We must re-assert our traditional roles as stimulators and incubators of research and researchers ... We must continue to lead the vanguard in entrepreneurial activity and continue to embrace new technologies to make us work “faster, better, and cheaper.”

Richard Ovenden (Bodley’s Librarian, University of Oxford)\(^1\)

What Richard Ovenden talks about in the conclusion to his article on Special Collections Librarianship also applies to thematic collections in general and the Jesuitica Project specifically. To prove this, we will take a closer look at the history and evolution of the Jesuitica Project and use it as a case study to illustrate the changes, challenges and opportunities that disclosing a thematic collection in a rapidly digitalising world can encounter.

1 Thematic Collections

Library collections are formed, based on miscellaneous criteria: provenance, material type, age, language, location, etc. A thematic research collection has previously been defined as a collection of sources gathered by scholarly effort and made available online to support research on a particular theme.\(^2\) Thus,
in a very broad sense, a thematic collection can be considered as any number of documentary materials that form a group, based on its contents. The term ‘contents’ has a very wide scope and can mean anything from a specific knowledge field to a single author’s output, or the collected works of a certain group of people. The Corble fencing collection, for instance, which is now being preserved and managed by the Special Collections Department of KU Leuven Libraries and which has almost entirely been digitised, is an example of such a thematic collection. It was created by the British fencer Archibald Corble, and is considered one of the world’s most extensive collections on the history of fencing.3 A completely different example of a thematic research collection is the collection called “Nineteenth-Century Disability: Cultures & Contexts.” It defines itself as an interdisciplinary collection of primary texts and images about physical and cognitive disability in the long 19th century, where each piece has been selected and annotated by scholars in the field, with the aim of helping university level instructors and students incorporate a disability studies perspective into their classes and scholarship through access to contextualised primary sources.4 Though very different, both collections can be considered as thematic collections.

In essence, a thematic collection exists when it is defined and thought of as a useful whole. It is always a cultural creation that allows people to see a distinctive link between certain individual items. The creation of a thematic collection then produces a synergistic reaction, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is precisely in the fact that individual items are grouped and considered as a larger entity, that allows for new study approaches, specific scientific methods and digital tools.

In the process of creating a thematic research collection we can distinguish four major steps (Fig. 16.1): (1) Distinguish a set of items as a collection; (2) Define which items belong to the collection (and which don’t); (3) Tag (or mark) items that belong to the collection; and (4) Propagate the collection to stakeholders as a whole. Throughout this chapter all four steps will be discussed within the context they apply to. These steps can follow a different order; multiple steps can be taken care of simultaneously and it is even possible to go

back to a previous step at some point in the process. The important part is that these four steps are always present in some way or another, when creating a thematic research collection.

### 1.1 Distinguish and Define
When considering thematic collections it is necessary to first identify what would be useful to distinguish as a library collection. This strongly depends on the context in which the library is situated. An academic (theological) research library can define its collections from three vantage points. The first being the available resources at the library itself. Do certain documentary materials appear in such a distinct way within the library that they can be linked together? Does the library have a unique set of materials at its disposal? To group these resources into an actual thematic collection what’s needed next is the idea of the resources as a whole from a research, pragmatic or administrative perspective. Another way of distinguishing a collection is based on the research (output) of an institute/faculty/university itself. Are certain research topics present? Does a researcher specialise in a specific genre or study object? Is funding available to come up with specific research questions? All these questions may lead to the creation of a thematic research collection. This collection can be formed by exploring the available resources, by newly acquiring certain items, or a mixture of both, i.e. filling the gaps. The third path that may lead to the creation of a thematic collection is the input from external funding/resources. Sometimes an external partner – which can be an individual as well as an organisation – has the explicit wish that a thematic (research) collection is created by the library in question. This can be done by depositing a set of documentary materials, or by supplying funds to create such a collection. These three paths are not closed circuits, sometimes two or three paths crossover, but ultimately also lead to the creation of a thematic collection.

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**FIGURE 16.1** General process of creating a thematic collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distinguish a set of items as a collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Input from available resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Input from existing research topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Input from external funding/resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Define which items belong to the collection (and which don’t)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Criteria for inclusion/exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Closed set versus dynamic set of items</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tag items that belong to the collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Bibliographic/holding/item-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In the catalogue/digital repository/discovery platform/…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Automatically versus manually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propagate the collection to stakeholders as a whole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Discovery platform [e.g. online catalogue, website, database, …]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Digital tools [e.g. LOD, IIIF-viewer, …]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Network of stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
important notion behind the creation of these thematic collections is the fact that they are non-exclusive. What this means, is that certain items can belong to different collections. A collection can be an integral part of a larger collection, it can be an overarching collection or it can lay at the crossroads of two or more collections. This is all very logical, but at the same time it is important to be aware of this.

The *jesuitica* at the Maurits Sabbe Library (Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven) are books written by Jesuits, and/or relating to the history/spirituality of the Jesuits. As a collection the *jesuitica* have a long-lasting historical background, which dates back to years before the existence of the faculty library of theology at Leuven itself. In the beginning of the 1970s, when the faculty library was recently established, the largest part of the library of the Flemish Jesuit Province was transferred to the library of the Faculty of Theology at Leuven. This Jesuit library, spanning over 400,000 volumes from the 15th until the 20th century, contained the research library of the Flemish Jesuits. Its contents were heterogeneous, from rare incunabula like Pierre d'Ailly's *Ymago Mundi* (Leuven: Johannes De Westfalia, 1480), to the first edition of the *Exercitia Spiritualia* (Rome: Antonio Blado, 1548), as well as 20th-century publications on philosophy, science, medicine, economics, and every other topic the Jesuits might have been interested in. The Jesuit library was in fact a very broad academic research library, comparable to a general Western European university library in the middle of the 20th century. This library deposit gave the new faculty library of theology a flying start, it could build upon the wealthy research collection that had been established by the Jesuits during several decades. Thus, the faculty library could immediately focus on acquiring the latest research outputs in the field of theology, instead of having to deal with also purchasing the still relevant bibliographical resources published in the past.

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5 For a full description, as well as access to the entire digitised copy, see https://limo.libis.be/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=32LIBIS_ALMA_DS71183619770001471&context=L&vid=KULeuven&search_scope=ALL_CONTENT&tab=all_content_tab&lang=en_US.

6 For a full description, as well as access to the entire digitised copy, see https://limo.libis.be/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=32LIBIS_ALMA_DS71129079400001471&context=L&vid=KULeuven&search_scope=ALL_CONTENT&tab=all_content_tab&lang=en_US.

Of course, in the Jesuit library one could also find numerous so-called *jesuitica*, books written by a Jesuit or concerning the Jesuit order, as you would find them in any other (theological) research library at that moment. In addition, the Jesuits have a long-lasting tradition of collecting and preserving books connected to their own history.\(^8\) As a result, the Jesuits distinguished a specific set of books within their library, which they called the ‘Jesuitica collection’. This collection comprised only of books, dating from the 16th until the 20th century, that concerned their own history and/or spirituality and that were written by the most illustrious of Jesuits. The Jesuit library used its own classification system, which was a subject-based numerical system. The Jesuitica collection at Heverlee corresponded with the numerical notation starting with either ‘78’ for Jesuit spirituality (which included a large section of ‘78 M’ for the Spiritual Exercises) or ‘110’ for Jesuit bibliography.\(^9\) Since the Jesuit library’s classification system corresponded with the actual shelving location, the entire Jesuitica collection could be found together. This specific collection remained at the Jesuit library in Heverlee for a much longer period. Given its specific nature and the close relationship to its owner, the Jesuits were reluctant at first to deposit this collection in the same way they did with the bulk of their library. In 2003, however, the Jesuits decided it was time to move the specific Jesuitica collection to the Maurits Sabbe Library as well. The agreement about this deposit between the Jesuits and the Faculty of Theology came with a clause. The library had to start a project dealing with the disclosure of the Jesuitica collection and finding new means to stimulate research in the field of *jesuitica* and *ignatiana*.\(^10\) This Jesuitica Project would be carried out by an employee of the Faculty and would be supervised by the Faculty and the Jesuits, making sure the project they agreed-upon would be carried out to everyone’s satisfaction. When creating the Jesuitica Project, this meant that from then on the *jesuitica* were supposed to become a thematic research collection within the Maurits Sabbe Library. The next point of action then, was to come up with concrete steps to define this thematic research collection.

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To get a clear view of which items belong to a collection and which items don’t it is highly recommended to establish clear criteria from the start to sort out what is part of a collection and what is not. In case of the *jesuitica* this is actually not always clear to the outside world, which sometimes leads to misinterpretation and mistakes. On the one hand, there is the Jesuit library with the 400,000 volumes. Secondly, there is the Jesuitica collection that the Jesuits created within their library and that was deposited later on. Thirdly, there are the *jesuitica* books from everywhere within the faculty library. Very often these three different entities are being mixed-up. The only way to rectify this now, is by providing contextualisation in the clearest possible way. Something as simple as coming up with a clearly distinct name for a collection can prove to be very useful, as well as a list of clear-cut criteria and a thorough and comprehensive description that’s visible and understandable for collection-users. The next step is to come up with a (preferably easy) way of ‘tagging’ all individual items that are part of the collection.

1.2 Tag and Propagate

The process of tagging the items of course depends on the criteria and definition that was established earlier on. In case of the *jesuitica* a tag was added in the cataloguing system on the bibliographical level. It is, however, equally possible that a tag on the holding- or item-level of the book (or other type of documentary material) is preferred. If the collection solely consists of digitised books, for instance, it can also be better to add a tag to the metadata in the digital repository, instead of in the catalogue. There’s a very wide range of possibilities and they’re all dependent on the nature of the collection. The important thing is that it is logical, consistent and coherent.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, academic libraries experienced first-hand the unavoidable wave of digital innovations that took place inside and outside the world of libraries. It is no secret that library-specific changes in library management systems throughout the years affected how cataloguing and user-operability worked. Innovation has led to advancements within data management, resulting in more accurate search results significantly improving the way researchers and scholars discover content. Expectations are shifting as well, people want resources to be collectively held and available for all.11 For KU Leuven we can see that the library management system

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DOBIS/LIBIS changed to Aleph in 2005. In 2010, the OPAC made way for the new Primo-based discovery system for KU Leuven: Limo. Then, in 2014, the university changed its library management system again to Alma, a so-called Unified Resource Management System. Other technological developments took place on a much bigger scale. Major search engines, like Google, are now incontournable. When Google Books celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in October 2019, Google reported the number of scanned books as more than 40 million titles. What this means for libraries? To put it in the words of another librarian, Reg Carr: “The centre of gravity [of libraries] has moved from information provision to information access.”

In 2003, the Jesuitica Project started off as a genuine cataloguing project, with a bit more attention to disseminating the disclosed contents amongst a specific audience. First of all, cataloguing Jesuitica was done, for the most part, as would for any other book in the library. The DOBIS/LIBIS software, the cataloguing tool at that time for the university library, was used to build the electronic catalogue for the Jesuitica Project. Metadata models and schema provide a consistent structure for determining what aspects of a resource are to be described and how the data is to be stored, while cataloguing rules help to ensure that metadata content is also consistent and coherent. Hence, the descriptive metadata-model used in the DOBIS/LIBIS system was based on the MARC21 standard. Since the early printed books (printed before 1840) were the first to be processed, the descriptions of Jesuitica volumes were very detailed and in-depth: UDC-based subject headings, a complete collation formula, all illustrational details, a complete list of contributors, dedicatees, etc.

Although the amount of detail of the descriptions was significant, this still does not single-out the Jesuitica as a distinct collection. What did single-out the collection, was the fact that on top of the detailed descriptions, a Jesuitica tag was created specifically for cataloguing Jesuitica. This tag was a local subject added entry-topical term (650 _2 |2 KUL |a #GBIB: jesuitica) which was
included in the descriptive model. Consequently, this tag was added to every bibliographical description of every *jesuiticum* that was kept at the Maurits Sabbe Library. By doing this, not only did we realise this important step in the process of creating a thematic collection within the library, it also greatly expanded the range of the thematic collection. A book did not need to belong to the former Jesuit library to be included in the thematic *jesuitica* collection. All *jesuitica*, whether they formerly belonged to the Jesuits, or not, were henceforth ‘tagged’ as a part of this specific thematic collection. There was also no distinction between the early printed books and the modern books, with regard to them belonging to this collection. It also meant that the collection was not frozen in time, but that it would keep on growing as new *jesuitica* were purchased (or deposited) in the years to come. However simple it seems to dedicate a tag to every bibliographical entry in the thematic collection, it is an essential part in defining a set of books as a (thematical) collection on a digital platform. By assigning the tag, the *jesuitica* from the library were clustered in a digital way and this paved the way for additional actions of disseminating the data.

1.3 **Cataloguing**

About ten years after the Jesuitica Project was launched, the supervisory board realised that, although the thorough descriptive model had its clear advantages, the process of cataloguing the entire Jesuitica collection of ca. 20,000 volumes simply took too long. In 2006, on top of the work that needed to be done on the specific Jesuitica collection from Heverlee, the Jesuits of the Dutch Province deposited their Jesuitica collection – also amounting to ca. 20,000 volumes – together with the *preciosa* collection to the Maurits Sabbe Library as well. The disclosure of these *jesuitica* from the Berchmanianum at Nijmegen also fell under the branch of the Jesuitica Project. In light of recent developments and by weighing up costs and benefits, a new metadata-model was proposed and accepted. The descriptive model for cataloguing *jesuitica* from then on would be a ‘core’ model. Instead of providing time-consuming collational formula’s, an exhaustive list of all contributors, or a description of all illustrational details, the focus of cataloguing changed to searching for external contents of digitised versions (Google Books, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, HathiTrust, etc.) and external bibliographical databases (*STCV*, *STCN*, *ESTC*, *USTC*, *SBN OPAC*, *VD16*, *VD17*, etc.), and providing direct links in the description.

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to these sources. Adding these direct links to the bibliographical descriptions in the catalogue would mean the number of required data entry-fields could be drastically reduced, without losing too much information. The first and most basic rule that needed to be applied in creating a description of an early printed book was that one edition could be distinguished from another. This idea was inferred from the STCV-method of describing bibliographical units, which in turn was derived from the Dutch STCN.\footnote{Goran Poot, Steven Van Impe, and Stijn Van Rossem, \textit{Handleiding voor de Short Title Catalogus Vlaanderen}, 2nd. rev. ed., Armarium: Publicaties voor Erfgoedbibliotheken 1 (Antwerp: Erfgoedbibliotheken Vlaanderen, 2005).} The time-profit was tremendous and within just a couple of years the number of catalogued books had doubled and the processing speed greatly increased (Fig. 16.2). It is safe to say that the only reason why this was possible, was because of the evolution of the digital means inside and outside library systems.

About a year after the descriptive model had been revised, another Jesuitica collection was transferred to the Maurits Sabbe Library. This time, it was the collection from Maastricht University. Since this collection was no property of the Jesuit order, the cataloguing-part to this collection strictly did not come to

![Figure 16.2](https://creativemedia.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)
fall under the specific tasks of the Jesuitica Project and its employee. However, since lots of jesuitica are in fact present in both the Jesuit collections as well as in the Maastricht University collection, they are inevitably linked, which in practice leads to the Jesuitica Project’s employee cataloguing these Maastricht-holdings as well. Of course, this clearly also benefits the other task assigned to the Jesuitica Project of disclosing the jesuitica at the Maurits Sabbe Library as a collection. By including the Maastricht jesuitica, the amount of jesuitica physically present at the faculty library immediately grew with ca. 20,000 volumes. Although the actual number of jesuitica at the Maurits Sabbe Library now amounts up to ca. 100,000 volumes, including all other jesuitica the library received or purchased over the past forty years, this is not yet visible in the online catalogue. Since manually adding a tag to a bibliographical description is a required step in the creation process of this thematic research collection, this means that a book will not appear as part of the thematic collection if the tag is not present. Although the descriptive metadata of the Jesuitica collections from Nijmegen and Maastricht were digitally transferred by means of converging the data from the depositing library’s cataloguing system to the catalogue of KU Leuven, the bibliographical descriptions did not automatically include a jesuitica tag. Technically this would have been possible, but since the transferred data was not processed in the same way as were the data from the other jesuitica at the Maurits Sabbe Library, it was deliberately decided not to do this. A jesuitica tag would only be added to a description when a cataloguer at the library had seen and properly catalogued the book, by applying the predetermined metadata-model and cataloguing rules, which makes the metadata consistent and coherent.

Important questions need to be answered with regard to how the step of marking will take shape. Do you automatically assign tags to certain items, or is this a manual process that needs to be controlled? Both ways have their advantages and disadvantages. When automatically assigning a tag, you can build up a collection in a very short time and it forces you to define strict criteria for the collection. When the criteria are set, it diminishes the chance of mistakes. The disadvantage is that it can only be done on collections that were already pre-defined as a collection, or that have certain machine-readable traits that allow for automatic recognition of an item as part of a collection. The opposite is true for manually assigning a tag. There is always a risk of manual errors and building up a collection is a slow and time-consuming process. On the other hand, it is also possible to assign tags to individual items that demand human interpretation and that are difficult or impossible to define in machine-readable features. In case of the jesuitica, for instance, it would have been difficult to single out every Jesuit author beforehand, or to distinguish
every book that concerned the Jesuit's history or spirituality solely on the title. Another question that has to be asked, is what type of data you want to be present in the collection? Do you want all data to be described uniformly, or do you simply want all data (abbreviated, detailed, processed, converged,...) to be a part of the collection? In case of the jesuitica it was decided that there had to at least be a basic layer of uniformity to all items belonging to the collection. Hence, leading to the fact that a jesuitica tag would only be added manually by a cataloguer when she/he has described the physical volume.

1.4 Propagating the Collection as Whole

The concept of Linked (Open) Data (LOD), now ubiquitous in information sciences, is not all that different from the descriptive model now being used at KU Leuven Libraries for their rare book collections. In fact, linked data is generally considered to complement rather than replace existing library management structures. Compliance with the standards and best practices that underpin linked data principles enables linked data to streamline data interoperability and reuse over the internet.\(^\text{19}\) The use of URI’s, HTTP and interlinking the URI’s is already being applied at KU Leuven Libraries. Just a couple of years ago the university signed the Europeana public domain charter, which implies that the university will strive to give free access to all non-copyright protected data, thus making the data ‘OPEN’.\(^\text{20}\) The only thing still needed to conform completely to the concept of LOD is the use of RDF and/or SPARQL for querying, which is not far from realisation in the future.\(^\text{21}\) Ex Libris has already designed Alma to support RDA-RDF format for bibliographical descriptions, which KU Leuven Libraries applies. The very next step in the process will be the true implementation of Linked Data within Alma for KU Leuven Libraries. Or, to put it in the words of Richard Ovenden again, we “embraced new technologies to make us work ‘faster, better, and cheaper’.”

The digital developments also had a significant impact on how information was searched for and used by academia. The role of libraries is for a large part


shifting from information provision to information access. By switching from OPAC to Limo, Leuven's university libraries made a change from a catalogue to an electronic discovery system. Back in 2003, integrating the bibliographical data from the Jesuitica collections in the Libis-Net catalogue of the university library was key to improve discoverability. Its one big downside at that time was the poor discoverability outside the environment of the institutions' own online catalogue. The local data of the catalogued books was difficult to find for an international audience. Thus, the Jesuitica Project set up a separate catalogue on its website. The data from the university catalogue had to be manually imported in the Jesuitica catalogue. International researchers could then find their way to the jesuitica data more easily, since the website's data was searchable via random search engines on the internet. However, its biggest benefit would become its largest downside. The fact that the data was moved to a separate catalogue, meant that the Jesuitica catalogue and the university's catalogue were not synchronised in any way. Therefore, data from the separate catalogue was always running behind. The fact that the import-procedure was a time-consuming, complicated and laborious task also did not help. At the same time, metadata harvesters began to emerge on the internet. Metadata harvesters, like Science Digital Library and Europeana, accumulate metadata from many collections (or sources) with the goal to enable searching on the huge quantity of heterogeneous content, using only their locally stored content. So, when the data from Limo gradually becomes more discoverable, the separate Jesuitica catalogue in turn becomes inversely proportional obsolete.

Although the idea of the separate catalogue may be running on its last legs, the preliminary actions necessary to create this separate catalogue are still very much relevant today. In order to carry out the export-import process the Jesuitica tags were used to single-out every jesuitica record in DOBIS/LIBIS, Aleph and later on Alma. Now, these tags are still present in the bibliographical records and they can be used to create a thematic collection in Alma, as well as in Limo. A direct link to a specific query in Limo that yields all search results with that specific tag can be accessed from the Jesuitica website.

Whether it is through a separate website, an online or locally stored database, or a virtual space within a larger discovery platform, the final step into

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creating an actual thematic research collection is the propagation of the set of items as whole, no matter the medium being used. This is also a step that is not set in stone. As we already explained, the Jesuitica Project started with the setting up a separate catalogue for the collection on a website. Now, more than a decade later, the separate catalogue is as good as obsolete, and has been largely exchanged for a distinct place within the general online catalogue for KU Leuven (Limo). On top of that, part of the digitised collection is also accessible through the collections discovery space on Limo and a page on KU Leuven Libraries’ platform for online exhibits. In short, the possibilities in this final and important step of propagation in the process of creating a thematic collection are endless, multifold and non-exclusive.

2 A Digitalising World

2.1 Digital Pioneer

In its task to find new means to stimulate research in the field of jesuitica and ignatiana, the Jesuitica Project developed several tools in a digital environment that were either completely separate from the Jesuitica catalogue or that simply complimented the catalogue. A tool can be all sorts of things, from a link to an external website offering access to another related research project that could prove useful to some researchers, like The European Jesuit Libraries Provenance Project (https://www.jesuit-libraries.com/), to a specific reference work that was digitised at KU Leuven and publicly made available through its discovery platform, like the Prosopographia Jesuitica Belgica Antiqua (PIBA).

The portal to all the available tools, is a basic website on the internet: www.jesuitica.be. All tools available through this website were developed and implemented by means of a certain demand from the research community. The jesuitica website now offers a wide range of useful aids, divided in the following themes: Collections, Research, Tools, and Archive.


While some aids consist of a basic hyperlink to another website, others start to lead a life on their own. They become sub-projects or side-projects to the Jesuitica Project. From the early days, the Jesuitica Project also undertook various pioneering digital initiatives, which in part shaped the process of digitalisation at KU Leuven's university library. More than ten years ago, in September 2010, KU Leuven Libraries executed its first internal digitisation projects: Ex Cathedra and the digitisation of the Bible of Anjou. In 2010–2011 the Jesuitica Project took part in several digitisation projects (Bibliotheca Imaginis Figuratae and Flandrica.be) which resulted in the digitisation program for Jesuitica (2016). Not every project or aspect of these innovations in digitalisation was equally successful. While at first, the Bibliotheca Imaginis Figuratae (BIF) project (2010) looked promising, ten years after it was founded, we found that this collaborative project was no longer being actively used by researchers. After just a few years, it was clear that the leading researchers involved turned other research ways and that the necessary input from (doctoral) students and staff was missing. Unfortunately, the images no longer live up to the present standards the university imposes on its digitised collections. All objects digitised in 2010 for BIF are thus obsolete and will ultimately be deleted from their (oh, the irony!) permanent repository. During the past ten years LIBIS kept on developing its preservation and visualisation software to attend to most digitisation project's demands and prerequisites. As an unfortunate consequence, the specific metadata of the indices, created for the BIF project, can no longer be accessed and viewed with today's viewers. Although it is clear that the BIF project was no long-lasting success, it does not mean the project was a total waste of money, time and energy. The BIF project also delivered some very useful things as well. For one thing, it paved the way for the Jesuitica Project to become involved in other digitisation projects at KU Leuven and abroad. BIF helped shape the permanent repository for digitised objects and it was a first step in developing a methodical way of providing substantive metadata for digitisation. On another level, it gave an idea of the richness of the jesuitica collections at the Maurits Sabbe Library. In fact, the objects digitised for BIF in 2010 will be digitised anew in 2021 according to the latest standards and visualised in today's IIIF Universal Viewer. So, even if a project

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and technological developments in themselves turn out to be unsuccessful in the long run, it does not mean they were not of great use and value for other reasons.

Another aspect of digital pioneering for the Jesuitica Project was the establishment of a non-authoritative online bibliographical database on www.jesuitica.be. This bibliography was instigated by the researcher’s demand for a timely bibliography on Jesuit studies. The authoritative Jesuit bibliographies by László Polgár and Paul Begheyn were printed volumes that appeared annually in the Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu from 1980 to 2001 and 2006 to 2018. Researchers wanted quicker updates of the latest publications on Jesuit studies, and thus alternative bibliographies, like the database on jesuitica.be, emerged. The bibliographical database was not limited to the academical output from KU Leuven on Jesuit studies, it also included new publications from all over the world in various languages. While new monographic acquisitions, specific book chapters within these monographs, and articles published in the most recent issues of theological and historical journals that found their way to the Maurits Sabbe Library provided one resource of constant influx of materials for this bibliographical database, the other input generally came from random search queries of findings on the internet. At that time, the goal of the bibliography was not to have an exhaustive list of KU Leuven publications, but rather to help researchers find whatever sources were out there that could be of use for their own research. The project foresaw in a weekly newsletter, providing updates with the latest additions to the database to inform the research community. In 2018, talks between the Institute of Advanced Jesuit Studies, the ‘Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu’ and the Jesuitica Project resulted in the co-foundation of the Jesuit Online Bibliography (JOB). The Jesuitica Project ceased the expansion of its separate bibliographical database on www.jesuitica.be and decided to join forces to contribute to the JOB. The JOB has the advantage of being a collaborative effort, with firmly established partnerships, which results in more stability, guaranteed continuity and a larger and more diverse output. This authoritative bibliography on 21st century Jesuit studies was launched in April 2019. So, what began as a side-track of the project, is now a collaborative authoritative online resource for scholars all around the world, being used on average by ca. 1,000 users every month, making it a stable

pillar of the Jesuitica Project.\textsuperscript{30} To reach out to the community, the Jesuitica Project provides a newsletter that is sent out every Friday, which provides news on upcoming events, project-updates and the latest added entries to the JOB. The newsletter now reaches a niche of ca. 600 researchers every week, which is considered a fair amount of subscribers for a very specific academical topic. The newsletters have a 97.80\% delivery rate, a 30.87\% open rate and a click rate of 8.48\% of all sent emails. According to a market study done in 2019 by mailing service mailchimp we can see that an average open rate is only 21.33\% and that an average click rate is only about 2.62\%.\textsuperscript{31} If not anything else, this tells us that the newsletter is pretty successful in outreaching to its community.

Digitisation has created added potential to the Jesuitica Project, providing new data in the form of fully digitised books, next to the ‘traditional’ metadata from the library catalogue. The way the digital images are processed, accessed and used has also undergone great changes. Descriptive, technical and structural metadata for the digital images is now optimised. A standardised mapping provides basic information that leads directly to the bibliographical description in Limo. The terms and conditions for using the images is clearly visible. Labels are generated with meaningful descriptions for every image. The digitisation policy of KU Leuven Libraries focuses on making its digitised collection in the public domain as open as possible. Developing FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable) data is one of its major guidelines.\textsuperscript{32} Recently, the digitised Jesuitica have been disclosed with the Universal Viewer.\textsuperscript{33} This IIIF-compatible viewer benefits access and use of the digital images.\textsuperscript{34} Using a IIIF-compatible viewer implies that the (re)use of data is made easier. Since the use of a IIIF-viewer means that a json-manifest is created for every digitised object, it results in the fact that the digitised object can also be viewed via other platforms that use this IIIF-technology (e.g. Mirador Viewer) (Fig. 16.3).

\textsuperscript{30} By comparison, the jesuitica website reaches on average just over 1,000 users per month.
2.2 Hybrid Collection

At the end of the 20th century, Reg Carr was one of the first to launch the term ‘hybrid library’. The Maurits Sabbe Library fully embraces this idea to become a genuine hybrid library, where the digital complements the physical. For the heritage collection of the Maurits Sabbe Library we can see clearly that the number of physical consultations of books in the library has encountered a linear declination since at least 2015, when we first started collecting data about our heritage collection consultations. Although we do not have any representational data (yet) of the number of digitally consulted heritage items,

36 Consultations of precious books in the Maurits Sabbe Library: 654 (2015), 413 (2016), 385 (2017), 282 (2018), 192 (2019), 82* (2020). The numbers for 2020 should be interpreted cautiously, since the library was forced to close for several months due to the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
we are sure that the numbers have inclining. The difficulty to collect significant data lies in the question of what to measure, as well as how to measure this. Students and researchers not only have access to our locally digitised contents, but are guided to digitised objects from all around the world through our own Limo discovery platform, as well as through general and specific search engines on the world wide web. So, how can you really get a clear view of what digital resources now substitute the documents that could only be consulted physically in the past? In 2020, humanities students at KU Leuven were supposed to be subjected to a specifically designed library survey. The goal of this survey was to gain more insights into the way digitisation influences physical versus digital collection consultation of heritage materials. Because of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, however, the library was unable to complete the survey and it was postponed. The Maurits Sabbe Library nevertheless is convinced that students and researchers benefit the most from the combination of a well-documented and accessible physical collection with a broad and properly disclosed digital collection, which is exactly what the ‘hybrid library’ is all about.

In analogy with this term, and in line with library policy, we believe the jesuitica are in fact evolving towards a ‘hybrid collection’. As a hybrid collection, the Jesuitica Project’s strengths can grow even more solid and new opportunities will present themselves in the ever digitalising world. One idea worth to investigate, is a virtual ‘reading room’, specifically designed for a thematic collection. This would not be a static catalogue but a dynamical platform, where readers can interact in different ways with the data. Key here is a synchronised system. For KU Leuven this means a dynamic link between the data from Alma, Limo and Rosetta. While this is not yet possible, it will certainly be one of the aspects to explore regarding technical developments in library software tools. Just a couple of years ago the University signed the Europeana public domain charter, which implies that the university will strive to give free access to all non-copyright protected data. This refers to digitised images, as well as the metadata from book descriptions in Alma. Again, this is where the notion of Linked Open Data comes into play.

The following article gives an idea of how various institutions have tried to gain insight not just into whether or not users are finding their materials, but also in how and why, and in the quality of the user experience: Elizabeth Joan Kelly, “Assessment of Digitized Library and Archives Materials: A Literature Review,” Journal of Web Librarianship 8, no. 4 (2014): 384–403.

3 Collaboration

Collaboration is one aspect of the project, that is transversally part of all of the above-mentioned characteristics to the *jesuitica* collections and to most thematic research collections. From the very beginning, the Jesuitica Project was firmly established within the Faculty of Theology and the Maurits Sabbe Library. Therefore, the project benefits from the resources and developments that take place in the library, the faculty, but also in the larger setting of the university (library) and abroad. In return, the results of the project’s successful initiatives naturally flow back to the commons of the partnerships.

3.1 Internal Partnerships

In the case of the Jesuitica Project a good example of internal collaboration can be found in the digitisation of *jesuitica*, which we mentioned earlier on. To start up a digitisation project several actors from university services needed to work together. To begin with, the Jesuitica Project was able to deliver the physical resources: a set of early printed books that were eligible for digitisation. Secondly, the infrastructure to produce digital images needed to be present. At first, digitisation was done small-scale on a flatbed scanner in the Maurits Sabbe Library. This later on changed to professional digitisation, with adequate equipment, in a therefor specifically designed Imaging Lab, with trained personnel. Thirdly, a uniform way of providing metadata for digitisation purposes needed to be constructed and implemented, which was a task for Metadata & Data Management. Finally, there was the technical infrastructure, the digital repository, that needed to store and represent the digitised images. In case of KU Leuven, LIBIS was the partner providing the know-how and technical support to deliver these necessities. These four partners together – collection managers, digitisation department, metadata & data management, and library data services – presented with the results of a set of digitised early printed books, that were made available through a discovery platform and stored in the digital repository.

When tackling a task like establishing a thematic research collection, you should be aware that the possibility of successfully doing this solo is virtually non-existing. In various processes and at several points while creating a thematic research collection support is needed from different actors. While one actor can be the library staff providing facilities to maintain the physical collection, another can be the technical staff designing and maintaining the software infrastructure where the data are created and stored. A third possible, and even crucial actor, specifically in terms of a research collection, is the research community that benefits from the results of creating a thematic
collection. Without the existence and support of the community that uses the collection, a research collection in itself has little added value.

3.2 Establishing a Network

The Jesuitica Project acts as a recognised partner in specific gremia, linked to its mission. In order to stimulate research in the field of Jesuit studies, the Jesuitica Project took part in establishing the Jesuit Online Bibliography. This not only benefits the users of the Jesuitica collections by providing a useful tool to help their research along, it also broadens the network to that of Boston College’s Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies. The Jesuitica Project is also partner in IGNIS, a KU Leuven Centre for Jesuit Studies, which fosters international and interdisciplinary research into the history, spirituality, pedagogy and educational projects, missionary activities and heritage of the Society of Jesus.39 Recently, the Jesuitica Project also became a member of HERKUL, an inter- and transdisciplinary institute at KU Leuven, that gathers a large group of experts from diverse fields associated with cultural heritage.40 By collaborating in various fields linked to the Jesuitica Project, the project itself becomes more firmly established and increases its outreach range. This is an important, but often disvalued part of establishing and maintaining significance.

In the world of digitalisation and academics not innovating is often seen as a sign of degradation. In part this is true, in the sense that without innovation, new ideas and new projects academic research, collection disclosure and library maintenance will cease to remain relevant. The instigator to these new ideas or projects, however, not always has to be an academical research question, or a digital innovation, it can also be rooted in a clear demand from (a part of) society. A good example is the establishment of the Jesuit Armarium in 2020.41 The name Jesuit Armarium, referring to the Latin word armarium for ‘bookcase’, is an online primo-based discovery tool for book collections of the Jesuits of the European Low Countries. The collection was formed by and is property of the Jesuit Region of the European Low Countries, whether the subcollections were formerly held at historically important libraries such as the theological library at Heverlee (Flemish Jesuits) or the Berchmanianum at Nijmegen (Dutch Jesuits), or systematically collected by Jesuit organisations in the wake of their research (e.g. Ruusbroec Institute). The discovery platform

virtually unites all these books (including the precious books, manuscripts, journals, etc.) of this Jesuit region and leads researchers and enthusiasts to their current place of safekeeping. The creation of this virtual platform was directly requested by the Jesuit Region of the European Low Countries. They wanted a new and great ‘library’ which holds all documentary materials they possess. Some decades ago, it would have been imaginable that large quantities of books would be transferred to a physical library building that could harbour over half a million books, unifying the Jesuits’ bibliographical legacy. Now, in the 21st century, it is much easier, cheaper, and more logical to unify these collections virtually. All you need to do, is create a virtual space on the internet from which every resource can be accessed. And that is exactly what happened. The Jesuit Region of the European Low Countries, the Jesuitica Project, LIBIS and collaborating institutions agreed to a primo-based discovery tool that provides direct access to the data from different online catalogues already containing these data, yet dispersed over different platforms and in different formats. Thanks to recent innovations in metadata conversion and linked data the platform, now called Jesuit Armarium, was launched in February 2020.

4 Conclusion

In sixteen years, the Jesuitica Project has undergone a lot of changes. While it has not lost sight of its initial goals of disclosing the jesuitica collections, disseminating knowledge on its contents and stimulating research, the project, and what it entails, looks completely different from how it was in 2003. Although it is a constant struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing and digitalising world of academia, the Jesuitica Project has, for now, been able to do so. Perhaps, this is the most important question to ask here: “How does the Jesuitica Project remain relevant; and what does this tell us in the broader sense about disclosing thematic collections?”

First of all, we must not fight the digital evolutions that the library landscape is facing. It is true that, for instance, digitisation of collections faces multiple challenges: limited resources, high costs, quickly evolving technologies, copyright, legal issues, and changing user expectations. Despite these challenges, libraries should still try to seize opportunities that benefit from these digital developments. Digitisation is, above all, part of an access strategy.42 Although every new innovation and expansion (e.g. side-project) implemented upon a

thematic research collection comes with a set of risks, a large amount of work into proper establishment and an often forgotten load of maintenance, not innovating and not moving forward is simply no option, if a thematic research collection wants to remain relevant.

Secondly, it is clear that the digital evolutions that libraries are facing will not entirely substitute the relevance of a physical collection. To the contrary, our experience with the Jesuitica Project and within the Maurits Sabbe Library made us strongly believe in the dual approach of the hybrid library, where the digital complements the physical and vice versa.

Last but certainly not least, in all that is said above the very basics remain quintessential. This is why I do not entirely agree with Reg Carr’s notion that the centre of gravity of libraries has moved from information provision to information access. Although he makes an interesting point, we must not forget that all information systems are dependent on that most basic of things: data. Without data there can be no information provision or information access. In my opinion there is a clear straddle in the role of libraries, with the creation of (meta)data on one side and information access on the other. Even if digital advances improve the findability and accessibility of collections and single documents, there is one thing they cannot do without and that is ‘data’. No matter how information holders are catalogued or found, the raw data still needs to be created. This will remain the stronghold of the Jesuitica Project for the foreseeable future, and it may also be that for disclosing thematic collections in general. Digital information systems crave data. No matter how the data is constructed, organised or disseminated, the tasks of creating and providing data remain for a large part human tasks. However more omnipresent data will become – through mass digitisation, metadata harvesting, or Linked Open Data – structuring the data will also become more important than ever. Distinguishing and defining thematic collections, applying specific tags to this set of items and subsequently providing access to the virtual collection as a whole will be key.

**Bibliography**


