

November 2017

# Primary Sources as a Vital Part of An Academic Library Collection: The University of Denver Experience

Michael Levine-Clark

*University of Denver Libraries*, [michael.levine-clark@du.edu](mailto:michael.levine-clark@du.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Levine-Clark, Michael (2017) "Primary Sources as a Vital Part of An Academic Library Collection: The University of Denver Experience," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 5, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7837>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# Primary Sources as a Vital Part of An Academic Library Collection: The University of Denver Experience

by Michael Levine-Clark (Dean, University of Denver Libraries) <michael.levine-clark@du.edu>

Primary source collections matter because they allow students (at whatever level) to work with original sources and to come to their own conclusions about how events may have happened in the past. This process forces students to think critically about those events, and gives them a grounding in history that can allow them to confidently question interpretations made in secondary sources. Primary source collections are valuable for the greater understanding they give to students about the particular topic they are studying, but perhaps more importantly, they are valuable because they give students insight into how the research process works and confidence to question interpretations made by other scholars.

At the **University of Denver**, we have invested heavily in digital primary source collections from a range of vendors, and our reference librarians have worked closely with our special collections librarians to integrate print and digital primary sources into a variety of humanities and social science courses. Our investment in these resources has led to high levels of engagement by students and faculty.

Many of the primary source collections we have acquired were produced by **Adam Matthew**, and in talking to them about our experiences with primary sources, we decided that it would be worthwhile to do a study of primary source usage worldwide. I have been analyzing data, and we will soon publish a white paper. As part of this study, we have identified similar successes at other institutions, which we will present as case studies linked to overall usage data. Faculty are making very creative use of primary source collections, engaging students in the research process, and helping them understand the value of going to the original source. It is clear from these case studies that universities get great value from the primary source collections that libraries are providing. A case study from the **University of Denver** is presented below, but first it is worth understanding why the university has made such a strong commitment to these resources.

## Uncovering a Need

Like many undergraduate history majors, I was required to conduct original research using primary sources and write a senior essay, a semester-long research paper, in order to graduate. I came up with a topic — the relationships between two short-lived mid-nineteenth century English utopian communities that were constantly fighting with each other — and identified as an important source the

*Working Bee*, and *Herald of the Hodsonian Community Society*, a newspaper published by one of these communities. Luckily, because I went to school in Connecticut, I was able to easily get to New York City, where **Columbia University** and the **New York Public Library** each held half of the brief run, and which were the only libraries I could identify in the United States that held this title. I could not have done this project without this newspaper, and if I had gone to school somewhere else in the country, I probably would have had to change my topic (though now the newspaper has been digitized and is widely available via **Gale's *The Making of the Modern World***). Years later, as a reference librarian working with senior history majors at the **University of Denver**, I was reminded of this experience, because students would regularly come up with fascinating topics (much more fascinating than mine!) but because we were often unable to identify primary sources that were accessible without travel they had to revise their topics or abandon them altogether.

Both of these experiences influenced me as a collections librarian, and when publishers began to release digital primary source collections, we committed to buying them in bulk. Though one impetus for this strategy was the wish to get better pricing, a much bigger motivation was the desire to provide the widest range of primary source content possible to our students so that they would have more options available for conducting original research in the humanities and social sciences. We acquire all of the primary sources collections produced by the major vendors, giving our students a wide variety of options when

they want to do a research project, and always negotiate a substantial discount. While it may seem somewhat extravagant to purchase \$10,000 or \$20,000 collections speculatively, we regularly purchase equivalent amounts of books in hopes that they will someday be used. Our philosophy, as we acquire these collections, is that primary source content is just the sort of material we want available for potential use. We are paying for perpetual access, and if significant use does not happen right away, we are not bothered. We recognize that some of these collections will get low use, but we also understand that what appears to be low use, may in fact be intensive use by a single user that forms the basis for a major research project.

## Primary Source Training for Users

As we have acquired more and more digital primary source collections at the

**University of Denver**, we have become more successful at working with faculty to develop assignments or entire courses that take advantage of these resources. Our reference librarians team up with our special collections librarians to introduce both print and digital primary sources to the students, who then work with either or both types of material.

One successful course at the **University of Denver** is a seminar on World War I, taught by **Professor Carol Helstosky**, who revised the course in 2015 to place a greater emphasis on primary sources. During this course, Arts and Humanities Librarian **Peggy Keeran** conducts two sessions on searching primary source databases, and **Kate Crowe**, Curator of Special Collections, and **Jeanne Abrams**, Curator of the Beck Archives, which document Rocky Mountain Jewish history, each oversee a visit to Special Collections. Students bring two print or digital sources to every class, where they discuss these sources in depth. At the end of the quarter, they write a paper that analyzes the primary sources they have identified and a final paper that utilizes those primary sources. **Keeran** created a libguide<sup>1</sup> that identifies a range of resources for this course, with the *First World War Portal*,<sup>2</sup> a collection of primary sources, highlighted as the main resource. In the first year that this course was taught, usage of this collection increased by over 600%. It is clear, when comparing usage at Denver to usage of *First World War Portal* worldwide, that embedding a resource in a class like this can be very successful. For example, there were 819 PDF downloads from the *First World War Portal* at Denver in 2016, compared to an average of 28 at other institutions.

## Usage Trends

When a resource is used this heavily the patterns of usage (and not just the volume) differ from what is typical. **Figure 1: Comparative Usage** (see p.28) compares broad patterns of use for all **Adam Matthew** collections worldwide (see top image), with *First World War Portal* worldwide (middle image), and with **University of Denver** usage of *First World War Portal* (bottom image). Several patterns immediately stand out:

- A lower percentage of usage involves visiting the home page, indicating that more activity happens on every visit to the *First World War Portal* — students are spending more time on the site.
- Students are spending less time overall browsing the document list and more time searching.

*continued on page 28*



**Primary Sources as a Vital Part of An Academic ...**  
from page 26

- Document views (whether online or as a PDF download) account for a lower percentage of overall use, and page views account for a higher percentage, indicating that students are reading more pages per document than the norm. This is truly immersive use.

The data show that students made heavy use of the *First World War Portal*. Feedback from the first time the course was taught in the fall of 2015 shows how much students valued the experience of using primary sources. In summarizing the feedback, Helstosky notes that,

Most students agreed that the emphasis on primary sources gave them a deeper understanding of the war. Several students went out of their way to find soldiers' diaries and trench journals, for a "very real" understanding of what it was like to be involved in the war.... One student said she felt like she was "taking charge" of her education in this class. Quite a few students stated that this approach made them "better scholars," in particular, students noted how they had never questioned secondary sources before this class; once students found primary sources of their own, they began to question some of the assumptions and arguments found in secondary sources. Class discussion determined that historians take different approaches to sources and therefore arguments, history is more of a debate or conversation, not a matter of being right or wrong.<sup>3</sup>

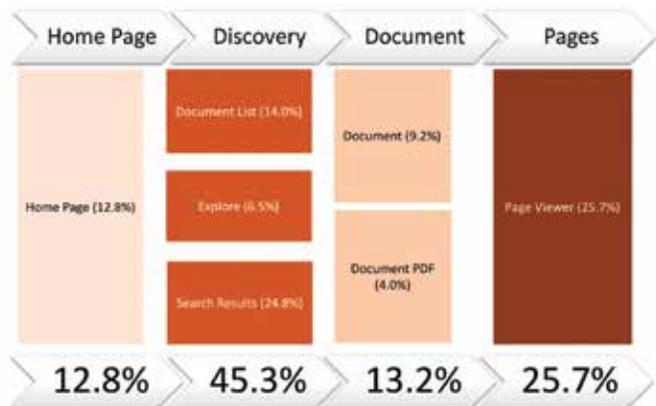
For the students in this class, the experience of using primary sources was truly transformative.

Primary source collections can provide students with a much deeper understanding both of the topic being studied and of the process of doing research. Our experience at the **University of Denver** has shown that building a large collection of digital primary source collections creates unique opportunities for collaboration with faculty in developing courses and that students value these courses tremendously. While this experience of a single institution is instructive, the data we are gathering for the study of worldwide usage of **Adam Matthew** primary source collections will help to place that local usage in context; hopefully providing a more nuanced understanding of how primary source collections are used at a wide range of institutions. 🌳

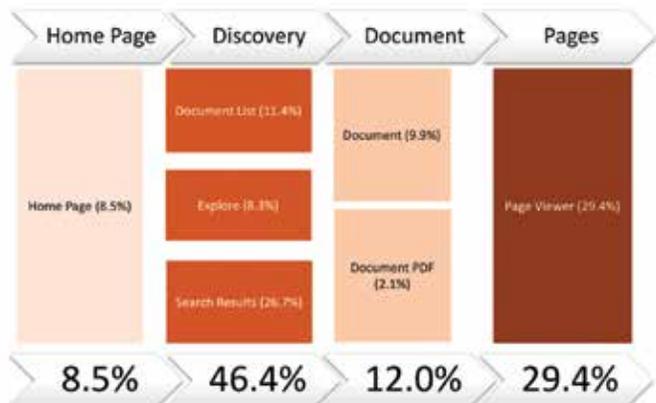
**Endnotes**

1. *Hist 1360: World War I: Home*, <http://libguides.du.edu/firstworldwar> (accessed May 17, 2017).
2. *The First World War*, <http://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk> (accessed July 5, 2017).
3. Email from Carol Helstosky to Michael Levine-Clark, December 7, 2015.

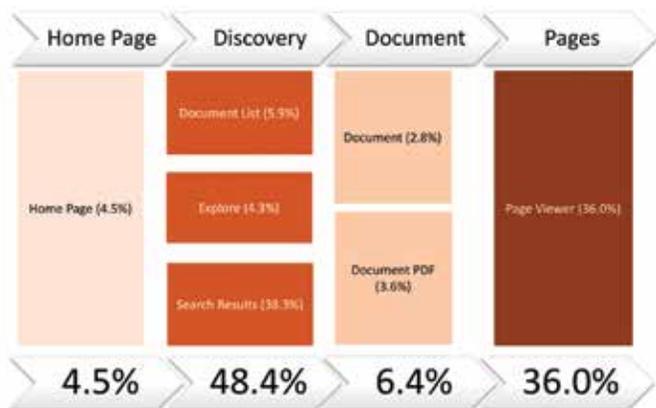
**Figure 1: Comparative Usage**  
**All Collections Worldwide**



**First World War Portal Worldwide**



**First World War Portal at the University of Denver**



Some types of use are not included so percentages do not add up to 100.

**Rumors**  
from page 8

of the reviews in *TCA* and *Choice*, ccAdvisor is a brand new database which will also review open-access resources, public websites and tools and is designed to be a guide for faculty and students to assess the resources and evaluate information databases. "What a wonderful way to mark our 19th year of

publication for *TCA*. We are very pleased to be working with *Choice* to bring our reviews to the new ccAdvisor platform," says **Becky Lenzini**, President of **The Charleston Company**. For more information visit [choice360.org/products/ccadvisor](http://choice360.org/products/ccadvisor).

More excitement! We at *ATG* have decided to launch **ATG Media** and have decided to put our toe in the open access waters. We are launching the **Charleston Briefings, Trending Topics for Information Professionals**. These

are no more than 50-page monographs. For our first launch in Charleston, we will have *Peer Review: Reform and Renewal in Scientific Publishing* (Adam Etkin, Thomas Gaston, Jason Roberts); *Library Marketing: From Passion to Practice* (Jill Stover Heinze); *Reading in a Digital Age* (David M. Durant); and *Library as Publisher: New Models of Scholarly Communication For a New Era* (Sarah Kalikman Lippincott). The *ATG*

*continued on page 34*