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Online searching: an untapped resource for researching the history of the health sciences

by Robert E. Skinner

Researchers in historical disciplines have been slow to make use of online searching as an information gathering tool for a number of reasons. Chief among these reasons is the fact that historians and scientists do not attack research projects in the same way. The scientist typically conducts a literature review to see what work has been accomplished in his area of interest and also to see that the particular slant he is studying has not been reported by someone else. It seems clear that historians do not approach problems in this way.

M. F. Steig has noted that few researchers in history know very much about online services or of their potential. Furthermore, few of them bother to make use of the indexing, abstracting, and bibliographic tools in their field to gather potentially valuable secondary source materials. The results of Steig's study have led her to conclude that historians generally have an unsystematic approach to research.¹ The author's experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student in history tend to support her view.

It is important for those of us who work in information gathering activities in the history of medicine to realize that this situation does not have to continue and that we can be the agents of change simply by becoming aware of the capabilities of tool that have been at hand all along. The medical bibliographer's job has always included the education of the patron, and this is no less true if the patron is a medical historian or a health professional seeking historical background for a publication.

There are three databases available to nearly all medical libraries that have application to historical research, though two of them may not immediately spring to mind. They are MEDLINE, HISTLINE, and CATLINE.

MEDLINE

MEDLINE is the best-known database in the health sciences and is the oldest. Since it includes the contents of the Cumulative Index Medi-

cus, the International Nursing Index, and the Index to Dental Literature, it also tends to be the most comprehensive. While few of us think of it as fertile ground for historical research, a recent query of MEDLINE's current file revealed well in excess of 15,000 articles in the history of the health sciences.

MEDLINE also abounds with special features that make history searching easy and effective. The Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) provides the user with a strong vocabulary for history searching with terms such as HISTORY OF DENTISTRY, HISTORY OF NURSING, and HISTORY OF MEDICINE. This last heading is also a broad array term with more specific time period headings available under it. These include:

HISTORY OF MEDICINE, ANCIENT
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, MEDIEVAL
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 15th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 16th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 17th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 18th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 19th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, 20th CENTURY
HISTORY OF MEDICINE, MODERN

These terms may be searched separately or all together by exploding the MeSH Tree number for HISTORY OF MEDICINE, K1.517.211?. Combining these terms with any strategy will provide a bibliography with an historical slant.

MeSH also provides a "history" subhead (HI) which can be joined with MeSH headings in the C, D, E, F, G1-3, and H through N Tree categories. While this subhead is supposed to be routinely used to index historical aspects of any applicable subject, it is wise to use a dual strategy which includes the use of the HISTORY OF MEDICINE headings.

Other special features in MEDLINE are the "check tags." The first of these is the term HISTORICAL ARTICLE. Also available are the tags HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY and CURRENT BIO-OBIT which can be searched with any name entered in the personal name as subject field(PS). HISTORIC-

AL BIOGRAPHY is used if the subject of the article died more than two years prior to publication. CURRENT BIO-OBIT is used for still living personalities and for those who have died just prior to the writing of the article.

With all of these special features, MEDLINE can be considered the database of choice in historical information gathering. The author has found it to be valuable on a number of occasions.

HISTLINE

HISTLINE, which is derived from the Bibliography of the History of Medicine is currently the only existing database totally devoted to the history of science. It indexes not only journal articles, but also monographs, symposia, and congresses dealing with the history of the health sciences.

There is a controlled vocabulary (referred to as "keywords") but it is rather rudimentary when compared to MeSH. It is really less a vocabulary than a list of broad subject categories. Six of these keywords (DENTISTRY, DISEASES AND INJURIES, DRUGS AND CHEMICALS, PHARMACY, RELIGION, and SURGERY) can be used in conjunction with a group of keyword subtopics which are roughly analogous to MeSH subheads. There is also a keyword for pulling the broader aspects of these six called GENERAL, appropriately enough.

Searches can also be narrowed by searching countries (CY) and time periods (TP). The five time periods available are:

BEFORE 500 A.D.
500 A.D. - 1450
1450 - 1700
1700 - PRESENT
MULTIPERIOD

One of HISTLINE's best features in the built-in capability to search personal names as subjects (PS). The entries usually include the full name of the subject, inclusive birth and death dates, and, occasionally, other information as well. It is recommended to use the NEIGHBOR command to first determine the proper form of the name when conducting this type of search. In this same line is the keyword COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY which will retrieve biographical works dealing with three or more persons.

HISTLINE does have drawbacks. The worst of these is the fact that the controlled vocabulary is so broad. Narrow searches are difficult unless judicious textword searching is used by the search-

er. NLM is supposed to be evaluating HISTLINE with an eye toward improving the vocabulary. From the author's standpoint, this is something to be hoped for, as it will increase HISTLINE's utility and effectiveness.

CATLINE

Few people think of searching CATLINE as a regular course of events, but CATLINE is an excellent source of monographic material, including symposia, conferences, and proceedings in the history of the health sciences. CATLINE is easily searched using the MeSH, and special form sub-headings (SH) are available to make a search more specific.

As in HISTLINE, it is possible to search for personal name as subject using the (PS) field identifier. Again, use of the NEIGHBOR command is recommended. CATLINE also has available a corporate source as subject field (CS) which would be an excellent feature for compiling a bibliography of medical or nursing school histories, for example. The fact that older material was recently added to the database has added to CATLINE's utility and effectiveness in performing retrospective searches of the literature.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there is no shortage of online tools for searching the history of the health sciences. For those not experienced in the use of online databases, it is recommended that the Online Services Reference Manual sections 7 (MEDLINE), 8 (CATLINE), and 22 (HISTLINE) be consulted for more detail.

While there is not space here to go into this subject in great depth, there is even more available online for those who would like to involve themselves further. Libraries with access to the BRS, DIALOG, and ORBIT systems have even greater resources than those listed here. Readings that describe these sources in depth include:

Nancy G. Bruce, "Searching the History of the Health Sciences." Medical Reference Services Quarterly 1(3): 13-35, Fall, 1982.

Robert E. Skinner, "Searching the History of Science Online." Database 6(2): 54-61, June, 1983.

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Conservation:

An experimental technique in binding repair

Librarians whose collections contain primary sources in the history of the health sciences have common preservation problems, namely that their leather-bound books frequently have loose or totally-separated boards. During a year-long course on preservation techniques, my instructor, Dr. Mary Tigelaar, demonstrated an intriguing solution to these difficulties; described in the following seven steps. (Dr. Tigelaar has studied under Peter Waters at the Library of Congress and Don Etherington, now at the Humanities Resource Center.) She warns all potential users of this procedure that it is still experimental and has not yet stood the test of time. Persons interested in this approach are urged to contact her for details in depth. Her address is: Dr. Mary Tigelaar, 5300 Waneta Avenue, Dallas, Texas, 75209. - Jon Erlen.

STEPS IN REPAIRING LEATHER-BOUND BOOKS:

Materials: Japanese handmade paper, thin and thick; Dr. Martin's dyes; paste; wax paper.

Equipment: Brushes; bone folder; needle; straight edge; support equal to thickness of spine.

Procedure:

1. Dye thick Japanese paper to match leather; let dry.
2. Cut strip at 3/4 inch wide and as long as the spine.
3. Paste strip using offset method and apply to spine of closed book; let dry.
4. Open book to break on the inside and support cover at right angles to spine.
5. Cut thin Japanese-paper strip so that it overlaps both surfaces by 1/8 inch — approximately 3/8 inch wide and the length of the text-block.
6. Paste strip, using the offset method, and apply to the break; let dry.
7. Close book and rub down outside mend.

Overhead photocopiers at last?

The Abbey Newsletter (specializing in book-binding and conservation; from the School of Library Science, Columbia University) reports in July, 1983 two hopeful developments:

1) An overhead copier being developed by a British manufacturer for the British Library, which would copy from bound volumes by means of a mirror system. The book would be cradled in a V-shaped holder which would not damage the binding. Predicted for the marketplace in late 1983, the copier would cost 8 to 10,000 pounds, or 13 to 16,500 dollars. (Perhaps the research institutions of a city or region might share the purchase and the usage?)

Also, 2) the National Endowment for the Humanities has granted Library Technology Reports \$64,400 to develop a device to be used with existing plain-paper copiers, which would allow the book to lie face-up "and open no wider than about 90 degrees." One would hope that this device might perhaps come in cheaply enough so that many libraries could afford one of their own.



Tribute to John Blake

The Association of Librarians in the History of the Health Sciences commends John B. Blake, a founding member of ALHHS, for his scholarly contributions to the history of the health sciences and his willing and frequent assistance to librarians.

His bibliographic publications will be an indispensable resource for future generations of librarians and scholars.

Under his guidance, the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine has been a national resource in the history of the health sciences.

Inscribed to recognize the admiration and respect of his colleagues, in Minneapolis, May 4, 1983.

The historical work of William Dosité Postell, Sr.

by Robert E. Skinner

It is interesting to note that the writing of the history of medicine, once considered properly within the purview of the medical librarian and bibliographer, seems to have been largely abandoned by the profession in our own time. It is unfortunate that this is so, since this is a heritage that was passed down to us by the great physician-librarians of the past, such as Billings and Garrison.

There is a feeling on the part of many that researching and writing the history of medicine is really more the business of the medical practitioner or of the new breed of medical-historical scholars that have come on the scene in recent years. Perhaps there is some justification for that, but on the other hand some of the greatest historians of science never studied science to any great degree. The name of Dr. John Duffy immediately springs to mind. Probably the greatest historian of the sciences in this century was Professor George Sarton, the founder of the journal *Isis*. He once said:

I have not tried to teach science; there was no time for that, and it was not my business. I am not and have never been a science instructor, but a humanist, a man deeply interested in the humanities of science, and above all, in the personalities of scientific investigators.... The cook needs ... criticism and so does the musician and the sculptor, the chemist and the geometer. One of the main purposes of the history of science is to provide such criticism and to develop the humanities (as against the technicalities) of scientific efforts. Saints strive for goodness and justice, artists search for beauty and men of science for truth. How do they do it? And why? How do their efforts combine and help one another? How do the branches of science hold together? These are the questions — human questions, not technical ones — which we are trying to answer.¹

Postell, while not an historian of the same stature as Sarton, apparently saw medicine in the same light and tried to answer some of those questions. Much of his work in history is concerned with personalities, medical education, medical writing, and the social aspects of health and disease.

While Postell may not be a familiar figure to younger members of the profession, he was one of the leading figures in medical librarianship in the 1940's, 1950's, and early 1960's. Trained as a geologist in the early 1930's, he found his job eliminated by the depression, and turned to libr-

arianship as an alternative career. After spending a number of years working as a school librarian in rural Louisiana, Postell was chosen to be the first professionally trained librarian at the L.S.U. Medical Center in New Orleans in 1938.

When Postell took over, he found a small, poorly lit reading room with a small stack area containing about 6,000 volumes of books and journals. By the mid-1940's, he had managed to increase the library's holdings to over 20,000 volumes in spite of low budgets and the vicissitudes of academic life during wartime. By the time he left L.S.U. to become the Librarian of nearby Tulane Medical School in 1958, L.S.U. boasted a sizeable research collection.

While many would have been completely taken over with the chore of building and maintaining a medical collection, Postell was able to perform his usual duties and also to become the first really important figure in medical bibliographic instruction. Thanks to the understanding and support of Dean Rigby D'Aunoy, Postell began, in 1939, a series of six one-hour lectures that presented the history of medical writing and the practical aspects of using bibliographic tools and bibliographic compilation to freshmen students. The success of the course was entirely Postell's, but, as was typical for him, he gave credit to the dean's ruling that the course be mandatory for all students.²

Since there was no text on the subject of bibliographic instruction, Postell wrote his own. Entitled *An Introduction to Medical Bibliography* and published by L.S.U., the book went through four editions. In 1955, a revised and expanded version entitled *Applied Medical Bibliography for Students* was published by Charles C Thomas as number 259 in their prestigious "American Lecture Series."

Postell was also actively involved with the Medical Library Association and was one of the leading lights in the struggle to approve the concept of certification for medical librarians. Between 1945 and 1949 Postell served as editor of the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, a position that he used to urge the membership on to greater heights of professionalism. Postell was recognized twice by the M.L.A. for his contributions to the profession. In 1952 he was chosen association president and in 1958 he was awarded the Marcia C. Noyes Award for Service to the Profession.

It is as a medical historian that we are primarily concerned with Postell here. Postell was

descended from two southern families who had lived in America since colonial times. Apparently they instilled in him a love of the past for he seems to have always harbored a deep interest in the history of the southern United States. Indeed he left behind a sizeable library on that subject.

His genesis as a medical historian is found in the M.L.A. Annual Meeting that was held in Newark, New Jersey in 1939. It was his first meeting and one aspect of it had a tremendous impact on him. Reporting on it later to the dean of the medical school, he wrote:

The highlights of the meeting were the paper and discussion dealing with the knowledge librarians should have of the History of Medicine, and the consensus of opinion that in the near future cal librarians would be required to be familiar with the History of Medicine.³

Postell was quick to begin working in this area. The interesting thing about Postell as an historian is that he had no formal training in historiography. His undergraduate and graduate degrees were both in physical geography, so while he had a strong background in scholarship, it was not in the discipline of history. Nevertheless, by 1940 he was lecturing to local groups and had published his first paper, "The Special School of Medicine of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning," in no less a journal than the distinguished Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics.

This paper is of some note because Postell's use of primary source materials, his organization, and writing style all suggest a higher level of historical training than he really possessed. It is also important because it seems to have set the tone for the rest of his historical work. He managed to combine his interest in his southern heritage with his enthusiasm for medical history. A quick glance at the bibliography of his work (see below) shows that nearly all of his work in this field dealt with some aspect of medicine in Louisiana or in the southern United States.

His best-known work, of course, is the monograph he published on the health of slaves in the pre-Civil War south. This book seems to have had its beginnings in Postell's membership on a special committee of the Social Sciences Research Council in 1943. The committee had been formed to study health conditions in the south and its findings were published in a book entitled Social Research on Health. Postell's contribution was a chapter called "Historical Aspects of Health Problems in the South."

Earlier Postell had begun, as a hobby, traveling about the rural south collecting antique medical and pharmaceutical implements. This led him into the directorship of a program sponsored by the women's auxiliary of the Louisiana State Medical Society. The program's purpose was to collect and preserve the medical heritage of the state.

These two occupations somehow merged to create the idea of a project concerning the health

of southern slaves. With the help of a grant from the L.S.U. Council on Research, he began visiting museums and archives all over the south accumulating information from letters, diaries, and plantation records. The end result was the appearance, in 1951, of The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations. Published by the L.S.U. Press, the book had the distinction of being Volume One in the new "Social Science Series."

It is apparent from reading Postell's non-historical writing that he thought of history as a proper professional activity and an important part of his job as a medical librarian. History made up a considerable part of his course and books on medical bibliography as well. It is clear that he saw his scholarship in this area as a means to legitimize his place on the faculty of the medical school. Indeed, Postell held faculty rank at a time when few medical librarians in the country could lay claim to such a distinction. His library at L.S.U. had the further distinction, in 1955, of becoming a regular department of the medical school. As the Department of Medical Bibliography, each member of the professional staff became a full member of the medical school faculty, a situation that endures to this day.

For Postell, who died in 1982, the image of the medical librarian as a professional member of the medical school faculty was very important. One of his major goals was to gain recognition for the profession as a scholarly group. For those of us interested in the history of medicine as a part of medical librarianship he will always stand as an outstanding example for us to follow.

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