

Your Digital Library Is My Digital Library: Reflecting on our Experience in Promoting a Rare Book Collection

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Abstract:

We reflect on our own experience in the University of Lisbon Faculty of Medicine Library trying to promote the rare book collection in the university world and hopefully beyond, through initiatives such as the Book of the Month. We also focus on some issues of old book cataloguing and the theoretical and physical features specific to old books, with a few examples from which something can be learned and shared.

Professional Disclaimer

Although this paper is first and foremost a collection of personal impressions and thoughts on the slippery subject of digital libraries and their seemingly endless possibilities, unscientific in character and contents, and without the proper method as to form, it is not unlikely that, albeit as such, it may bring about some valuable comments on the subject and add to our discussion at this conference – in which case it will have been well worth it.

Just Recycle Them

Apart from the lavish black comedy-type note in the title, the word ‘recycle’ has of course a more constructive meaning to it, regarding old books, which suggests these be given a new life and come out of their isolated coma on dusty shelves. But how can we get our doctors and students to pay just a little attention to the fact that our library happens to have one of the most valuable rare book collections in the country and that we would all be better off if at least we learned to fully appreciate them and the lessons they provide?

This appreciation would be no little achievement considering that, as we have pointed out elsewhere, «the period in which we live is witnessing the development of the new information technologies at a dizzying pace, in a manner that is substantially transforming not only the traditional paradigms of access to information and the methods and forms of communication, but also the very habits of life and organization of thought. This development has been so striking in our work and in our lives that we end up undervaluing and forgetting previous stages, with it becoming necessary to recall them in ways that sometimes seem like a longing for the past or sound like old-fashioned things. And for these, as we know, we don't have any time.»

There is, however, more to memory and our common past than we might suppose. It is known today that those who have suffered severe memory loss due to illness or accident, and, as a consequence, have no remembrance of a substantial part of their past, have great trouble organizing both their present and future life. As Luísa Schmidt suggested in a thought-provoking analogy, civilizations who have lost an important part of their organized, archived memory in consequence of war, natural disaster and the like, have also great difficulty in structuring both present and future events. This, I believe, assures the importance of keeping track with our ancestors and their past deeds. It also assures the importance of our work.

But, apart from the historian of medicine, who of course is seen as something of a rare bug, little attention is paid, among the medical and academic community, to old medical books. Nonetheless, we have had, in the recent past, some rewarding experiences, regarding some little but fully worthy initiatives to promote them, such as the “Book of the month”, which has been a common practice in some libraries for quite a few years. Users may thus become aware that the collection exists through the acquaintance with some of its highlights. We would like to call your attention to some of them. But first, let us consider a handful of questions.

Digital Libraries on the Grow

Today, in what has been seen as a “digital fever”, more and more libraries are offering, via their websites, access to digital collections that include many fully digitized books, including old books¹, in ever growing numbers. These add to, or – in many cases – take advantage of, larger projects such as Google Books.

The scenario in digital libraries will continue to change rapidly. In fact it is my conviction, as someone who has been trained as an historian, that the Internet is still, not considering its inception but its worldwide use, a relatively new medium. This is a fact we must take into consideration when analyzing and confronting what has been achieved versus our own expectations.

A digitization project which aims to offer readers instant online access to rare items should not repeat work that has already been done or is in the process of being done. While we cannot know in advance or in detail what others are planning, we should offer our readers the possibility of accessing the full text to a great number of works that exist in our catalogs; even though the item is not quite the same, the work becomes readily available - whereas in most cases rare book collections are not.

One of the many things that have been available for some years now is the possibility of linking a bibliographic record to the full text of the given work.

Why shouldn't we provide the user with full text digital editions or other useful electronic resources, such as partial content, images, and other relevant data when in so many cases these are just a click away? I take it that the research and technical work implied here might as well be considered by many as too much time consuming if not of scant usefulness to users.

¹ It seems paradoxical that one of the first uses librarians found for new technologies was to promote “old technology”. Very old indeed, since by definition old books are those printed sometime between the invention of the press in the late fifteenth century and 1800.

As far as I am concerned, those links, especially those to full text, freely available digitized editions, should be included in bibliographic records. Even if it is impossible to determine how long they will last, that is, how long that electronic resource will effectively work.

Can you (not) repeat please?

Repetition is something librarians wish to avoid, although it probably happens a lot more than we would like to believe. Working to avoid repetition is commonplace in day-to-day cataloguing work in libraries. Most likely, when working on a bibliographic record, we search other libraries' websites and their catalogs online for information. The chances are that work has already been done somewhere in some library, most likely in a lot of libraries. But even if we choose to import it, even if that is not impractical, we still have to check for mistakes, some incongruence or a colleague's idiosyncrasy – and we do have to see if it that record suits the specific item in our library.

Although this is likely to happen with modern-contemporary books, it is old books that challenge us the most. No two items are alike. Some hundred years of history guarantee that items of the same work (same edition, date, printer, etc.) have in some way or other become older quite differently over the years. One of them might still appear in an almost mint condition, while the other can be severely damaged, its yellowish pages torn apart, a true puzzle suit to a librarian's nightmare.

There are, of course, countless examples of more subtle differences, quite interesting in the lessons they provide: former ownership marks and signatures, handwritten notes of various types, ex-libris, bookbinding features and the like. I suppose that many times we decided not to include these in the bibliographic record, but they should not be forgotten or neglected, lest we are to lose an important part of the history of our institutions.

There is another sort of repetition I would like to focus on. In the Library of the Lisbon Faculty of Medicine we have been for long and are still tempted to digitize many items of our rare book collection. We considered quite a lot of books in the beginning, whereas today this only involves those we believe will be hard to find anywhere else – this is the

case of Manuel Constâncio's astounding *Anathomia* - an eighteenth century's manuscript in which the anatomy lessons of the late master have been preserved – a book that allows us to marvel at the medical teaching of those times in Portugal and beyond; and of which no other copy exists to our knowledge.

So, for a great and ever-growing number of old books of medical sciences that have been gathered in the Library over centuries there is already a complete digitized edition available online. Google Books provide them by the thousands, but there are many other sites. Therefore, while we don't know in advance or in detail what Google Books and others are planning, I believe we should offer our readers the possibility of accessing the full text to a great number of works that exist in our catalogs.

Our Possible Futures

Although we might deny it, we do have our own ideas about how the future of libraries will take shape. Although we also know it will be quite different when we are there. So we cannot guarantee how much time those 856 field links will last, what advantages will come from them or how many readers will actually access them.

No matter how politics of public access to old / rare books may vary from library to library, I believe it still poses problems for librarians the world over. I am thinking of the somewhat embarrassed librarian who refuses to turn his back on a particular reader whose «working methods» with old books might not suit their fragile condition or, even worse, afraid that he might be tempted to take some old map or lithograph home with him.

In our very own National Library, a famous Nobel Prize winner was actually prevented from accessing the rare books collection. It is true they can be easily damaged – just think of the dust and sometimes even large pieces of binding that many of them leave on the desk when we take them back to the shelf.

So it is obvious that a digitized version can help to preserve items while at the same time users can still access the text even via remote access. Alas, researchers and historians will always say it is not quite the same – and rightly so. It is not about being old-fashioned.

They will always demand the physical item, arguing that even the most accurate, high resolution picture is not the same thing – with which we tend to agree.

What We Are Doing and What We Want to Do

In 2009 we submitted a project called «The Memory of Medical Teaching through the Centuries: the Simão José Fernandes' Rare Book Collection» to Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for funding and it has been accepted.

Simão José Fernandes (1793-1845) was a notable Portuguese doctor and bibliophile who donated an impressive rare book collection to the Faculty of Medicine Library. The Library was, in its own right, heir to the collection that came from the old Royal School of Surgery (later the Medical-Surgical School of Lisbon). These had received some of the richest book collections as a result of the extinction of religious orders in the advent of Liberalism.

Our Project has, as main goals, to preserve and revive the historical memory of medical teaching at the Faculty and of the institution itself, through the valuation, preservation, conservation and digitization of its historical collections. In some of these aspects, the Library staff has done and will continue to do great part of the work, while in others we will turn to outsourcing - namely, valuation has been carried out by a bookseller specializing in old books, while digitization will be done by a professional company.

Roughly 4 000 rare books out of about 6 000 have been catalogued and are now available in SIBUL (the University of Lisbon's cooperative cataloguing system, which gathers most of its libraries' catalogs).

Links were inserted in the bibliographic records, using the 856 MARC field, to the title page image and /or full text, when freely available - we have decided to digitize, from the entire collection, the title page of each book, including a link to it in the bibliographic record, while in some remarkable cases digitizing also partial content, illustrations and such. In our site, a great part of those images have a click-to-enlarge feature.

Meanwhile, some items have been restored and many more will be, according to a conservation and preservation plan that accounts, among other specifications, to urgent situations.

In the end of the project we will have a complete catalog of our rare book collection, published both in paper and electronic form.

Some of our Books of the Month and a Glimpse of the Seas of Knowledge they Treasure.

'Green thinking' avant la lettre

RAUCH, François Antoine, 1762-1837

Harmonie hydro-végétale et météorologique: ou recherches sur les moyens de recréer avec nos forêts la force des températures et la régularité des saisons par des plantations raisonnées / par F.A. Rauch. - Paris: chez les frères Levrault, An X de la République [1802]. - 2 vol.; 20 cm.

In an age when 'green thinking' is a major issue, this work reminds us that ecological concerns were not invented in the last decades of the twentieth century. This work was arguably the first to express those, along with an elaborate land-use planning applying to the French territory.

In revolutionary France (on the title page we read «An X de la République», that is 1802, in the revolutionary calendar then in use), as in the whole of Western Europe, the quest for farmland led Man to grub massive forest zones without care.

This rare edition had however little impact at the time. Interest was renewed in the late twentieth century.

Syphilis: News of a 'Foreign' Disease

Ruy Diaz de Isla, 1462-1542

Tractado cõtra el mal serpentino : que vulgarmente en España es llamado bubas / Ruy Diaz de Isla, 1462-1542. - Sevilla : en casa de Dominico de Robertis, 1539

Tracing the origin of most diseases requires decades of interdisciplinary work, combining modern medical research with anthropology, archaeology, etc.

As with many other diseases, there is no agreement on the origin of syphilis: while some authors argue that it came from the New World brought by Columbus's crew members, others, basing their interpretation on archaeology, maintain a pre-Columbian origin.

The first accounts of syphilis describe it as a "foreign" illness, as might be expected from such a "curse" as a sexually transmitted disease. Thus, syphilis was "Neapolitan" to the French, "morbus gallicus" to the Italians, and so on.

Pathologies are generally (scientifically) named based on Greek and Latin roots which account for the affection and / or affected organ. In the case of syphilis, the origin is mythological and is beautifully described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Apollo punished the shepherd Syphilus with the disease, for having allegedly insulted him.

...and Man created the Vaccine

Edward Jenner, 1749-1823

Indagação sobre as causas, e efeitos das bexigas de vacca... e conhecida pelo nome de vaccina / por Eduardo Jenner; traduzida do original Inglez por ... J. A. M. - Lisboa : na Regia Officina Typographica, 1803. - 137, [12] p., [4] f. il., [1] tab. desdobr. : il., tab. ; 23 cm. - Com 4 estampas coloridas, 1 tabela desdobrável

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) referred to smallpox (caused by two main virus strains, *variola major* and *variola minor*) as "the most terrible of all the ministers of death." The metaphor illustrates the reputation of the disease that was eradicated only in the last decades of the twentieth century.

It was to fight smallpox that first vaccine was developed, by Benjamin Jesty, a farmer in Dorset, UK. In 1774 he inoculated his wife and two children, immunizing them against the disease.

History sometimes repeats itself: the creation of the first vaccine is not attributed to Jesty, but to Edward Jenner, an English physician who made his first inoculation years later, and who would, however, be successful in claiming the credits.

The Birth of Dermatology

Jean Louis Alibert, 1768-1837

Description des maladies de la peau observées à l'hôpital Saint-Louis, et exposition des meilleures méthodes suivies pour leur traitement / par J.L. Alibert. - Paris : chez Barrois l'ainé et fils, 1806. - [4], XXII, 286 p., 53 grav. : il. ; 55 cm. - Com 53 gravuras, a cores.

It is clear that modern books have features we seldom find in old ones. For example, take modern publishers' concern for portability. Indeed, our present example is everything but portable. This edition of *Description des maladies de la peau observées à l'hôpital Saint-Louis* has nonetheless other attributes to it besides its height and weight (21 inches, 11 pounds). It is a founding text of contemporary dermatology, and the author, Jean Louis Alibert (1768-1837), was among those responsible for establishing dermatology as a medical specialty.

It is essential, in dermatology, to refer to pictorial representation, as accurate as possible, of skin disease symptoms, and Alibert was a pioneer not only in systematically describing these diseases but also in providing accurate, hand colored pictures. We must remember that photography appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it would have to pave its way until it could serve as a means for the accurate depictions we know of.

Foggy Days in London Town

Nathaniel Hodges, 1629-1688

Loimologia : or, an historical account of the plague in London in 1665 : with precautionary directions against the like contagion / by Nath. Hodges. [To which is added] An essay on the different causes of pestilential diseases and how they become contagious... / by John Quincy. - London : printed for E. Bell, 1720. - [2], 288 p. ; 20 cm.

This work is a vivid, first-hand account of the epidemic that became known as the Great Plague of London, which killed roughly one fifth of the city's population, in 1665-66.

The fact that most physicians abandoned the city in the course of the epidemic adds to the value of this work, which accounts for the author's observations, made as he was testing medication and therapies then available. It also registers the number of victims in each parish.

We also learn that the English writer Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) based his *A Journal of the Plague Year* on this work.

Hippocrates is not Hippocrates

Hyppocrates Luzitano, ou aforismos de Hyppocrates / traduzidos fielmente do Latim para o Idioma Portuguez... [por] Francisco Daniel Nogueira. - Lisboa: na Off. de Pedro Ferreira, 1762. - [16], 248 p.; 15 cm

The name Hippocrates is almost synonymous with medicine. He is widely regarded as the father of rational medicine, and when medical students in their debut swear a modern version of his famous oath, they are still paying homage to the genius of Ancient Greece. Still, it is more myth than reality that we refer to when we utter the name Hippocrates. As a matter of fact, just as modern philology disputes the authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Hippocratic Corpus, the body of works that it gathers and its authorship also remain under seemingly never-ending academic dispute.

Aside from the famous oath, his aphorisms, in their succinct, comprised form, epitomize ancient knowledge that has stood the test of time. In these, medicine is inseparable from philosophy, emphasizing, in particular, moral and ethical issues. A medical doctor must possess a thoroughly cultivated mind, not a mere technical know-how.

This Portuguese edition presents two translations of the original Greek text, with the Latin text facing the Portuguese text – Latin being the *lingua franca* of science, the author worried that many students made a poor use of it and so he decided to put it in plain vernacular.