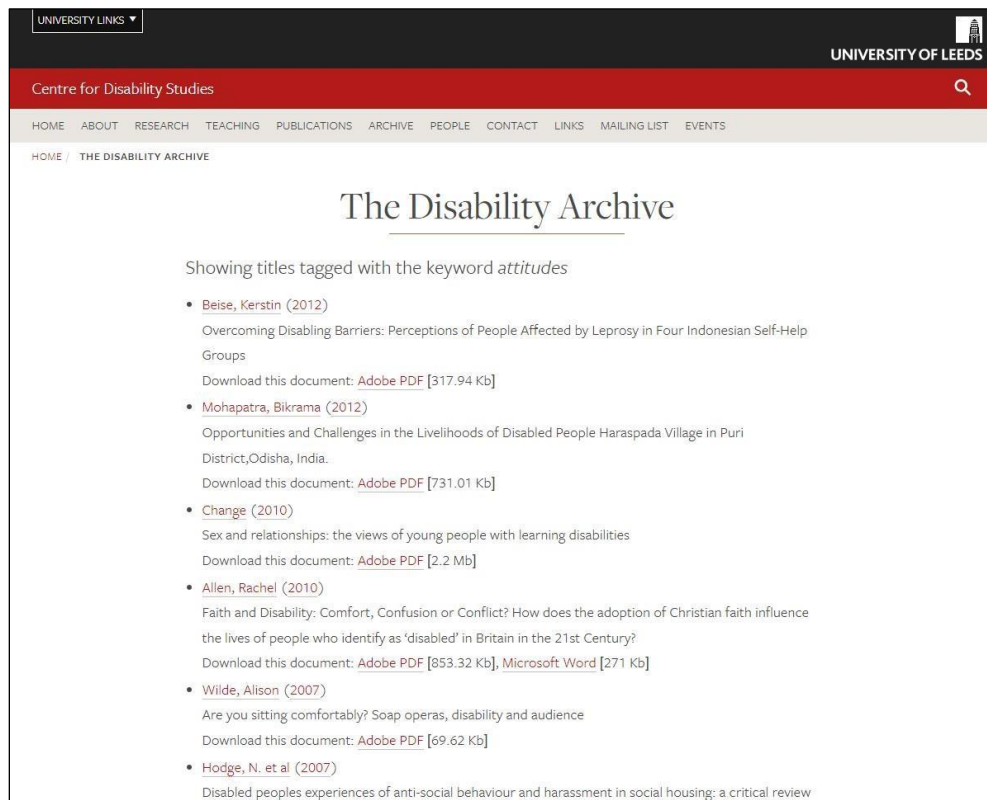


Figure 4. The final means of browsing archival materials is through keywords that articles are tagged with.

With this in mind, *The Disability Archives UK* is highly usable but not without its flaws. The website does not comply with web accessibility suggestions, and it lacks text informing how users with specific web accessibility needs can navigate the archive. Because the archive focuses on disability, disregarding a discussion of web accessibility is quite an oversight. The other major flaws are the available methods for browsing. As noted above, on the archive's landing page there are only two options for browsing. However, once users dig deeper into the site by clicking a letter or selecting a date, more browsing options appear. The purpose of keeping extra methods like keywords from the landing page is unclear, though these multiple options for browsing do enhance the resource's overall level of accessibility.

A larger issue occurs when delving further into the keywords. Instead of using a controlled vocabulary defined for the site, site designers tagged keywords, which results in a lack of consistency. There are several instances of duplicates or near duplicates of the same keyword or phrase, but clicking each option leads to different results. This means that users who browse by keywords but omit duplicates may not find all available material. An example can be seen in Figure 5. There are two keyword phrases that are nearly identical: “Assessment, benefits, medical model, politics, policy, research” and “assessments, benefits, medical model, politics, policy, research.” These phrases are very similar yet clicking on one will lead to different articles. Other smaller issues with the keywords, such as spelling errors and unnecessary groupings of keywords (e.g., “normality, prejudices, attitudes, stigma, culture, restricted growth”), exist but do not impede accessibility to the same degree.

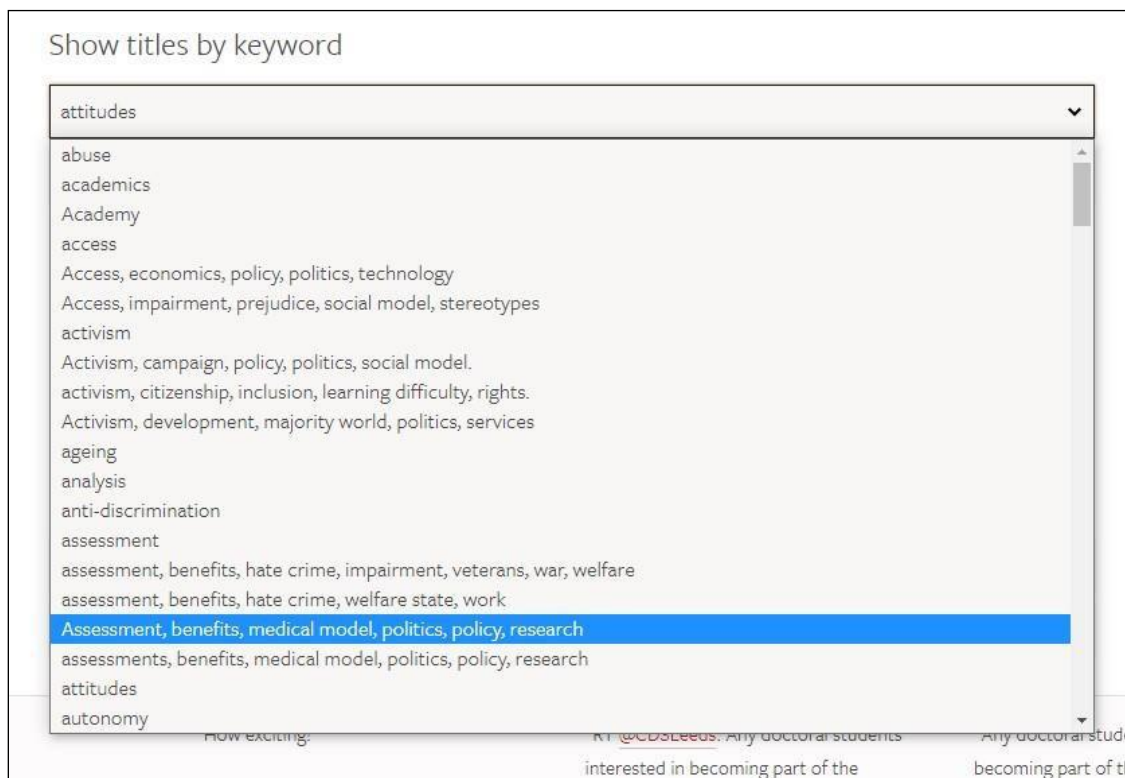


Figure 5. In this image, an assortment of keywords is shown. The set of keywords highlighted in blue is very similar to the set directly below it. However, clicking on either will lead to different results.

When considering any resource, accessibility should be the highest priority. A user must be able to conduct research in an archive with relative ease. Because *The Disability Archive UK* focuses on disability studies, it was difficult not to hold it to a higher standard in terms of accessibility, though it was equally difficult to decide how fair that was. Should the content of an archive influence the determination of

its effectiveness? In this instance, I struggled to overcome that bias because I assumed those working behind the scenes of *The Disability Archive UK* had a deeper understanding of the obstacles researchers face when trying to collect information and resources online. On the other hand, all archives should strive for full accessibility in order to be discoverable, which is the primary objective of any archive whether physical or digital.

Even so, the issues with the keywords and browsing methods do not seem difficult to fix. *The Disability Archive UK* can still be used effectively and is an exceptional resource thanks to its subject matter. It will benefit students, academic researchers, and members of the disabled community. If the issues mentioned here are addressed and curators behind the scenes continue to collect material, the resource could be even better. A few major takeaways that archivists can learn from *The Disability Archive UK* are the importance of having quality metadata as well as the importance of collecting materials regarding seldom discussed topics such as disability. This archive proves that there are materials out there that need to be preserved but collecting them and providing equitable access will take hard work and dedication.