English Studies

ISSN: 0013-838X (Print) 1744-4217 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/nest20

Notes from the Transcription Desk: Visualising Public Engagement

Susan Schreibman, Vinayak Das Gupta & Neale Rooney

To cite this article: Susan Schreibman, Vinayak Das Gupta & Neale Rooney (2017) Notes from the Transcription Desk: Visualising Public Engagement, English Studies, 98:5, 506-525, DOI: 10.1080/0013838X.2017.1333754

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2017.1333754

ENGLISH STUDIES, 2017
VOL. 98, NO. 5, 506–525
https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2017.1333754

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Notes from the Transcription Desk: Visualising Public Engagement

Susan Schreibman, Vinayak Das Gupta and Neale Rooney

An Foras Feasa, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Letters of 1916 is Ireland's first public engagement digital humanities project. Begun in September 2013, it collects, digitises, transcribes, encodes and makes available through its electronic platform epistolary documents written about Ireland between 1 November 1915 and 31 October 1916. This paper analyses the volunteer community associated with the project, inspects the levels of its engagement, studies its interests and motivations, and considers how future projects can adapt this investigation into projects addressing community interactions. The basis for this inspection is a user survey carried out in Spring 2016, alongside an analysis of the transcriber community using data on transcriber activity from the beginning of the project in September 2013 to June 2016. The paper argues that the success of a public engagement project lies in the understanding of its community—an understanding derived within a critical framework, inspected through data analysis and communicated through visualisations.

1. Introduction

Letters of 1916 is Ireland's first public engagement digital humanities project. Begun in September 2013, it collects, digitises, transcribes, encodes and makes available through its electronic platform epistolary documents written about Ireland between 1 November 1915 and 31 October 1916. At the time of writing, letters in the collection have been contributed by 32 institutions and 54 individuals. Once letters are ingested into the system, the public are invited to transcribe, edit and encode them.[1] While community involvement is key to the development of the collection, unlike many other crowdsourced projects Letters of 1916 does not integrate rewards, badges or other game-like features into its website design. This approach to gamification[2] in crowdsourcing resonates with Michael Lascarides and Ben Vershbow who contest that "a tool that can deeply engage patrons directly with a collection and stoke their imaginations does not need to have a layer of gameplay

CONTACT Susan Schreibman susan.schreibman@gmail.com

[1]Through the online transcription desk the project facilitates the public using a limited tagset from the Text Encoding Initiative. These are largely for structural encoding, including paragraph marks, sic and underlining, and but it also includes tags common to letters, such as marking addresses, salutations and dates.

[2]Margaret Robertson challenges the term "gamification". As it stands, gamification indicates the utilisation of badges, points, pins and awards—items which games themselves utilise, but are not the defining feature of a game. Robertson instead proposes the term "pointsification".

added to it to in order to be successful".[3] The project has thus framed its outreach efforts as an invitation to the public to be part of the research process by revisiting their knowledge of the events of 1916 through a deep engagement with primary sources.

It also positions the public as co-collaborators with multiple roles. Since the project does not make available a single analogue collection in digital form, but is rather a synthetic collection from multiple sources (both public and private), the public are key to the project's collection strategy. Many families deposit digital copies of their personal letters so that their relations' stories can become part of a public, national narrative. The public are also encouraged to engage with the project in terms of transcription, editing and text encoding, the three activities enabled by the transcription desk (or the "Contribute" section of the website).

The goal of Letters of 1916 is to reassess the narrative of this period through the collection of letters (including postcards and telegrams) with a tangible link to Ireland. Through this document type, and through this method of collection, the project addresses the shifting of the discourse of Irish history into a more inclusive and complicated narrative. What we perceive from these documents is a story of conflicted loyalties revealing the complexity of a society that has often been reduced to a shorthand of Catholic versus Protestant,[4] while also revealing an aspect of life during this time which has been repressed—the ordinary and the quotidian.

The year 1916 was one of transition for Ireland: between its involvement in the Great War and the rise of militant nationalism, the country was divided by sentiment, separated by ideals. The year 2016 saw the centennial commemoration[5] of the Easter Rising[6] across Ireland. As a result, a more complex interpretation of the events that transpired in Easter week 1916 has entered the national consciousness and with it interest in the smaller and more personal accounts of those caught up in the ensuing violence.[7] The rhetoric of the letter presents personal perspectives and individual memory traces; the collected letters provide an insight into those fragmentary stories that, inspected together, constitute a collective consciousness.

This period is marked by two major conflicts; letters—written by those serving in the trenches to those on the home front, describing the quotidian and the extraordinary—shape how we view and understand this period. These are expressions of personal lives, of the everyday, and are significant in organising and shaping lives. These texts are products of interpretation and can be seen as motivated (letters written for a particular audience) and as accounts (letters that relate the experiential rather than the factual).[8] Letters are shared experiences that connect people across

[3]Lascarides and Vershbow, 130.
[4]See, for example, Ferriter, 338–9; and Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 453–5.
[5]The decade is being commemorated officially by the Government as the "Decade of Centenaries". For further information, see www.decadeofcentenaries.com.
[6]The Easter Rising was an armed insurrection launched by a minority of Irish nationalists against the British Empire in 1916. The Rising was largely contained to Dublin and was suppressed following a week of intense fighting. It is seen as the genesis of Irish independence from the United Kingdom.
[7]An example of this is Foster, *Vivid Faces*.
[8]Janet Gurkin Altman (p. 88) describes that

> In letter narrative we not only see correspondents struggle with pen, ink, and paper; we also see their messages being read and interpreted by their intended or unintended recipients. The epistolary form is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator).

geographical spaces.[9] The unique, personal perspective of the epistolary form challenges the perceptions of established history, questioning the role of memory and the acts of commemoration that this era suggests.

As a public engagement project, Letters of 1916 provides a vehicle for individuals to play a meaningful role in the uncovering of what has been, by and large, a silent history. Previous access to these letters range from *difficult* (the issues of finding and using a collection of letters in an archive or library), to *almost impossible* (collections held at institutions that have not allowed public access because their collections were uncatalogued or they have limited facilities for researchers), to *impossible* (as they are in private hands).

This paper analyses the volunteer community associated with the project,[10] inspects the levels of its engagement, studies its interests and motivations, and considers how future projects can adapt this investigation into projects addressing community interactions. The basis for this inspection is a user survey carried out in Spring 2016, alongside an analysis of the transcriber community using data on transcriber activity from the beginning of the project in September 2013 to June 2016. The paper argues that the success of a public engagement project lies in the understanding of its community—an understanding derived within a critical framework, inspected through data analysis and communicated through visualisations. The narrative presented in this article is created through a study of memory, commemoration and re-authoring and reinforced through the interpretation of contributor data.

2. Historical Overview

The Easter Rising of 1916 is arguably one of the most important events in Irish history.[11] On Easter Monday, 24 April, a small group of Irish nationalists rebelled against British rule, seizing several locations in Dublin city, and in doing so changed the course of both Irish and British history.

It only took the British a week to suppress the uprising. During the most intense fighting, a good deal of Dublin's city centre was destroyed. It was a largely unpopular military action, particularly with the Dublin poor who lived in the areas where fighting was most concentrated. Many of these poorer families had husbands, sons and brothers serving with the British forces in the various theatres of the Great War. The executions of the leaders of the Rising, which began 3 May, however, brought about a shift in public opinion, making martyrs of them and setting in motion a series of events, often violent, that resulted in Irish independence from the United Kingdom in December 1921.

Until fairly recently, the canon of Irish historiography portrayed the Rising as a fairly singular event, with the Great War and the complex role it played within Irish society virtually written out of history. For almost a century, families with relations who served in the war were largely silent on what was perceived as a stain on their Irishness, their loyalty to

[9]Altman, contemplating the form of the letter, contends that while letters connect two geographical points they also serve as a bridge between the sender and the receiver. The epistolary author can either choose to emphasise either the bridge or the distance (p. 13).

[10]As of May 2016 there are 1504 registered users on the Letters of 1916 site. These users transcribe, on average, 192,409 characters a month.

[11]The Bibliography of British and Irish History lists a total of 829 publications indexed under "Irish rebellion (1916)" up to 2015 (the last index available at the time of writing). See www.history.ac.uk/projects/bbih.

the Irish State. And yet, there is no doubt that the Great War provided the opportunity for those who planned the Rising to strike out against British rule while the British were distracted on two bloody fronts. Moreover, the rhetoric of Great War recruitment,[12] of laying down one's life for one's nation was co-opted by the leaders of the Rising who must have known their own action would result in nothing less than their own blood sacrifice.[13]

In 2013 Ireland began what is known as the Decade of Commemorations, beginning with the first major labour unrest, the 1913 lockout, and ending with a revolutionary war, Irish independence in 1921, followed by a civil war. The Letters of 1916 focuses on a sliver of time within this period: November 1915 to October 1916—six months before and after the Easter Rising. The goal of the project is not, however, to focus solely on these two major conflicts, but rather it is to situate these events within a larger societal framework and in doing so recreate a "year in the life" on the island of Ireland.[14]

3. Methodology

This article addresses the question of community engagement in Letters of 1916 from two distinct perspectives. The first employs a survey directed towards project contributors that attempts to glean individual motivations for participation. The second is an analysis of the data extracted from the Letters of 1916 database, to garner an elevated view of community participation. The primary interest of this form of investigation is to understand, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the interests and motivations of the user-community. While the survey addresses the thoughts, opinions and desires of individual volunteers, the data analysis considers the user-transcription data to provide a bird's eye view of the efforts of the community as a whole. The combination of these forms of inspection not only allows us to gauge the reasons behind the success of this project, but also to adapt and improve aspects to better work with the community that we have built. The methodologies used in carrying out these forms of investigation are described below.

3.1 Survey

The survey, carried out in April 2016, was inspired by Sharon M. Leon's analysis of the Papers of the War Department 1784–1800 community in which she identified six motivating forces for public engagement with their project:

[12]The rhetoric of laying down one's life for one's country, one's friends, is widespread in literature of the Great War. See Frantzen. Irish politician and supporter of Irish involvement in the Great War John Redmond used sacrificial rhetoric in 1915:

> [It] is these soldiers of ours to whose keeping the Cause of Ireland had passed to-day. It was never in worthier, holier keeping than that of these boys, offering up their supreme sacrifice of life with a smile on their lips because it was given for Ireland. (Finnian, 99)

[13]On blood sacrifice, Timothy Shanahan (p. 43) writes that "Pearse, perhaps more than any of the other leaders of the 1916 Rising, embraced the idea of the efficacious power of blood sacrifice. His martyr death would do more to advance Irish freedom than mere military victory ever could." However, rhetoric of blood sacrifice was not confined to Ireland. It also became a rallying point for Australians in understanding and commemorating their Sacrifice at Gallipoli as early as the first anniversary of the battle; Sheftall, 65–6.

[14]The Treaty of December 1921 which provided independence for 26 counties also stipulated that six counties in Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. The collection policy of Letters of 1916 includes all 32 counties.

> (a) a general interest in early American history; (b) a sense of civic duty; (c) a specific point of scholarly research; (d) engagement based on genealogical and family research questions; (e) various educational assignments; and (f) a curiosity about how the transcription tool and process worked.[15]

These observations were a result of community engagement with the transcription tool that the project developed, Scripto,[16] which Letters of 1916 adopted.

The Letters of 1916 survey included sixteen questions (see Appendix) designed to draw out both binary ("yes" and "no") answers and longer, more nuanced responses to provide additional context. These longer questions were intended to qualify certain trends in the community's interaction that had previously been speculated upon. These speculative trends included the presumed impact of the centenary upon transcriber motivation, the popularity of letters written by the principal figures of the Irish historical canon and the geographical spread of the community. The survey was distributed electronically to approximately 850 individuals who had registered as contributors and had indicated that they would be willing to receive communications from the project.

While carrying out this survey, we respected the anonymity of the community by asking limited personal information deemed important for analysis: gender, age (indicated within a range) and whether or not they are involved in the education sector (at first, second or third level). The responses, 47 in total, came from a variety of users including transcribers, letter contributors, teachers, and second and third level students. This represents two-thirds of the active users on the site in March and April 2016.

3.2 Data Analysis

This mode of examination provides a quantitative approach to understanding the user-community. The "Contribute" section of the Letters of 1916 website provides a mechanism for contributors to add new letters to the system (for those who own original letters, be they in private hands or archives) and transcribe letters previously ingested into the system. The resultant transcription data is stored in a MySQL database. The data on which this analysis rests was extracted on 1 June 2016 and reflects the progress of the project from September 2013 to May 2016. The data gathered from the MySQL database is cleaned and normalised in Google Refine.[17] A Linked Data model is created to express the relationships between the various fields in the database; Figure 1 describes this relationship. The "Rev ID" (contributor), the "Letter ID" (letter) and the page ID (page) express which transcriber has worked on which page of a particular letter. The letter is then related to the "Collection" (the major thematic subject) to which it belongs and is also assigned "Topics" (additional themes associated with each letter). Both the collection and the themes are manually assigned in Omeka. Each letter belongs to one primary "Collection" but may have multiple "Topics" assigned to it.[18] Both are manually assigned. This allows for an inspection of the specific themes that users transcribe in the project. A

[15] Leon, 89.

[16] Scripto is an open source transcription tool. The Letters of 1916 utilises Scripto in conjunction with the transcription desk developed by the University of Iowa Libraries, which, in turn, is built on Omeka, developed by George Mason University.

[17] Since team members also proof and edit letters, their contributions are manually removed from this dataset to ensure the integrity of the analysis.

[18] This is illustrated in the discussion on letter visualisations in the following section.

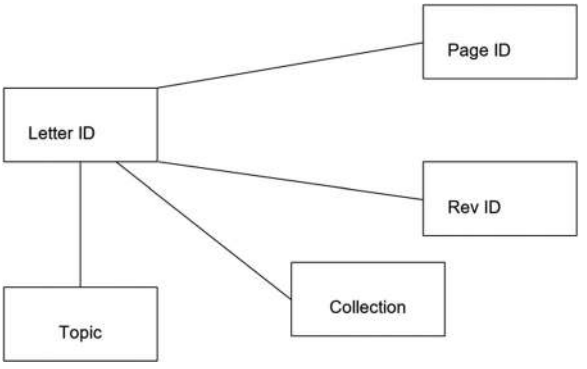

Figure 1. Data model for computational analysis.

further concern of this research is to investigate transcriber gender against topics. The MySQL database does not store the contributor gender (this is not asked for during the user sign-up process). To acquire this data, the first names of the contributors are reconciled against the Irish boy and girl names database from the Irish Central Statistics Office.[19] The outliers are manually reconciled. Following this, the contributor IDs ("Rev ID") are assigned a gender and then connected to the letters, pages, collections and topics following a similar process as described above.

The data models are exported as RDF/XML files and imported into Gephi.[20] In the visualisations below, the data fields are represented as nodes while the edges represent the relationship between the nodes. The data model is visualised using the continuous graph layout algorithm, Force Atlas.[21] The resulting graph is exported from Gephi as Graph Exchange XML Format and displayed using the graph-drawing library Sigma JS.[22] This allows the project to create browser-based, interactive graphs with selectable nodes and edges. The visualisations provided in this document are screenshots taken from the browser-based drawings.

A final concern for this research is to consider the temporal aspects of user contribution —the hours of the day and the days of the week that find particular affinity in user engagement. The essential reason for this inspection lies in our attempts to refine our outreach and public engagement techniques to address the peak activities over the course of the day and the week. To facilitate this, a "translation_timestamp" field is recorded in the MySQL database, which records the exact time that a user began the transcription process for a particular session. This data field records both the date and the time of activity. To perform the analysis, this field is split into two columns—one addressing the date and the other addressing the time. The date column is reconciled against calendar days to find the days of the week with the highest transcription activity. A similar approach is used for the column recording the hours of the day, which allows an inspection of the

[19]"Irish Babies Names," Central Statistics Office, accessed 21 June 2016, www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Database/eirestat/Irish%20Babies%20Names/Irish%20Babies%20Names_statbank.asp?SP=Irish%20Babies%20Names&Planguage=0.
[20]"Gephi—The Open Graph Viz Platform," accessed 30 June 2015, https://gephi.org.
[21]For further details see https://gephi.wordpress.com/tag/force-atlas.
[22]"Sigma JS," accessed 15 June 2016, http://sigmajs.org.

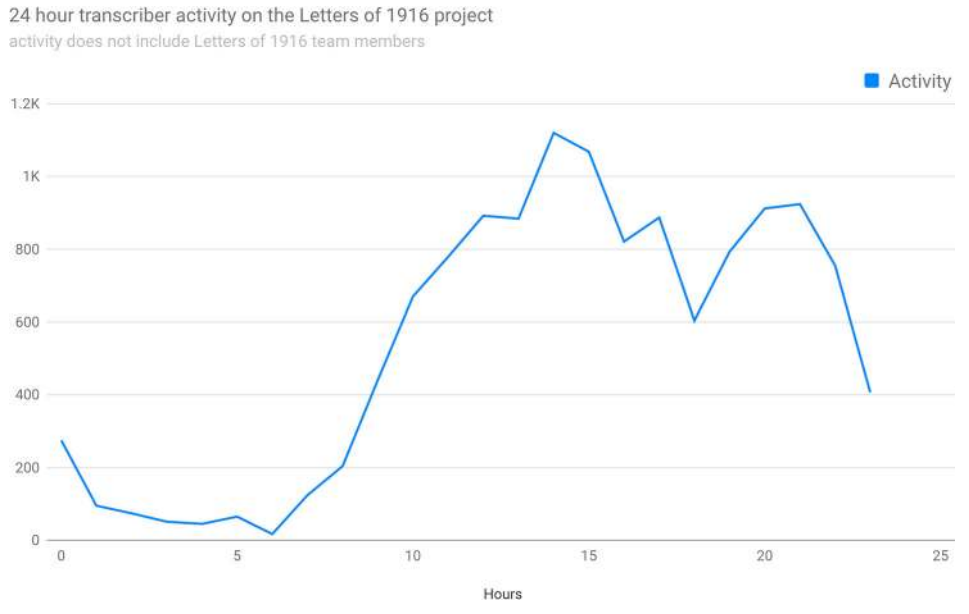

Figure 2. This is the aggregate total of the number of edits made by the transceivers over a twenty-four hour period. The peaks and troughs are illustrative of transcriber activity at any given hour of the day.

time of the day when users are most actively transcribing letters. Figures 2 and 3 are representations of this analysis.

The results of these analyses and the resulting visualisations are presented, analysed and discussed in the sections below.

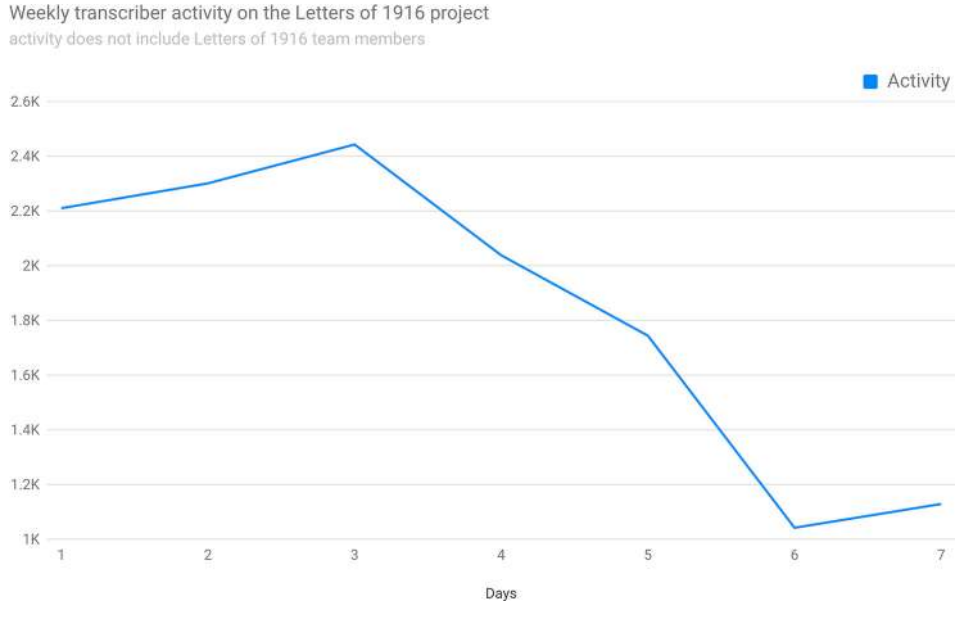

Figure 3. This is the aggregate total of the number of edits made by the transceivers over a seven-day period beginning on Sunday. The peaks and troughs are illustrative of transcriber activity at any given day of the week.

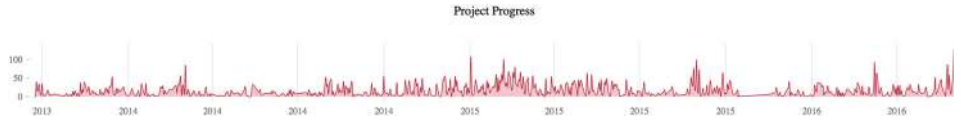

Figure 4. Illustration of the lifespan of the project from 24 September 2013 to 1 June 2016 (*x*-axis) and transcription activity through number of recorded transcription sessions (*y*-axis). This demonstrates the progress of the project in terms of transcriber contributions.

4. Commemoration, Memory and the Archive

The project displays a sustained interest on the part of the community. Figure 4 represents the progress of the project from its inception to 1 June 2016. The *x*-axis represents time (from 24 September 2013 to 1 June 2016) and the *y*-axis accounts for the number of recorded transcription sessions. As is evident from Figure 4, the project has managed to sustain the interest of the community since its inception. The reasons behind this continuous engagement lie, in our understanding, in multiple places. The project, framed within a seminal moment in Irish history, challenges the audience's understanding, and perhaps more interestingly, their memory of this time.

Andreas Huyssen suggests that towards the end of the twentieth century memory became a part of our cultural existence through the widespread popularity of the museum, the re-establishment of cultural edifices like the monument and the memorial as an aesthetic form.[23] He goes on to describe Western culture as being "obsessed with the issue of memory".[24] He questions the paradox that novelty in our culture is "ever more associated with memory and the past rather than with future expectation".[25] He identifies a crisis in the apparent dislocation of the ideological progress of society and the fast-fading functional purpose of history—the teleological aspects of historical knowledge; Huyssen suggests that the Nietzschean approach to archival history—as an apparatus producing knowledge for its own sake—often remove it from the connections that tie it to culture. This dislocation is bridged by another paradox: the mnemonic culture, nourished through a fetishism of the old, rejects the notion of archival logic and is, at the same time, dependent on the contents of the archive for its subsistence. The archive, as perceived by Derrida,[26] is the institutional passage from the private to the public, both an act and a space that is invested with power.

The documents that are housed within the archive (noun) or those which are archived (verb) are privileged over other documents which are not abstracted from their private residences. This is the logic of the archive. This understanding is, however, problematised when we consider the recent growth of digital archives that preserve, catalogue and make available digitised and born-digital material. The question of vested power, as Derrida claims, can be challenged in these repositories whose motivations may be different from the space that Derrida engages with. Letters of 1916 is a memory project, a digital archive that collects, catalogues and makes available these letters with a rigour not dissimilar to archival methods. While previous access to these letters has been significantly

[23]Huyssen, 6.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid, 7
[26]Derrida and Prenowitz

difficult, the narratives within these present individual memory traces, when reflected upon, challenge the canonical narrative of events. This is confirmed by responses to the survey. The following is representative of this perspective: "I found it very moving that Uncle Wesley's letter had been accepted as genuine and valued fragment of Ireland's history. It was almost as if I had been accepted as Irish for the first time." The engagement of the project with this notion of memory is one that needs elaboration.

Plato's *Theaetetus*[27]—a dialogue between Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus—concerns itself with the nature of knowledge and the difference between knowledge and perception. Plato's model of the wax tablet[28] introduces a series of distinct, if related questions, pertaining to memory. First, memory seems to have both active and passive components. For Socrates, the act of remembering is primarily active: it is when we want to remember that we subject the block to the perception or the idea and stamp the impression into it.[29] However, as Paul Ricoeur points out, the notion of the imprint also involves "the external causality of an impetus … which is itself at the origin of pressing the seal into the wax".[30] Memory, then, seems to be uncertainly suspended between that which we wish to retain, making a conscious effort to do so, and that which impresses itself upon us so that it is more passively experienced and undergone. Letters of 1916 presents a corpus that challenges the "passive" memory of the year 1916—that propagated through the canonical narrative—with an active engagement with not only the voices of the canonical figures, but those at the margins. The engagement of the public not only to experience the collection, but to *actively* participate in its formation is the effective force behind its formulation. The answer from one respondent to the survey echoed that of several others when she wrote that the project provided her with "Closer contact with people of the time rather than at second hand through history books". While archives select and curate through specific authorities, Letters of 1916 prefers a more democratic approach, encouraging the public to contribute through donations of letters, transcription of documents and the encoding of letters. The acts of transcribing and encoding transform the community of volunteers into a collective that is greater than just a recipient of information. This idea of action within the project can be taken further as we consider the minutiae of decisions that need to be made in the production of a machine-readable copy of the digitised letter-image. The unravelling of quirky handwriting, the considerations during the encoding process and the reviewing of transcribed documents allow the community to construct this resource with great influence, leaving what might be a deep impression on Plato's wax tablet.

The association of memory with this project may be seen in two separate aspects. In the first instance, the letters are individual memory traces presented in their unique epistolary form; they are reflections on individual experiences, from the minutiae of everyday life

[27]Plato.

[28]In seeking to distinguish between thought and perception, Socrates explains that objects of perception are a succession of constantly changing awareness, whereas objects of thought are those objects of perception to which we have given some degree of stability by imprinting them on the mind. In order to explain further, Socrates uses the metaphor of a wax tablet. He asks Theaetetus to consider the mind as a block of wax. To convert an object of perception to an object of thought, this block of wax is held under the perception to imprint it, stamping the mind with an impression of the object (as one would do with a seal ring). Memory and knowledge of what has been imprinted lasts as long as the impression on it remains.

[29]Plato, 99–100.

[30]Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 51.

between friends and family, in business dealings and in interactions with government officials, to an unprecedented view into what life was like in a troubled time. The letters are assigned specific topics: "World War 1: 1914–1918", "politics", "Patronage", "Official documents", "Love letters", "Last letters before death", "Irish question", "Family life", "faith", "Easter Rising Ireland 1916", "crime", "Country life", "City and town life", "Children", "business,", "Battle of the Somme" and "Art and literature".[31] A distribution of the letters and topics can be seen in Figure 5. The coloured nodes represent topics while the black nodes represent letters. The letters cluster around specific topics to which they belong; some letters exhibit multiple topics and find themselves located between the topic nodes that they belong to (Figure 6). This visualisation allows a distant view of the thematic distribution of the letters. The size of the topic nodes are dependent on the number of letters belonging to that particular theme. The contributors to the project have the option to choose letters from these particular topics—a low-level filter to select letters by thematic interest.

The wide gamut of perspectives and authors[32] provides contributors the opportunity to engage with multiple aspects of life in 1916. Perhaps it is the quotidian nature of many of these letters that appeals to the volunteer community—subjects that are relatable and solicit empathy within the minutiae of everyday life. For instance, the letters of Marie Martin, a Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse aged twenty-one at the time of the Great War, appear to be a community favourite.[33] Martin's letters cover a multitude of themes from the Great War to reflections with her family in Dublin. A snapshot of how the community has transcribed and encoded the Marie Martin letters may be seen in Figure 7. The central yellow node represents Marie Martin and the grey nodes represent the letters she writes. The black nodes clustering around the grey nodes are pages of those letters. The red nodes are the individual transcribers of each page. The size of the nodes relate to the number of pages they have contributed to. It is interesting to note that 43 different people have transcribed, edited or encoded the Marie Martin letters. It is also interesting to note that most letters have multiple contributors; these provide early indications of a collaborative approach to transcriptions and encodings in public engagement projects such as Letters of 1916. A similar pattern may be seen across the entire project with the majority of letters being transcribed and encoded by multiple contributors.

Moreover, contributors typically shared with us during face-to-face interactions[34] the roles they assumed. For example, one participant at an outreach event described how she had assumed the role of editor. At the time, it was difficult to find letters that had

[31]The terms are collected from the Library of Congress' vocabulary (which accounts for the irregular capitalisation of the terms). It should be noted that a single letter may have multiple topics but only a single collection. In August 2016, two further topics were added to the project—"Suffrage" and "Medicine". These are not reflected in the research as the represented data is from 1 June 2016, prior to the addition of these new terms.

[32]As of 1 June 2016, there are 1233 unique authors in the collection.

[33]Our survey, surprisingly, shows that 14% of the respondents thought Marie Martin to be the most engaging author; their interest in Martin's letters is significantly more than in those of Roger Casement or Padraic Pearse—important political figures at the time—revealing that there is a place for the quotidian in memory studies. Another possible reason for the popularity of the Marie Martin letters, though in no way contradictory to the previous insight, may stem from it being one of the older and larger collections digitised by the project.

[34]These include Upload Days when members of the transcriber community are invited to come to Maynooth University for an afternoon to help with adding letters into the transcription desk, or during one of the project's many outreach events across Ireland.

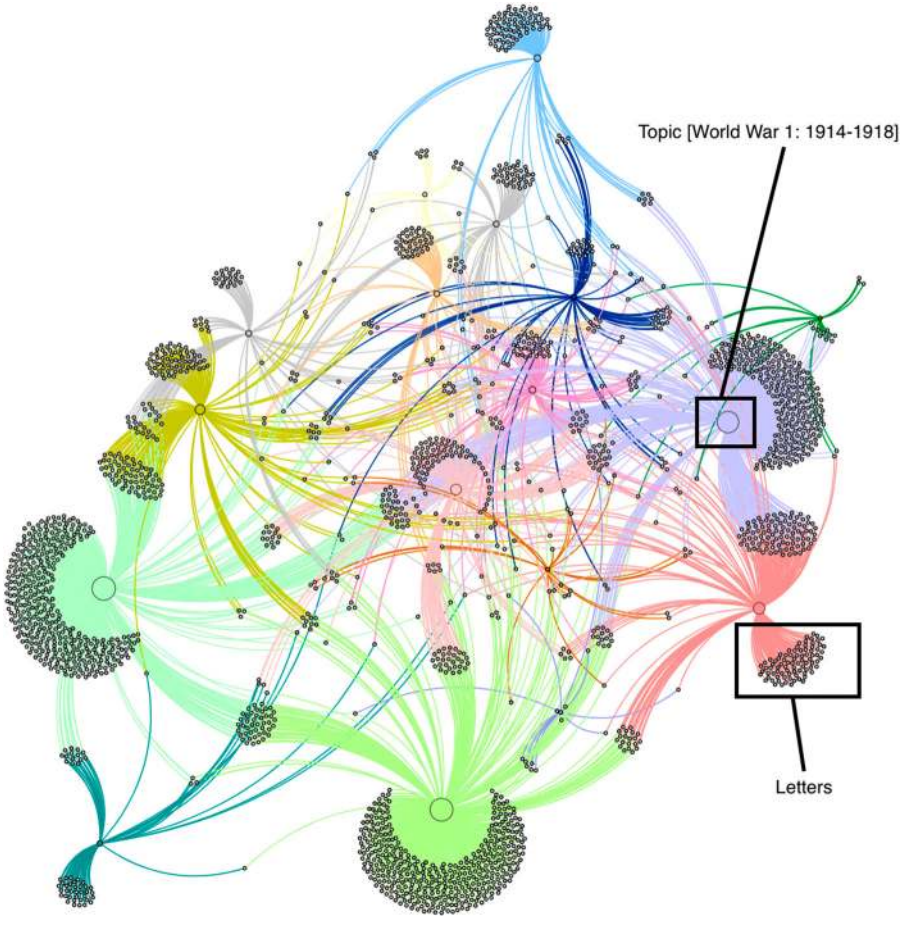

Figure 5. This illustrates the distribution of the letters into topics that are assigned to them. The black nodes represent letters while the coloured nodes represent topics. For instance, the purple node on the right represents the topic "World War 1: 1914–1918". The nodes that cluster around the larger, coloured nodes belong to that topic. The visualisation also reveals that a single letter may be assigned multiple topics.

not been transcribed through the transcription desk interface. Rather than waste time searching for letters, she edited previously transcribed letters and shared with us a small notebook in which she kept track of the letters she had previously edited. Another practice the project adopted was to tweet when help was needed in transcribing a letter that was not written in English. Typically, within minutes these letters would be transcribed, and when the letters were in Irish, the project frequently received emails from Irish speakers asking how they could find more letters to work with. The survey attempted to tease out these specific roles within the community (Figure 8). The majority of users who engage with the site do so as transcribers. This distribution of roles is not surprising as transcribing is the easiest and most intuitive community-based activity facilitated by the site. A cross-project inspection of the collaborative nature of these efforts might provide more

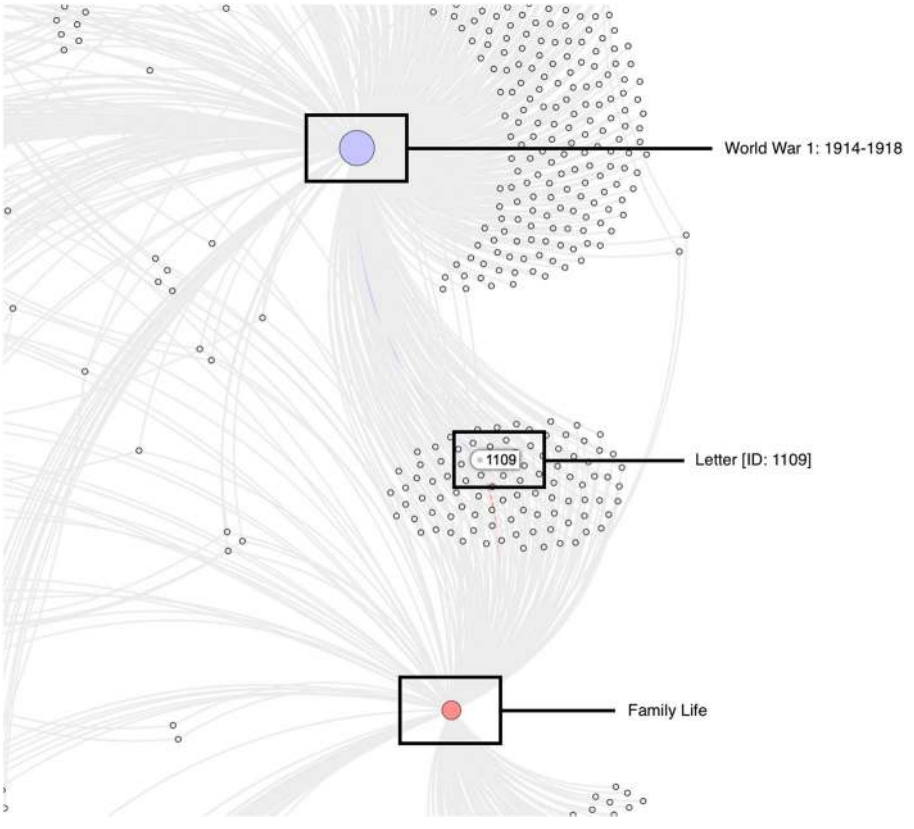

Figure 6. A close up of the topics and letters. Letter ID 1109 belongs to both the purple topic (World War 1: 1914–1918) and the red topic (Family life).

evidence of the nuanced nature of community engagement and could be an interesting area of investigation in future.

Regarding the second aspect in which memory is associated with this project, the centenary of the Easter Rising locates the project within a socio-political space where memory assumes a ritualistic form. Paul Connerton's seminal work on the means of societal remembrance considers the importance of commemorative ceremonies as an approach to investigating social memory. Connerton, along with other commentators in the field, argues that memory emerges as a dialectical relationship with forgetting. Memory, like history, is not merely invested in the past but also with the legitimisation of a politically desired future.[35] Benedict Anderson and Hayden White suggest the need for a narrative to create the image of the nation along the principles of historical continuity and homogeneity. This narrative allows the nation to be imagined as a continuous ideal even if commemorations focus on specific events with substantial temporal spaces in between. Forgetting, then, is a structural necessity in the creation of a national image.

[35]Papadakis, "Nation, Memory, and Commemoration," 254.

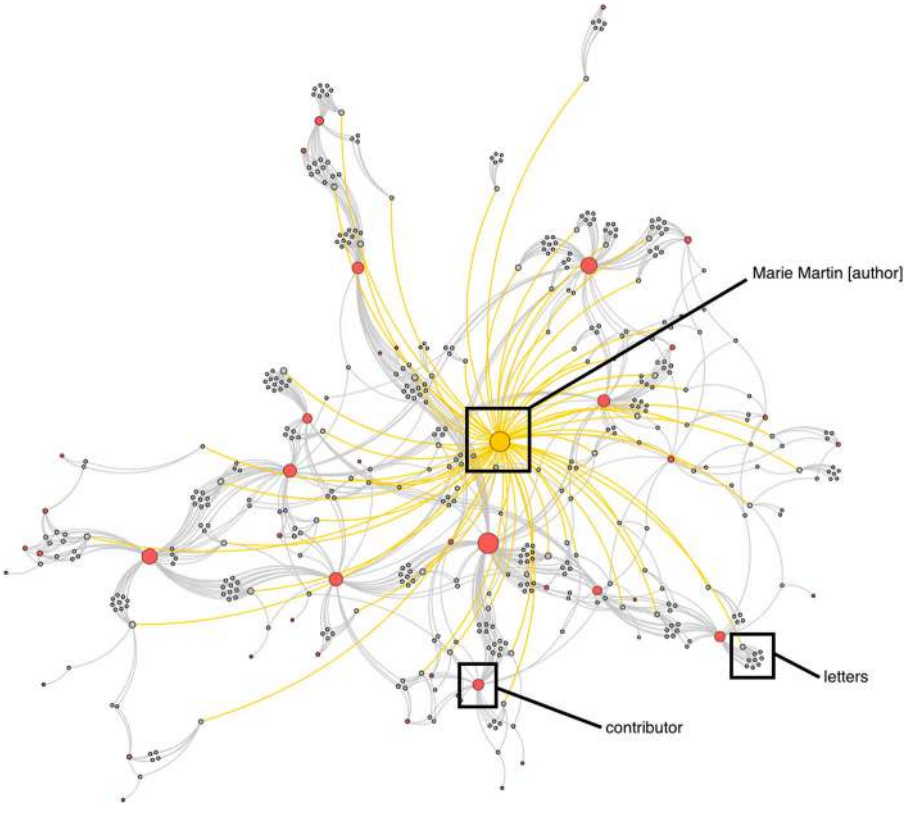

Figure 7. Public engagement with Marie Martin letters. The author is represented by the central yellow node, contributors by the red nodes and the letters (and pages of letters) by grey nodes.

The Easter Rising, a key event in the formation of the Irish state, remains an event in public memory even though the quotidian details may be forgotten. The centennial commemoration presents a narrative, as Anderson and White recognise, that addresses the complex motivations behind national identity; Letters of 1916 takes into account the year around the Rising and presents multiple narratives from individual perspectives

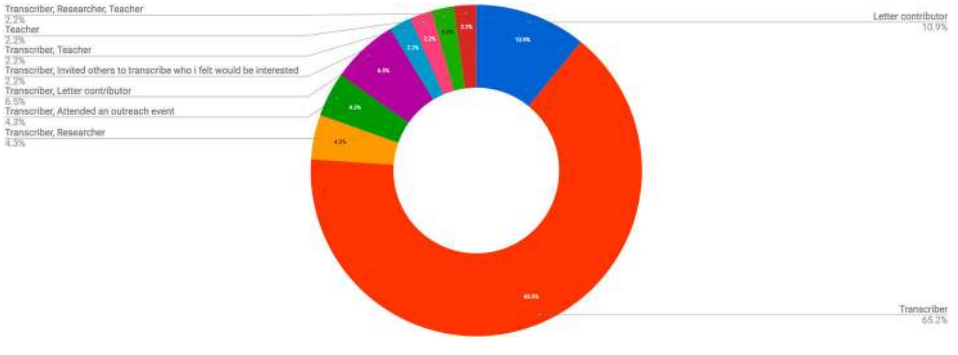

Figure 8. Breakdown of roles adopted by the community from the Spring 2016 community survey.

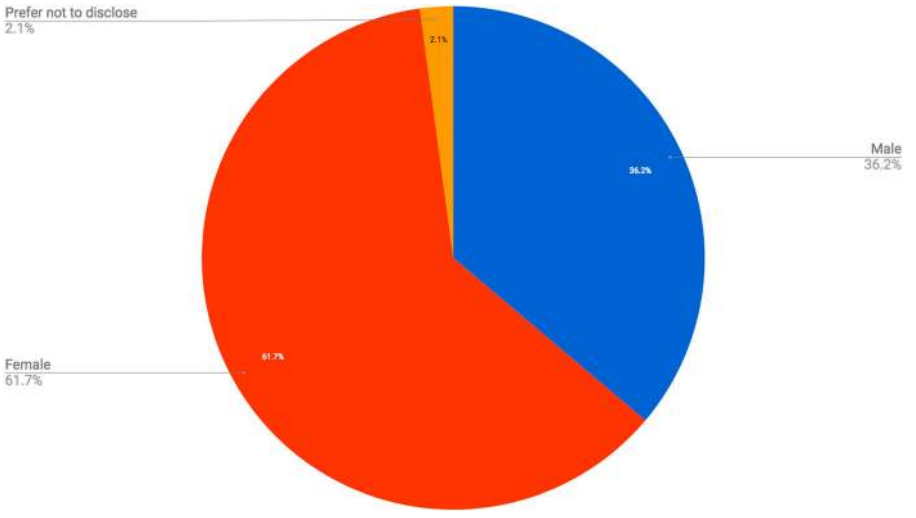

Figure 9. Gender breakdown from the Spring 2016 community survey.

that bridge space and time. The project gathers from across institutions leading to a collection that affords a varied sample that adds to the fabric of the larger national narrative framework. The commemoration of the event, as reflected in parades, television and radio documentaries (both in Ireland and abroad), wreath-layings, re-enactments and readings of the Proclamation, approaches a ritualistic mode to remembering the events of 1916. The success of Letters of 1916 may be thought to be closely tied to the acts of forgetting and re-remembering the sequence of events leading up the Rising and the episodes that transpired after. The centennial commemoration is the impetus that drives the community to engage with the letters in a sustained manner. A curious result of the analysis is presented in Figures 2 and 3, which reveal the hours of the day and the days of the week that the community transcribes most.

An inspection these visualisations reveals that transcribers actively engage in the process of transcription between 10am and 6pm and again between 6pm and 7pm. Also, the users transcribe from Monday to Wednesday (a steady rise in activity) and a steady decline in activity till Friday. Saturday is the least active day for the transcription community. The almost ritualistic adherence to the transcription work displays a community that is invested in the resource as a part of daily life. A clue to this might come from the user survey: a majority of users who answered were in the 55–65 age group. Moreover, a majority of the respondents are female (Figure 9). This is confirmed by the data analysis, which also indicates that there is a higher number of female users registered on the site.[36] Consequently, the female members of the community transcribe more than their male counterparts, as evidenced in Figure 10.

The analysis has also informed the basis of social media campaigns. Since the project is now aware of when and how the community participates, it is easier to target communication on the days and hours that users are most active.

[36]According to the data analysis, 71% of the registered and active transcribers are women while 29% are men.

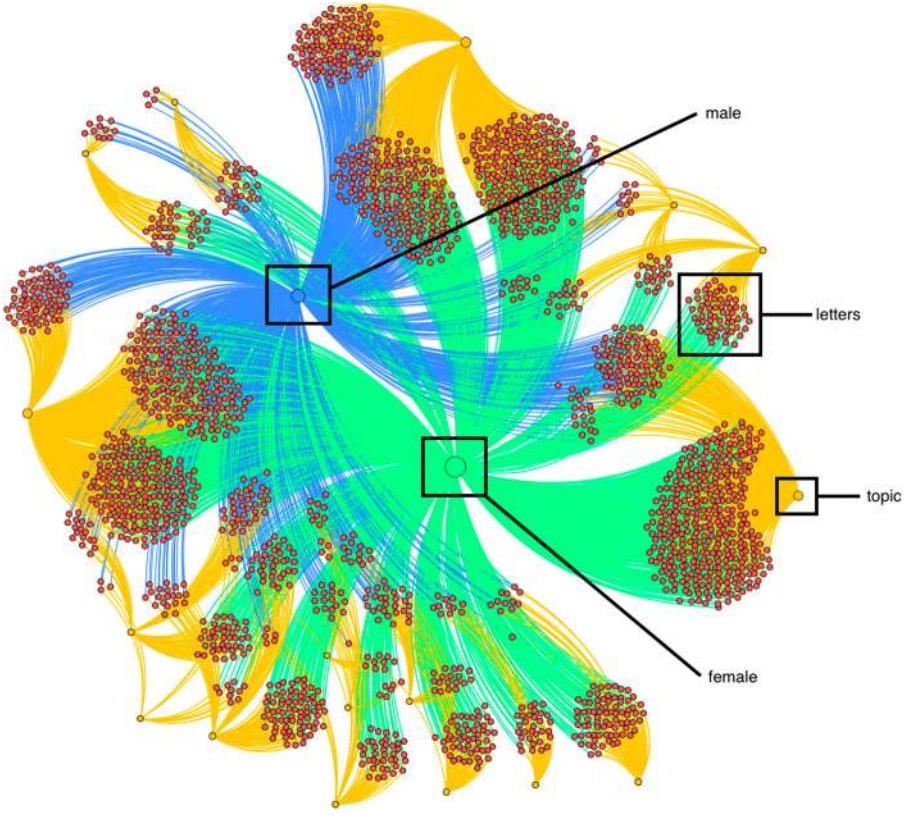

Figure 10. This illustrates how male and female volunteer transcribers engage with the Letters of 1916 collection. The green node represents female transcribers and the blue node represents male transcribers; the red dots are individual letters and the yellow nodes represent topics assigned to these letters.

5. Transcription as Re-authoring

The question of *why* these community members transcribe the provided documents is a question that is perhaps the most difficult to answer with any certainty, despite the results of the survey and the data analysis. While it is possible to quantify participation or derive an understanding through a more qualitative approach, it is difficult to, unfalteringly, ascertain the stimuli behind it. What we are able to provide is, at best, conjectural, even if it is grounded in statistical data and focused questionnaires. It is important to state, at this point, that the participation of the community in these forms of public engagement projects is in no way philanthropic; it is, absolutely and necessarily, motivated. The successes of these kinds of projects do not lie in some idea of networked benevolence, some wilful notion of generosity on the world wide web. The desire to transcribe is rooted in purpose, but not in material gain.

The survey shows that, in some part, the motivation of the participant may be derived from a personal relationship to the letters or to the authors. Whether it is an affinity towards the author of the letter or looking to discover how those in the past lived, their interests are persuaded by some form of personal association. A second motivation may

be observed in a more objective, intellectual inquiry into the events of 1916—a motivation present in professionals and enthusiasts alike. One survey response echoes this sentiment:

> No other engagement with primary source material has afforded me a greater sense of this breadth than the "Letters of 1916", where so many of those tiny instances of otherwise non-recorded and voiceless people can be traced in their own writing, or in writing pertaining to them.

However, if we choose to look beyond these (in)tangible motivations, we may consider the very act of transcribing—typing out someone else's letter—a subject that might provide a fertile ground for this line of investigation. Letters are a conduit from the past that impinge on our present, conveying a mosaic of life lived, messy and complex, eschewing our notions of a collective past that tends to be (one might argue, by necessity must be) summarised and flattened by narrative.

Letters are singular in the manner in which they communicate this narrative. We argue that there is a degree of embodiment on the part of the volunteer when transcribing or, perhaps, re-authoring these documents. The act of re-writing these letters in the electronic medium provides a degree of engagement with the narrative of the letter that is closer than the mere act of reading. If we choose to think of transcriptions not merely as mechanical actions but as investments that are intimate, we may think of the transcriber appropriating or embodying the role of the author. Transcriptions, then, are acts of re-authoring, an intimate engagement with the narrative for which the transcriber is both the witness and the author. Janet Altman Gurkin provides a sustained examination of the use of epistolarity in novels, revealing the complex relationships between the author and the reader of letters—tracing the dynamics between authoring, reading and re-reading epistolary documents. She identifies the central questions around these acts of authoring and reading:

> With whom does the reader identify—writer, addressee, or editor—and what are the determinants of reader identification in the letter-reading experience? Do epistolary narratives have particular ways of playing to (or against) the reader's desire for mastery, his creative pleasure in coordinating fragments, his voyeurism?[37]

Re-authoring these letters, then, further problematises this specific discourse. The transcriber is, at the same time, the reader, the editor and, arguably, the (re)author of the letter. The act of re-authoring is reclaiming or reviving a forgotten voice, a lost narrative; the fascination of being privy to the (often) private correspondence between individuals, the ability to re-author these documents and the unique power to present to the world a document that provides a varied perspective on a relevant, historical narrative are important (albeit, subconscious) motivations behind the act of transcription. While this may be difficult or, indeed, impossible to quantify with computational techniques, the success of Letters of 1916 is, surely, connected with the unique form of the epistolary document.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that this digital archive has benefited from a seminal moment in Irish history. Indeed, a motivating force behind the timing of the project was that it invited active participation in the years leading up the centenary of the Rising, as well as

[37] Altman, 193.

having a strong presence as a memory resource in the landscape of commemoration projects. That it works to reveal the intricacies of a period has also resonated with the public and professionals alike.

The popularity of letter writers such as Marie Martin, individuals who have previously existed outside the scope of the national narrative, is surprising. Martin's popularity highlights an active interest in social history. However it also suggests that the community seeks "new" narratives—stories from the past that challenge our collective memory. As a VAD nurse aiding the British war effort, Martin's letters provide a vehicle for introspection—a means to delve into one's own concept of national identity. Marie's own descendant described this experience at the launch of Letters of 1916 in March 2016:

> For my own part, I found myself intellectually a nationalist, possibly even tipping over into a small part republican in my thinking, but I always felt in some way apart and disconnected from the then prevailing narrative of the events of 1916 … Mary Martin's diary and later the 1916 letters of her daughter Marie gave me for one, a sense of social and national identity that up until then had been incomplete.

Marie Martin's popularity indicates a level of personal investment in the life of an ordinary person caught in an extraordinary time. Despite her writing from the Front, her letters to her mother contain the minutiae of the everyday, her worries and hopes, gossip, news of friends and relations, which appeals to a wide range of individuals.

The community's engagement with the project is not necessarily philanthropic: they engage for a purpose. One survey respondent described his/her involvement as having afforded

> an opportunity to contribute & in some way "pay back" to all of those people who in the past spent hours doing that work in dusty old libraries in the past and having it available online made it so much more open to so many more people.

Their involvement is one of influence and social responsibility—the community creates the digital archive so that they, as well as others, may later avail themselves of a resource of value. One respondent, an archivist, commented, "[I am] fully aware of the lack of resources available for transcription and digitisation, I think this is a fantastic project particularly as it makes the public aware and to get involved in preserving their heritage".

The community is not a resource and their involvement should be valued. There are many ways Letters of 1916 values its community: from inviting top transcribers and those that deposit virtual copies of their family's letters into the archive to write "guest blogs", to calling out their contribution on our top monthly contributor page and tweeting our thanks, as well personal thanks through many face-to-face outreach events, from inviting the public to workshops at the university, to visiting schools and giving lectures, not only in Ireland but in cities with large diasporic Irish populations.

This research has revealed a more nuanced insight into how and why the public chooses to participate in social engagement projects. An inspection of the *how* through data analysis corresponded with the *why* as ascertained by the survey. The challenge for Letters of 1916 is to fine tune our engagement to support both project and contributor goals while creating a resource that the community will value for many years to come.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Susan Schreibman http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8782-0794

References

Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1991.

Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques, and Eric Prenowitz. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63.

Ferriter, Diarmaid. *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000*. London: Profile Books, 2005.

Finnian, Joseph P. *John Redmond and Irish Unity: 1912–1918*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004.

Foster, R. F. *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*. London: Penguin, 1989.

——— *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923*. London: Allen Lane, 2014.

Frantzen, Allen J. *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Lascarides, Michael, and Ben Vershbow, "What's on the Menu?: Crowdsourcing at the New York Public Library" In *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, edited by Mia Ridge. London: Ashgate, 2014.

Leon, Sharon M. "Build Analyse and Generalise: Community Transcription of the *Papers of the War Department* and the Development of Scripto." In *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, edited by Mia Ridge, 89–111. London: Ashgate, 2014.

Papadakis, Yiannis. "Nation, Narrative and Commemoration: Political Ritual in Divided Cyprus." *History and Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2003): 253–270. doi:10.1080/0275720032000136642.

Plato. *Theaetetus*. Translated by R. Waterfield. London: Penguin Classics, 1987.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Robertson, Margaret. "Can't Play, Won't Play." [cited 12 September 2016]. Available from http://kotaku.com/5686393/cant-play-wont-play.

Shanahan, Timothy. *The Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Morality of Terrorism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

Sheftall, Mark David. *Altered Memories of the Great War: Divergent Narratives of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada*. London: IB Tauris, 2009.

White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Appendix: Survey Questions (with pre-defined response fields) from the April 2016 Letters of 1916 Survey

(1) Gender
   (a) Male
   (b) Female
   (c) Prefer not to disclose
(2) Age
   (a) 15–25
   (b) 25–35
   (c) 35–45
   (d) 45–55
   (e) 55–65
   (f) 65+
(3) Are you affiliated with an educational institution (e.g., university/school)?
   (a) Third Level (University)
   (b) Secondary School
   (c) Primary School
   (d) None
   (e) Other
(4) Country of residence (if Ireland please specify a county)
(5) How have you interacted with the project (please tick as many as appropriate)?
   (a) Transcriber
   (b) Letter Contributor
   (c) Researcher
   (d) Teacher
   (e) Attended an outreach event
   (f) Other
(6) How did you first hear of the Letters of 1916 project?
   (a) Word of mouth
   (b) Volunteer Ireland
   (c) Social Media
   (d) Traditional Media
   (e) Referral from other website
   (f) Other
(7) Why did you decide to participate in the Letters of 1916 Project (please tick as many as appropriate)?
   (a) Interest in Ireland
   (b) Looking for ways of contributing to a history project
   (c) Interest in using one's talents for the public good
   (d) General interest in the events of 1916
   (e) Interest in being part of a successful public history project
   (f) Learning a new skills (e.g., Metadata, xml encoding, transcription)
   (g) Ability to participate in a digital project from home
   (h) Other
(8) How often do you visit the Letters of 1916 site to transcribe a letter?
   (a) Daily
   (b) Weekly
   (c) Monthly
   (d) Yearly
   (e) Never
(9) How do you choose letters to engage with?
   (a) Search by theme

(b) Search by author
(c) I work on the first untranscribed letter I find
(d) I look for uncompleted letters to finish
(e) I prefer to edit fully transcribed letters
(f) I find a letter that interests me
(g) I like to engage in xml encoding of letters
(h) Other

(10) If you choose to transcribe/edit letters by their author, is there a particular author whom you follow (please indicate who)?
(11) Do you have preferred thematic collections that you engage with (please rate out of 5, with 5 being the highest)?
(a) Art and Literature
(b) Battle of the Somme
(c) Children
(d) City and Town Life
(e) Country Life
(f) Crime
(g) Easter Rising
(h) Faith
(i) Family Life
(j) Irish Question
(k) Last Letters before Death
(l) Love Letters
(m) Official Documents
(n) Patronage
(o) Politics
(p) World War 1
(12) Has interaction with the Letters of 1916 material changed your understanding of the events of the 1916 period (if so please tell us how)?
(13) Did your interaction with the site facilitate or inhibit your experience?
(a) I found the site easy to use, it was easy to find letters to transcribe.
(b) I found the site awkward to navigate, it was difficult to find new material to transcribe
(c) Other
(14) Have you participated in/attended a Letters of 1916 outreach event (tick as appropriate) If not, please disregard question 15.
(a) SFI Galway
(b) SFI Enniscorthy
(c) SFI Cork
(d) SFI Belfast
(e) SFI Letterkenny
(f) Kildare/Maynooth launch
(g) Trinity Launch
(h) 2014 Teachers Workshop
(i) 2015 Teachers Workshop
(j) New York Consulate St. Patrick's Day Launch
(k) RTÉ Reflecting the Rising
(l) None
(m) Other
(15) Has your participation in this event changed how you interact with/use the project (if so please indicate how)?
(16) Is there anything else that you'd like to add?