

# Digital engagement, challenging histories: Theory and practice

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Recent developments in digital engagement tools have created a dynamic environment for the reinterpretation of heritage. From open access historical research to digitised museum and archive collections, researchers, community groups and heritage organisations are now blessed with an abundance of previously hard-to-reach primary resources, accessible through websites, catalogues and third party sites. One relative newcomer in this busy marketplace is Yarn, a digital storytelling platform designed to bring the collections of museums and archives together with users' own archives and historic materials.



This paper focuses on how tools such as Yarn can be used to reinterpret historical objects related to medicine and disability. These are often controversial and complex, and relate closely to illnesses, conditions and treatments which can be distressing to audiences. The histories which accompany these objects and texts can be equally confronting and traumatic, with objects often connected with devastating cases of loss and injury. However, they also offer the potential for numerous alternative narratives to better represent the experiences of disability, disease and health. Opening up these collections through the creative use of digital tools allows us to facilitate spaces for alternative narratives which bring together personal experience and collections, moving beyond more linear, tightly-focused narratives in physical displays.

By showcasing the challenges and opportunities of using resources such as this in the context of medical and disability history, I argue that we can shed new light on otherwise inaccessible collections and make the process of curation more democratic and open.

