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Understanding the Value of Digital Archival Collections to Faculty at Maynooth University Library

Hugh Murphy 

Maynooth University Library, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article first defines what constitutes a “Special Collection” and what constitutes a “digital archival collection”. Some background on the evolution of surrogate primary sources, from microfilm, through online databases to Open Access resources is presented. The article then explores the literature relating to the management and use of Digital Archival Collections and other digital primary sources. Some contextual information on Maynooth University and our digital primary sources is given. The article goes on to report on a consultation with faculty members who offer their insights on using DACs. The findings of the consultation process, which broadly show a strong appreciation of the merits of these resources, but mainly as an enhanced surrogate are discussed. The article concludes with some considerations of what these findings mean for collection development and what needs to be done to further stimulate engagement with these resources in Maynooth University.

KEYWORDS

Collections; Special Collections; Digital Collections; primary sources

Introduction

There is no practical obstacle whatever now to the creation of an efficient index to all human knowledge, ideas and achievements, to the creation, that is, of a complete planetary memory for all mankind. And not simply an index; the direct reproduction of the thing itself can be summoned to any properly prepared spot. A microfilm ... can be duplicated from the records and sent anywhere and thrown enlarged upon the screen so that the student may study it in every detail (HG Wells, 1938, p. 86).

Offering a clear definition of what constitutes a ‘Special’ Collection has long been considered problematic (Dupont, 2007; Dupont & Yakel, 2013) although there is a broad consensus as articulated by organizations such as OCLC and others. The advent of digital platforms which offer access to online archives and other primary sources has further complicated such

CONTACT Hugh Murphy  hugh.murphy@mu.ie  Maynooth University Library, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

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definitions. These Digital Archival Collections (DACs) are licensed, digital corpora, typically consisting of text, image and audio-visual content and frequently, but not always, representing a digital version of an original analog primary source. (JISC, 2021).

The move to create surrogates of primary sources is not new and in many ways the history of these resources represents a continuation of the microform model which was so popular in the 20th century. The benefits of creating surrogates have long been established in terms of both enhancing access, and preservation. While it can be argued that DACs represent a simple evolution, the past 15 years has seen publishers leverage technology at scale to create vast digital platforms offering access to millions of pages of source material. The release of platforms such as Gale's *State Papers Online* from 2008, and various platforms from Adam Matthew at a similar time, has been augmented by other publishers such as ProQuest, who have a longstanding track record in microfilming and developed a suite of primary source digital content over a comparable timescale. The merits of this technological evolution and mass digitization are clear to see.

The creation of databases of primary sources began over twenty years ago, with sources such as *Early English Books Online* made available on CD Rom. With the advent of the World Wide Web, online databases quickly followed, with resources such as *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* available in 2002 and, as noted the advent of the *State Papers* platform in 2008.

As network and computing capacity have grown, so too has the range of products available, as well the as the functionality on offer. While the development of such functionality is consistently present in licensed platforms, it is notable that many open access platforms have seen a similar progression, with Latham's example of *Documenting the American South* a case in point (Latham, 2008). The fact that many DACs are openly accessible stands as a stark contrast to previous surrogate models. There is some variety in Open Access models, ranging from publicly funded, national models such as the *Digital Repository of Ireland* to other initiatives such as such as *Project Gutenberg*, *Internet Archive Books* and *Hathi Trust*, which provide access to both primary and secondary source materials. However, due to copyright, limitations remain in terms of what can be provided. (Wu, 2019). Such challenges are not present with licensed primary sources which are, by definition not 'open' and will only be available to institutions who purchase or subscribe.

From a library perspective, there is a continual challenge in understanding just how these collections should be managed. The role and management of digitised primary sources is often debated with responsibility for the subscription and licence resting with the electronic resources function

in many academic libraries, while the content could be said to have greater complementarity to the special collections of the library. Understanding both the role of these sources, how they integrate with comparable physical collections and the audience to whom they will be of use is a critical function for a library generally and for special collections in particular. On this basis digitized collections of primary sources represent both a challenge to collection development, but also an opportunity, in terms of enhancing access to resources which would otherwise be much harder to access. Beyond this however, their importance is accentuated by the scale of investment which libraries are making in these products. While it is difficult to be precise about the exact figures being spent, results from research from bodies such as JISC (2019) show evidence of investment in the UK of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Background/context

Maynooth University, in the Republic of Ireland, is located approximately 25 kilometres from the capital Dublin. While its roots go back to the formation of St. Patrick's College in 1795, the modern university, established as part of the National University of Ireland, dates from 1997.

The Library provides services to Maynooth University (MU) and the Pontifical University, St. Patrick's College Maynooth (SPCM), with an overall student cohort numbering over 13,000. MU has 27 academic departments, organized into three Faculties: Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy; Science and Engineering, and Social Sciences. The Library has world class special collections, with particular strengths in theology, literary and historical archives. These collections have been greatly enhanced over the last decade in concert with a strategic focus on outreach and ensuring their use in supporting the university's teaching and research.

Given the longstanding traditions in the humanities, the library has worked to complement its print collections with access to as broad an array of digital sources as possible. As such it is a member of the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI), which is a national open repository for Irish humanities, social science and cultural heritage and a leader in Open Access nationally. There are strengths with licensed primary sources also, with a current suite of databases from providers such as Gale including several modules from *State Papers Online*, as well as *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, and various newspaper and periodical databases. Several thematic databases have been procured from vendors including Adam Matthew and Bloomsbury focussing on topics such as migration, trade and drama. Maynooth University Library was the first library outside of North America to subscribe to the ProQuest Primary Source "Access and

Build” model. This model was considered to be attractive as it allowed the Library to offer access to a vast array of databases and develop the collection based on evidence and usage. Maynooth, along with eight other Irish universities is also part of the National IReL (Irish Research electronic Library) consortium, which provides access to a sizeable array of E-Resources, although the majority of these are scholarly journals, with primary source collections limited to certain newspaper databases, such as *Irish Newspaper Archive*.

It is against this background, the author carried out a consultation with members of the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy in the spring of 2021. Following a brief literature review, the article goes on to present and discuss the outputs from the consultation.

Literature review

While there is a wealth of literature on primary sources generally, the topic of digital primary sources has come much more to the fore in recent years. Broadly the literature relevant to this article falls into two categories: creation of such collections and their use in teaching.

Creation of DACs

There are a variety of approaches to creating such a digital corpus, from focussing on one archive, through taking a broader, thematic approach and the literature reflects this. Cox (2017) examines the workflows and challenges in creating a specific digital archive as well as the attendant strategic benefits. Hughes (2012) highlights the need to understand impact when assessing the success of embedding digital resources into research and also highlights ways to put the user at the centre of attendant processes. This theme is reinforced by Mills (2015) who notes the benefits of including the user community in determining precisely what should be digitized. Evans (2015) offers an interesting insight into the challenges in collection development with such resources and the potential for integrating them into the broader corpora of special collections. She suggests a revision of current practice with a view to ensuring proficient collection and access across both physical and digital collections. There are opportunities for community involvement also. Wu (2019) suggests some compelling alternatives to the current landscape, envisioning firstly an American national then an international collaborative library as a complement to, or in some ways a replacement for endeavors such as *Haithi* and the *National Digital Public Library*. However as with the models which it would replace, such a library would focus mainly on published output, not archival.

Use in teaching

There is a strong and growing field of study in the analysis of digital primary resources in teaching. Studies such as Wu (2019), and Brightenburg (2016) concentrate on open resources at least in part. Most studies which refer to a licensed product tend to focus exclusively on that one platform, such as Lindquist (2007) who offers a focus on Gale's *EEBO*, or Rysavy, Michalak, and Hunt (2018) who examine the use of *Market Research & American Business, 1935–1965* from Adam Matthew in teaching. Importantly, while the role of DACs in teaching is a relatively new area, there is a commendably longstanding tradition of reflection on the use of primary sources more generally. Matyn (2000) argues the merits of engagement with original sources noting how important such engagement is in terms of learning to interpret historical sources. This view remains common and was further developed by Roff (2007) who highlights the difference a student may find between an archive and a library. Roff however gives little regard to the primary sources available online in her article, nor to the literacies they can help inculcate. Wosh, Bunde, Murphy, and Blacker (2007) and Malkmus (2010) offer strong consideration of how to use such sources in teaching. Wosh places commendable emphasis on the role of curatorial staff in delivering teaching. More locally, the work of Joyce and Berry (2020) gives a clear example of how Maynooth University Library integrated original primary sources into teaching and outreach. The work of Barrutia, Bazela, and Barr (2020), who explore how to support teaching with primary sources in their report for the University of Sheffield Library, straddles both original and digital primary sources and as such is both relevant and useful to this study.

Methodology

Members of the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy at Maynooth University were consulted in March 2021, with a view to understanding the nuances of their engagement with the library's provision of licensed digital primary source platforms. The colleagues were selected on several criteria: previous engagement with the library in the selection or use of resources of this type or referral from a senior member of an academic department as being a strong supporter of the use of such resources. As such, the respondents represent a specific cohort of 'power users' on campus. While it would have been attractive to undertake a series of unstructured interviews comparable to those undertaken by Barrutia et al. (2020) the decision was made to pursue a survey in recognition of the pressure which academic colleagues were working under due to the current COVID situation, with Level 5, the highest level of restrictions in operation at this time. As such, a survey was designed via MS Forms. The questions

posed were a combination of multiple choice and open text. The use of open text was considered critical as it was necessary to get as much opinion and nuance from the respondents as possible to compensate for the inability to conduct interviews. In terms of the questions asked, a balance was sought between eliciting clear information about which were the main resources used for teaching and for research, as well as a set of broader questions aimed at eliciting sentiment. The former would be of help to the library in terms of delivering service whereas the latter would assist in learning more about how academics feel about these resources in terms of accessibility and their role as an alternative to original primary sources.

The full list of questions can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

The questions focused on usage of digital primary resources, for teaching and research, as well as an assessment of the merits of typical functionality. Based on previous discussions with members of Faculty, questions were also posed regarding the importance of context in the curation of the digital archive, as well as an assessment of their 'value' and findability in the library ecosystem.

This investigation was informed by prior work in the field such as the Ithaka/ProQuest large scale survey undertaken in the United States by Tanaka (2021) and the institution specific research undertaken by Barrutia et al. (2020) in Sheffield. In scale it more closely resembles the latter work but its great merit is in gaining feedback specific to Maynooth University, which will inform our offerings in this area. The respondents to the consultation were based in History, English and the cross disciplinary Arts & Humanities Institute. Given the focus on teaching, members of the University Centre for Teaching and Learning were also consulted.

Summary of findings

The findings are arranged under the following headings:

- Knowledge of Digital Primary Sources
- Using Digital Primary Sources in Teaching
- Access and accessibility of Digital Primary Sources
- Functionality of Digital Primary Sources
- Importance of context
- Preference
- Discoverability

Knowledge of digital primary sources

The findings of the research undertaken confirms that there is a strong working knowledge of the suite or DACs which are available to the

Maynooth Academic Community. These resources are increasingly important in research, but less so in teaching, where a reliance on engagement with original sources remains key.

Using digital primary sources in teaching

Firstly, there is a notable, if not complete distinction between what resources are being used for teaching and those which are being used for research. The platform *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) for example, which the library has had for over a decade, is heavily used in teaching, less so in research. Conversely, the House of Commons *Parliamentary Papers* database is heavily used in research but sees much less use for teaching. With regard to teaching, while most respondents still showed a preference for using original sources, four respondents offered a clear sense of how these resources can be used to best advantage in conjunction with the original sources. Five respondents noted the value of the digital version as an entry to engagement in terms of teaching, as this was often perceived as less ‘forbidding’ than consulting an original source which was important with undergraduate cohorts in particular. However, the view that engagement with the ‘materiality’ of original physical sources was stressed as essential too, with one respondent noting:

“That is where the real connection with the past comes home to them”

Access and accessibility of digital primary sources

The prominence and value of such resources has clearly been accentuated by the restrictions to physical collections due to COVID-19 restrictions. While limited consultation of the Maynooth University Special Collection is allowed by appointment, access to digital primary sources is always available on or off campus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the advantage of such digital sources at a time of restricted travel was referred to regularly, in terms of the academic’s own research, but also in terms of being able to (virtually) inculcate an understanding of engaging with primary sources among the student cohort. As noted by one respondent:

At undergraduate level, it has made it possible for us to have our students engage in independent research projects and minor theses in which they draw extensively on primary source materials. This is vital in providing them with hands-on experience of historical research and in fostering their interest in pursuing postgraduate study. Having access to digitised primary sources has been absolutely vital in enabling many of our postgraduate students (Taught Masters, Research Masters and PhDs) to continue work on their theses in a context in which access to archives in Ireland, the UK and continental Europe is denied owing to pandemic restrictions.

The idea of enhancing accessibility via digitized primary sources was queried. While there was a sense of the clear benefit that having access to a digital platform gave in terms of being able to undertake work from anywhere (as opposed to having to visit the repository where the original is housed) there was a very clear sense that this still constitutes a privileged position and one which is limited to those in the academic community who work in institutions which have subscribed to the content. From the library perspective, it was very welcome to see frequent references to the need for such resources to be open access, coupled with an acknowledgment of the financial implications for the library (and by extension the university). As one academic noted:

“providers have created a circumstance (institutional access) which allows them to impose exorbitant subscriptions”.

This corresponds to longstanding views among the academic community, ably summed up by Prescott (2016) noting the inability of scholars to access these premium products.

Functionality of digital primary sources

Issues of functionality were considered also and provided an interesting counterpoint to the idea that the more elaborate technical aspects of the platform were essential. There was a clear consensus that even simple functionality such as exporting a search result list, or the ability to download were absolutely essential, whereas ostensibly more powerful tools such as term frequency or the visual collation of search results were seen as much less valuable. For platforms which were showcasing handwritten script, any functionality which improved legibility was considered to be very beneficial. In keeping with some concerns expressed about the curation of the content of products, some concerns were noted around the limitations which may be present in the platform's discovery function, with one respondent referring to an inability to find something in the digital collection which they knew for certain to be present, based on the original source.

Importance of editorial/curation context of digital primary sources

Based on the survey and other discussions, there was a near universal appreciation for the importance of context being provided with the platform. No facet of a digital primary source was considered more critical, with one academic noting that such a resource *“needs to acknowledge gaps in collections, explicitly explain methodological decisions regarding sequencing of material (e.g., stating clearly if the ordering of material has been changed/‘corrected’ in the digitized version”.*

Such a view was common through the feedback, especially among respondents from the department of history. The comment from one that *“these decisions fundamentally shape research while the researcher may be unaware of the process completely or not in control of it. The simple fact is that historians should look at the collection as a whole with minimal editorial interference.”* was quite typical. Given the fact that primary sources are something that need to be interrogated, rather than offering full ‘truth’, this point would seem to be critical as the understanding of the context can only help the researcher or student in this critical analysis.

Preference for original versus digital primary sources

Ultimately, perhaps the key question is whether people would elect to use the digitized resource in preference to the original. Perhaps unsurprisingly, while there was a minority of very explicit answers favoring the original, the majority were much more nuanced and centred around the specific context. Those who very clearly did express a preference for the digital did so based on either accessibility (including environmental issues such as carbon footprint) or functionality. Those who were adamant that the online was no substitute for the original bolstered this view with issues relating to materiality. This can be best summed up in one comment:

“when you see a document in its physical context you understand so much more of it. The paper, the ink, the binding (or the box), its place on the shelf etc etc. It gives you a greater sense of how it was constructed, curated and then handed to this generation.”

Several respondents noted the need to use the original and digital as appropriate – for example doing the initial research work on the digital platform but consulting the original (if possible) with a view to *“comparing my notes on both, keeping an eye to any discrepancies in transcription”*. Another respondent noted that the availability of DACs was *‘game changing’* for their research.

One of the more informative aspects of the survey was the clear understanding of the role of DACs in attracting students and funding. In the case of the former, it was noted that providing access to these resources offers an additional incentive in terms of recruiting the best calibre of students. In the case of the latter, it was observed that various funding applications require a testimony detailing the breadth of resources available. These points were emphasized in particular by several of the more senior respondents who are engaged in funded projects and who noted that being able to provide access to certain resource was a *‘significant factor’* in attracting funding and students.

Discoverability of digital primary sources

Finally, when asked about how easy it was to locate these resources across the library web presence, the majority of respondents stated that finding them was not challenging. In addition to having a discovery portal, Maynooth University Library uses an A-Z list, and this was noted as the most popular access method. However, the ability of the researcher to access these resources at a more granular level via Summon, our discovery solution was not in evidence and one respondent explicitly asked for such an option, noting how useful it would be. This suggests a need to reinforce the breadth of access methods as part of instructional activities.

Discussion

Knowledge of digital primary sources

In terms of broad usage of such resources, the findings in Maynooth University which show a tendency for academics to use specific resources, chime with other similar research and particularly with the report from JISC/ProQuest in 2016 which noted “Researchers rely heavily on specific digital collections that they return to regularly, which is resulting in incremental changes in scholarly behavior.” (2016, p.3)

Using digital primary sources in teaching

The idea that these resources have a specific role in teaching was evident in the findings, although the preference for engagement with the original was strongly emphasized. There was no doubt that these sources played a key part in teaching which conforms with the findings of Malkmus (2010) that “academic historians generally consider primary sources an essential component of teaching history” (2010, p.414). Equally, the view that using primary sources in teaching is a key enabler of student engagement and stimulating learning (Malkmus, 2010) is consistent both with the findings of the survey, but also with the experience of staff in MU Special Collections. Interestingly however, the view, articulated by Barrutia et al. (2020) and others that there are unique pedagogical opportunities in relation to DACs was not as evident. This may have been a limitation of the survey, but while findings suggest some recognition of pedagogical benefits, the value of using originals to teach received greater emphasis.

Access and accessibility of digital primary sources

The claim that digital primary resources are helping efforts to democratize access is open to debate. In practice, such resources continue to represent a

degree of investment which is beyond that which can be afforded by many institutions. Despite their capacity for greater accessibility, the reality is that such resources are accessible to a very privileged few. For researchers who are not in an institution which can acquire such resources, the option remains to go to the original repository, an endeavor which represents a significant financial commitment and which prevents the use of the functionality referred to earlier. The idea mooted by Binkley as far back as 1935 that “the scholar in a small town can have resources of great metropolitan libraries at his disposal’ (Binkley, 1935 p. 184) is true -but only if you are part of a certain community.

In reality, as Prescott (2016, blog) notes, there is a danger

that digitisation becomes a tool which, instead of enhancing and democratising access to libraries (sic)and archives, shuts access down, thereby reinforcing and amplifying old inequalities and hierarchies

Academic colleagues were broadly aware of their privilege in terms of the ability to access such resources.

Functionality of digital primary sources

One of the key concerns is whether this ever-increasing development of functionality is leading to further ‘abstraction’ from the materiality of the original content carrier, be it archive or book. (Gregg, 2020) Publishers and vendors of licensed primary sources are increasingly aligning it with aspects of digital scholarship. The advent of additional and connected platforms such as Gale’s *Digital Scholar Lab* and ProQuest’s *TDM Studio* highlight a clear understanding that scholars are looking to do much more with the full text of these products than simply search, read and download. Typically, such platforms offer enhanced functionality such as advanced data mining, data clean-up, natural language processing and visualization. The Maynooth University experience would suggest that, while such tools may have merit for structured teaching, there is currently limited interest in such additional platforms and tools. Any research of this type which was noted in the consultation is working directly with unfettered access to full text and the presence of a software platform of this type might be considered an unwanted mediation. It is notable that even the basic functionality built into a DAC is seen by publishers and vendors as ‘added value’ but such value comes at a cost.

Importance of context in digital primary sources

The need for publishers to offer some guidance as to their editorial and curatorial processes is very clear based on the findings. Publishers

undertake this in various ways. Gale for example offer both expert penned essays, case studies and video material to allow for greater understanding. ProQuest also offer case studies and whitepapers as well as some contextual information for each database. If the importance placed on this by Maynooth University scholars is representative, then it may be that more explanatory content of this type is merited. It should be noted that this is an issue for primary sources on the internet generally, not just with licenced content.

Preference for original versus digital primary sources

Ultimately, there is clear evidence that the academics consulted still prefer to engage, where possible with the original source.

This is consistent with findings elsewhere. Malkmus (2010) noted that engagement with the original was still considered to be more ‘authentic’. The view of Sandra Roff (2007), that such engagement engenders a “thrill of discovery” reaffirms the Maynooth University view. Interestingly these opinions, with a focus on materiality, can be seen as a clear refutation of the idea proposed nearly a century ago by Binkley that the content was more important than the container. For Binkley, the researcher

... does not care whether they are printed or typewritten or in manuscript form, whether durable or perishable, whether original or photostat, so long as they are legible. Whether the edition is large or small, whether the library buys, begs, or borrows the material makes no difference to him so long as he can have it in hand when he wants it

(Binkley, 1936 p. 21)

It is worth noting that arguments against this view are not new and not solely restricted to digital platforms; as far back as 1970, Walter Benjamin was arguing that any reproduction of a cultural object, or work of art ‘detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.’ (Benjamin & Arendt, 1999, p. 21) In relation to primary sources, such an argument has great weight and for many users there remains a clear distinction between the reproduction, which is best described as ‘content’ and the original, which is a valid cultural object with inherent materiality (McGann, 2006).

In this regard, the question posed by Deegan and Sutherland (2009, p.157), where they asked ‘*Under what circumstances or what purposes is a facsimile a satisfactory surrogate for the object itself? ... Are we preserving features of the objects themselves or only the information they contain?*’ continues to be apposite. Just as we give due regard to the original object, perhaps, as McGann (2006) contends, we need to recognize what we might call the ‘digital materiality’ of DACs and considering them as a

technologically enhanced surrogate is reductive. As McGann notes “*The unique use of the digital medium, broadly considered, is the capacity to computationally trace patterns across corpora of various sizes, to draw these materials into computable synthetic relations at macro as well as micro levels.*” (McGann, 2006, paragraph 33). McGann was referring to an archive from an earlier point in the evolution of such things, but the overarching point has, if anything, become even more valid. These platforms are fluid and evolving and an appreciation of how they mediate the primary source can only assist in understanding how we relate to them. As Cordell (2017) has illustrated, the role of OCR in comprehension actually can be seen to represent an evolution in the original text – for better or worse.

Beyond issues of marginalia, and magical awe however, it is debatable whether any technological platform can ever replicate the engagement on a physical level which occurs between a reader and a physical source – the caution which may be required, the turning of a page. Ultimately the key question will remain, is the researcher satisfied with content, or do they need something more?

Discoverability of digital primary sources

The findings in Maynooth bear some similarity to those of Barrutia et al. (2020) who note the challenges in discovery, especially with time poor academics. Furthermore, these issues can be placed in a broader sea-change in terms of discovery with licenced platforms. In the last half decade, there has been an increased move from vendors toward ‘*platformisation*’, whereby previously standalone products are incorporated into larger platforms with enhanced functionality which can be applied to all available online collections. This process is not cosmetic and as shown by both Centrelli (2012) and Gregg (2020) there is a clear impact on search functionality. What this means for libraries that hope to direct readers to such content via their own discovery platform is not yet clear, but it would seem logical to conclude that the problems noted by the academic in the Maynooth University exercise are likely to continue.

Conclusion

The results of the consultation in Maynooth University suggest that both the experience and the understanding of the role and benefits of the DACs provided by the University Library do not deviate substantially from other academic libraries internationally, based on the literature. There is evidence of variety in use, with different resources proving more popular depending on whether they are used for teaching or research. Given that Maynooth,

as with other Irish universities is both a teaching and research intensive institution, it would be interesting to see if such patterns manifested in institutions with a greater focus on one or the other. The relative lack of interest in either the ability to find these resources as part of a broader discovery exercise may be because the respondents are all well versed in using such resources on a case by case basis and for precise, specific tasks. What was particularly noteworthy was the lack of interest in most additional functionality as opposed to the strong view of the importance of some form of clearly articulated outline explaining how the content was curated, what was included or excluded and what gaps may be evident. In this regard content truly is king, with functionality coming a very distant second. This point, coupled with the clear preference for original primary sources suggests that despite being power users, the respondents retain a desire for the 'awe' of engagement with originals. As such, it is clear that there remains a critical role for the library to proactively enhance understanding of how these digital collections can be used in tandem with original collections. The use of these resources in Maynooth reaffirms the point that these resources will typically see 'narrow and deep' usage, comparable to their physical equivalents. In terms of collection development, this is important, as any determination of 'return on investment' must be considered over an extended period, as would be the case with a physical archive for example. While the findings from Maynooth show that these resources can benefit teaching, research, student intake and grant funding, it is imperative that there is as much certainty around what dividends the investment will yield as early as possible.

As part of this, from the library perspective, there remains a need for more consideration of the DAC as something more than just the surrogate. As Cusworth, Hughes, James, Roberts, and Roderick (2015, p. 242) notes: "To be valid and essential, digital delivery of special collections must form the basis for an enriched and alternative engagement with content and offer research opportunities not available through using the analogue original on its own." This is a critical point and while the feedback from the Maynooth University community suggests some understanding of the distinction, it appears that the unique strengths of the digital collection are held in less regard than those of the originals. Although Maynooth University has a Humanities Institute with a history of digital engagement, projects have been research focused and, until recently tended to use bespoke local digital corpora, rather than engaging with large scale, commercially provided datasets.

While a broader investigation into the use of licensed digital primary sources will provide greater understanding as regards their use on campus to support critical skills and digital literacy, it was beyond the scope of this research. It is clear however, that as part of any promotional efforts in this

area, the library should emphasize the unique advantages of these resources and their potential role in developing critical, digitally literate students across many disciplines, not just among those who might traditionally engage with primary sources.

ORCID

Hugh Murphy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0597-6742>

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Appendix 1: questions from consultation

- Please select which of the following resources you have used in your TEACHING (list provided)
- Please select which of the following resources you have used in your RESEARCH (list provided)
- Please note any other digitized primary sources which the library provides that you have used
- These resources often have a good clear narrative explaining the creation of the resource and the editorial/curatorial decisions taken in its creation. How important do you consider this to be? (five stars being 'essential')
- These resources can offer additional 'operational' functionality. Please select any options which you have availed of in your work (list provided)
- These resources offer additional functionality to enable searching and comprehension. Please select any options which you feel have been of clear benefit in your work (list provided)
- Vendors of these resources claim that by subscribing to them a library is enhancing access and 'democratising the study of the past'. However they still require you to be an MU staff/student to access them Do you think this is accurate - please note your thoughts
- Original primary sources may pose challenges in terms of how to access successfully, navigate, and explore in-depth (for example, limitations in finding aids, impenetrable

text, lack of knowledge of the language). It may be said that digital primary sources address these challenges by providing modern interpretations, full text, metadata and tools to enhance exploration and usage. In your opinion, does this enhance access to more 'marginalised' or 'undiscovered' source material?

- Do you feel these resources are easy to find via the library website? Please note any comments or suggestions which might help make them more discoverable
- Given the choice, would you elect to use a digitized primary source over an original, physical primary source? If so, why?
- Please note any other thoughts or comments you may have about our digitized primary sources.