

Manuscripts Online: Written Culture 1000-1500 - DIGITAL RESOURCE

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[Manuscripts Online: Written Culture 1000–1500](#) [2] is an online gateway to digitised primary sources on medieval written culture. The website collects existing resources behind an interface similar to that of a library catalogue. Initially funded by the JISC, *Manuscripts Online* is a collaborative project between staff at the Universities of Sheffield, Leicester, Birmingham, York, Glasgow and Queen’s University Belfast, and is an exciting example of where collaboration between institutions and across disciplines can generate a much-needed resource for research. Indeed, the team behind *Manuscripts Online* sets out the aim in their accompanying information to the website to ‘make tentative steps towards changing the culture of manuscript studies’ by allowing ‘user generated content’.⁽¹⁾ This aim is clear in the presentation and layout of the website which provides tools for researchers to exchange comments on resources hosted by *Manuscripts Online*, to search all the resources for keywords such as geographical areas and names, and it raises awareness of the digital material available to medievalists by listing and describing the 21 resources available through its platform.

Although *Manuscripts Online* is not the first project of its kind – its sister site *Connected Histories* provides the same function for resources 1500–1900 and is also funded by the JISC – this search engine is unique in that it provides the same service for textual sources of an earlier period (1000–1500) and could prove invaluable to medievalists wanting to access the vast array of digitised primary sources hosted in various locations across the web.⁽²⁾ Due to the wide-ranging nature of the digitisation projects hosted by *Manuscripts Online*, some would prove difficult for researchers to locate without prior knowledge of them. In placing these innovative projects in one place *Manuscripts Online* makes textual material more accessible for medievalists who otherwise might not come across these projects without typing the right keywords into Google, or having easy access through their institutional libraries. *Manuscript Online*’s non-subscription access is also important to its function in demystifying the range of resources out there, and its accessibility means it has potential to not only be used by academics, or those studying at universities, but also by those

outside academia with an interest in medieval history. Consequently, *Manuscripts Online* paves the way in creating an online community of those interested in medieval textual culture, and facilitates this through its user participation functions, which create potential for the website to become a world-wide forum for academic discussion on its hosted resources.

The resources the website provides access to include some of the most important digitisation projects to the study of medieval textual culture. These include both websites that host digital images of manuscripts, early printed texts and transcriptions like *The Auchinleck Manuscript* project and *Early English Books Online*, and also websites which hold descriptions of archival material relating to a certain category of textual culture like the *Geographies of Orthodoxy* project and the British Library's extensive *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*. *Manuscripts Online* gives the researcher the ability to search across all of these resources at once, saving time spent between databases, and raising awareness of the variety of resources available for research. The resources searchable through *Manuscripts Online* are openly listed and described, making it very clear to the user what databases are accessible and those that are not hosted. This also means that the limitations of *Manuscripts Online* which only hosts 21 of the large number of extant digitised resources are clear to users conducting research through the website.

The home page of *Manuscripts Online* is clear and well presented providing a useful synopsis at the top:

Manuscripts Online enables you to search a diverse body of online primary resources relating to written and early printed culture in Britain during the period 1000-1500. The resources include literary manuscripts, historical documents and early printed books which are located on websites owned by libraries, archives, universities and publishers.(3)

This makes clear the purpose of the site to bring together already existing resources, rather than generating its own original content, and also states its primary purpose: to make these resources searchable. Below this synopsis is the simple search bar that enables you to search by keyword, place, person or reference, and by date. Usefully, it is also possible to use non-Latin characters within the search like the thorn and yogh, and in a function familiar to EBBO users can 'include variant spellings'. These two functions mean that the search facility is designed to cope with the variety of Old/Middle/Modern English, French, and Latin words that might appear in sources hosted by the databases this website acts as a gateway to. Furthermore, for a specific or complicated search there is a simple link at the top of the page to 'Custom Search' where multiple search criteria can be combined, for example: place, person and date or keyword, date and reference. Within their 'search tips' the makers of *Manuscripts Online* usefully describe the search logic in order to make gaining the appropriate results for the researcher easier. This includes tips such as putting quotation marks around a whole phrase, or putting in '*' as a substitute for characters in order to get more results.

However, despite these well-designed search functions it seems generating consistent results in searches was problematic for the developers, and is described as 'the greatest challenge' for the project in its final report accessible on the homepage.(4) Not only did the team have to overcome the problem of non-standardised spellings, and the various languages used in the hosted websites which include variations of English, Latin and French, they also had to overcome the incompatibility of some of the digital resources which have been created at different points, might not have been maintained, and which might only be available through subscription.(5) There are two ways in which the variations both in the language within the sources, and between the hosted databases are overcome in the infrastructure behind the search function. The first is through the parsing of each keyword to generate variant forms that include both dictionary variants and generated variants through the substitution of characters with their possible alternatives (yogh for y for example).(6) The second is through the development of Natural Language Processing algorithms that are appropriate to the multi-linguistic, non-standardised texts that *Manuscripts Online* searches so that languages, places, dates and documents could be accurately identified, categorised and searched for.(7)

In order to test the functionality of the search infrastructure, it is useful to give some examples of a search

from my perspective as a user from their target audience of postgraduates and academics. First a simple search is conducted, then a custom search, and the variations, usability and usefulness of the results are assessed. In a simple search for 'Becket' with the 'include variant spellings' box ticked '2019 results in 19 resources' are found. Usefully, the resources in which the search terms are found are listed, with the number of results for the keywords in each detailed alongside them. In addition, there is the opportunity to narrow down the search results by category (literary or non-literary manuscripts, for example), by format, by date range, access type (free or subscription resource) or by dictionary variants of the search term (for Becket: 'beket, becket and bekat'). This system of narrowing down results is familiar to any user of a library catalogue and so is very intuitive for the user. The 'Custom search' function is also easy to navigate and by putting 'Thomas Becket' within quotation marks, and selecting 'Free/No Subscription' databases only, a narrower '55 results in 4 resources' were found, thus making it a useful function in order to gain specialised results. However, although searching for a specific subject like 'Thomas Becket' works well, searching for a general noun such as 'wife' using variant forms and across all resources is problematic. Not only are '19135 results in 19 resources' found for this term, they are across a bewildering array of websites. For a user interested, for example, in the use of the word 'wife' within medieval textual culture this kind of result could prove difficult to unpick without a good knowledge of the nature of the resources hosted by *Manuscripts Online*.

Outside of the search functions, other useful aspects of *Manuscripts Online* to explore are the user participation functions. With the move to web-based resources for research comes an exciting opportunity to create online communities of people interested in the material a website hosts. This opportunity is gradually being embraced by developers of history resources, notably in projects such as 'Annotated Books Online', which enables users to transcribe and add to annotations on printed books and in the online edition of Pepys' Diary, in which users engage in discussion about diary entries.⁽⁸⁾ *Manuscripts Online* provides this kind of user participation function on a personal level and a communal level. In terms of personal interaction, by creating an account it is possible to use the 'workspace' function which gives researchers the ability to save search results and search paths. The save search paths function is particularly interesting because it enables the user to understand how they got certain results, and thus increases awareness as to the importance of using a variety of keywords, variant phrases and spellings in order to get the most accurate outcome for someone's needs. In terms of communal participation, the user can add comments to sources shown within their search results, and pin a location to their comment. By pinning a comment to a location, the commenter can choose to make this visible on the map, meaning that anyone using the website can view comments related to a resource which has been associated to a geographical area. Due to the Open Access nature of the website the information contained in these locational tags has the potential to reach a wide audience – both those interested in finding out about a particular resource, and those beginning research on a particular geographical area. This function also enables users to layer up comments about a source which could create a patchwork of information already known about a resource to be used by future researchers as a starting point in their own understanding.

However, within the three comments currently tagged on the map and made public, the scope for varying levels of engagement with the sources hosted by *Manuscripts Online* is clear. These range from a description of a manuscript sold at auction, to a comment about the Gough Map which demonstrates more of an enthusiasm at a search result: 'Wow! My home town of Chesterfield on a medieval map!'⁽⁹⁾ As such, it seems *Manuscripts Online* has the potential to reach audiences outside of its target audience at academic institutions, and to both formally and informally engage its users as a result of its Open Access interface. However, the drawback to this system is that it has not been embraced by users: only three comments have been tagged on the map since the website launched in January 2013. Although this could be due to users being unwilling to pin their search results to a geographical area, it could also be due to the usability of this function. At present, the information about the relevance of geographically tagging a comment is hidden under 'map' then 'comments' rather than there being an obvious forum where users can engage in discussion about their findings. Either this function needs to be made clearer on the homepage of *Manuscripts Online*, or it needs to be redesigned in order to allow users to tag their comments in other categories, because it is not always easy nor relevant to tag a result to a geographical area, particularly if this is not the researcher's main

interest. As such, allowing someone to tag a comment under person, date, or theme might be a useful way of getting more people to engage with the participation function. It would also help to have a page dedicated to information about how to use these participation functions, in order to describe how they might be useful to a researcher.

As such, although *Manuscripts Online* does have the potential to be a resource that evolves with its users, there are some key draw backs in its success which lies not only in its lack of user participation, but also in its limited expansion. When *Manuscripts Online* was launched in 2013, it included 21 resources and in the 'About the Project' page the team wrote that there would be an update in the summer of 2013 with more resources added. However, it seems this update did not happen, the website is still on version 1.0 and no resources have been added since the website's launch, nor indeed since the initial intended list of resources placed on the project blog in 2011.⁽¹⁰⁾ For a database that could be a hub of digital resources for the medievalist, this is a great shame and means that recent, innovative digital resource projects like *Medieval Swansea* and *Mapping the Medieval Countryside* are not included.⁽¹¹⁾ The limited expansion of *Manuscripts Online* seems to be due to the fact the project's JISC funding phase is over so the project does not have the income to add new resources, meaning that there is now a fee charged to digital projects in order to be hosted by the website.⁽¹²⁾ Without obvious growth and development, however, it is difficult to see how new projects could risk investing their own funding in order to place their resources on *Manuscripts Online*. Despite its obvious advantages and promise as an essential resource for those wanting to access the numerous and far flung resources on medieval textual culture, and its ability to connect researchers, *Manuscripts Online* suffers from an issue of longevity in a world where digital resources develop, update and move on quickly. This means that to ensure future success it must keep up to date with this developing landscape of digitisation in order to provide users with the best experience of digitised medieval written culture. It is, then, a great shame that such an innovative resource has not put in place a funding structure to ensure its continued usefulness and expansion.

Although *Manuscripts Online* will continue to provide a useful starting point for researchers of medieval textual culture, due to its hosting of the largest digitisation projects covering the period 1000–1500, it must continue to grow in order to become the gateway to medieval textual culture it set out to be. With a reevaluation of its user participation functions, allowing a more varied interaction with search results, and perhaps some more digitisation projects added, an already innovative resource would become invaluable.

Notes

1. 'About the project', *Manuscripts Online* <www.manuscriptsonline.org/technical [3]> [accessed 30 August 2016].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Connected Histories* <<http://www.connectedhistories.org> [4]> [accessed 14 July 2016].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Home page, *Manuscripts Online* <www.manuscriptsonline.org/technical [3]> [accessed 30 August 2016].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Michael Pidd, Orietta Da Rold and Katherine Rogers, 'Final report' <<https://www.manuscriptsonline.org/bundles/hrionlinemanuscriptsonline/dow...> [5] [accessed 30 August 2016].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ibid, 'Challenges'.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See 'Searching consistently', *Manuscripts Online* <www.manuscriptsonline.org/technical [3]> [accessed 30 August 2016].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Ibid, 'Adding structure to search'.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See <<http://www.annotatedbooksonline.com/> [6]> and <<http://www.pepysdiary.com/> [7]> [accessed 7 September 2016].[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. 'Comments', <www.manuscriptsonline.org/comment [8]> [accessed 7 September 2016].[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See: Blog, 'What is Manuscripts Online?' <<https://manuscriptsonline.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/mssso-summary.pdf> [9]> [accessed 14 July 2016].[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. See: <<http://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/en/> [10]> and <<http://www.inquisitionspostmortem.ac.uk/> [11]

- > [accessed 14 July 2016].[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. 'Participate', <www.manuscriptsonline.org/participate [12]> [accessed 7 September 2016].[Back to \(12\)](#)
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Links

- [1] <https://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/52758>
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- [3] <http://www.manuscriptsonline.org/technical>
- [4] <http://www.connectedhistories.org>
- [5] <https://www.manuscriptsonline.org/bundles/hrionlinemanuscriptsonline/downloads/Manuscripts-Online-Final-Report.pdf>>
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