# DePaul University Special Collections and Archives

# Report for the
# Society of American Archivists'
# *Jump In* Electronic Records Initiative

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**Institutional Context**

DePaul University Special Collections and Archives Department (SPCA) holds 12,000 rare books and well over 3,000 linear feet of archival records. Archival holdings consist of DePaul's University Archives (DPUA); Manuscript Collections (MSS) of community and personal papers; and the DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archive (DRMA), documenting the Western Province of the Congregation the Mission – DePaul's founding religious order.

SPCA's staff and administrators are acutely aware of the need to preserve the born-digital content we already hold, or will undoubtedly acquire. We have discussed how to address the challenges associated with acquiring, preserving and providing access to this content, and have worked to secure funding and staff. As of April 2014, we are still in the very early stages of envisioning, and developing, an infrastructure that meets our requirements.

Participating in the *Jump In* initiative has provided us with opportunities to: 1) test our assumptions about the media – and their content –already present among our records; 2) begin to assess whether and/or how consistently this media has been tracked in existing collection descriptions; and 3) begin dealing with real content in our collections, rather than deal exclusively in necessary, though abstract, "best practices." Our assumption has been that lessons learned, and decisions made, about the pool of records identified as part of our *Jump In* inventory will point the way to dealing with digital content we have yet to discover or acquire.

**Preparing For and Conducting the Inventory**

Two full-time professional staff members led the inventory of physical media, dividing the collections by personal expertise: University Archives in one group, with Manuscript Collections in the other. The DRMA collections were excluded from this initial review based on staff knowledge of the records, and low incidence of media among them. We immediately narrowed our focus to media in described collections, excluding media in unprocessed accessions, as well as media that may exist in processed collections but was never mentioned in a finding aid. This was a conscious decision to focus on records with the highest likelihood of discovery by a researcher (and trolling through hundreds of boxes looking for undescribed media seemed like like poor use of our time).

We had planned to locate media via keyword searches in Windows Explorer (making use of its "Search again in: File Contents" option), going so far as to build a list of keywords including "disk," "disc," "CD," "DVD," "electronic," etc. We quickly abandoned this method in favor of a manual review of the finding aids. While more time-intensive, there was no risk that we would "miss" a piece of media that might be only obliquely referred to, or described in a way we were unable to predict. The manual review might also illuminate how media had been described in the past, rather than imposing (and being limited by) the terms we would use at this moment in time. Collections flagged for media were slated for a physical review to confirm the presence of media, and gather more details about storage capacity, formats, etc.
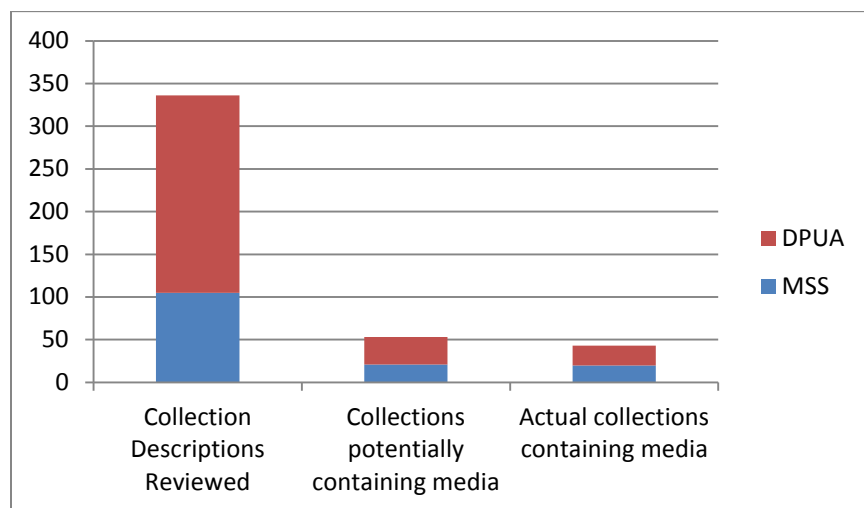
Though we took on the *Jump In* challenge precisely because of what we did not know, we did have a few assumptions or ideas about what we would find, including:
- An expectation that there would be a significant amount of audiovisual materials contained on CDs and DVDs.
- An assumption (by one staff member) that anything contained on 3.5 inch diskettes would merely duplicate paper records that had also been transferred to the Archives.
- An expectation that University records would contain many floppy discs, whether 3.5 or 5 inch.
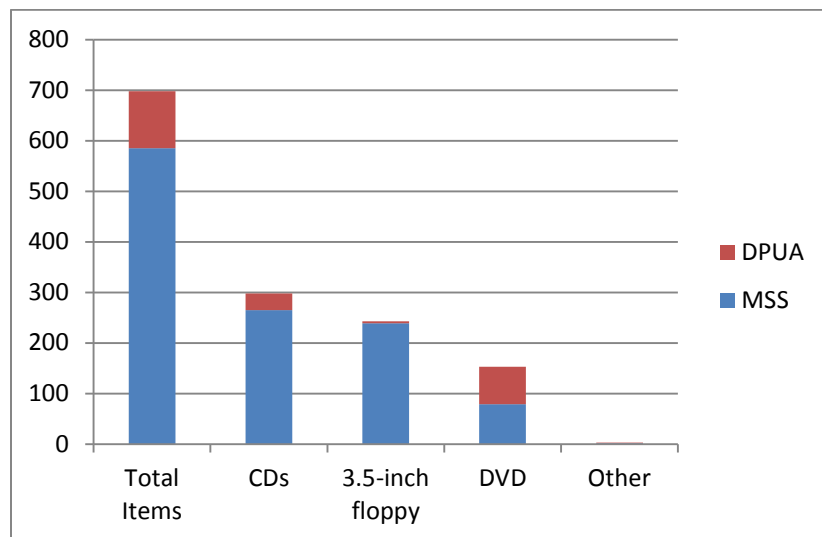
**Inventory Results**

Staff reviewed a total of 336 discrete finding aids, producing 53 collections that, according to their descriptions, contained media. One student assistant, Matthew Morley, spent 34.5 hours in reviewing manuscript collection finding aids for media; a full-time staff member spent 7.75 hours in reviewing University finding aids for media.

Upon physical review of the records, we discovered that of the 53 collections flagged in the finding aid review, only 43 actually contained media. In several cases the "false positives" were due to cases like the following, where the finding aid listed a "powerpoint" document or "E-notices," but we found only physical print-outs of the records, rather than media containing the original electronic files.



Manuscript collections contained the overwhelming majority of media, with 585 pieces to only 113 for University collections. DVDs are the most prevalent media in University records (74), with CDs in second position (32), and only a handful of 3.5 inch floppy disks (4). While the manuscript collections also contained a large number of CDs (265), 3.5 inch floppy disks were almost as numerous (239). One zip disk, one minidisc, and a single flash drive were also among the media.

**Assessment and Future Steps**

There were fewer pieces of media among the University records than staff had anticipated. It remains to be seen whether their relative scarcity reflects only a scarcity of description (we only examined media that were listed on a finding aid), or if we have seen the full extent of floppy disks, optical discs, and flash drives in processed University collections. The highest concentrations of media exist in the records of DePaul's Theatre School, comprised of 49 DVDs containing video of play productions, and the DePaul Emeritus Society, which includes 17 CDs and DVDs that may contain the transcripts and/or audiovisual recordings of oral history interviews with retired DePaul faculty and staff members. The Theatre School DVDs are of some concern, given the recent failure of one of the discs in that collection. Though their use is typically restricted to the actors in the production, which might dictate a lower position on our preservation priorities list, we know that SPCA holds the sole recording of many of these productions. The Emeritus Society records have also seen limited use in recent years. However, should the media contain audio or video recordings of notable faculty and staff, we may assign a higher priority to these media than if their content simply reproduces the transcripts we hold in hardcopy.

Twenty manuscript collections of the 105 finding aids reviewed had a total of 585 removable computer media items. One collection, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, had the highest concentration of 3.5 inch diskettes in the manuscript collections survey (185 out of 239). Another collection, Call To Action, had the highest concentration of CDs and DVDs in the manuscript collections survey (208 out of 265). These two collections are notable because of the quantity of removable computer media, however, numbers alone may not warrant a high place on a migration prioritization list. Because the survey required us to record label titles we now have a firmer grasp of what is saved on most of the disks and CDs. Content saved on 3.5 inch diskettes and CDs in the papers of a playwright, the papers of a professor of law, and the papers of a peace activist may contain unique material not represented elsewhere in their collections in paper documents.

As essential next step is to determine which media contain viable files, what formats they are in, and what information the files actually contain. These will be critical factors in determining preservation tasks and priorities, and in testing some of the assumptions we made going into the inventory. This data may also assist us in developing a more formal rubric that weighs factors such as fragility of the media, accessibility of formats, and the scarcity or research value of the content, in assigning preservation priorities. In addition, we must clarify those collection descriptions that erroneously indicate (or hint at) the presence of media, and determine how we ought to indicate their presence in new acquisitions, from the point of accession through inclusion in finding aids or other search tools. These guidelines can also be applied to media we may discover that has never been described in any accession record or finding aid. With our *Jump In* inventory in hand, we can determine how to leverage regular tasks, like description, to support preservation activities in addition to illuminating which tools and procedures we must develop.