The Dynamics of Primary Source and Electronic Resource: The Digital Renaissance and the Post-Reformation Digital Library

by Jordan J. Ballor

Editor’s Summary

The transition from mechanical printing to electronic information dissemination amounts to a digital renaissance, enabling primary source documents to be reborn as electronic resources. For history scholars, this presents opportunities and challenges for preserving centuries-old original texts in a digital environment, supporting downloading and digital access and presenting original research. The Post-Reformation Digital Library (PRDL) serves as a case study, capturing a select set of resources on theology and philosophy of the 15th to 18th centuries from a variety of physical locations and digital libraries. Through digitization, digital access and systematic cataloging, the PRDL – along with the database, social networking and dedicated website it has prompted – are helping to overcome barriers to access. Though a modest initiative, the progress of the PRDL demonstrates possibilities for rediscovering historical materials and making them available for modern scholarly studies.

Keywords

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We are today at the leading edge of a digital revolution, a revolution of information dissemination comparable in scale to that experienced in Europe over 500 years ago. It has become commonplace, if not a cliché, to invoke the Renaissance when discussing historical precedents for the radical implications of technological advances in the information sciences of the last few decades. But the comparison is indeed apt; it may well be that we face an end to the dominance of the mechanically printed text akin to the end of the dominance of the manuscript in the West in the 15th century. Some who herald this transition go so far as to call our current era “the late age of print” [1, p. 93].

When speaking of a digital renaissance in the context of religious history and historical theology, what comes foremost to mind is literally a rebirth of primary source documents into an electronic world. Whereas the Renaissance of the late-medieval and early-modern world focused on bringing to bear the wisdom of the ancient world, including a return to the textual sources of that era, today’s digital renaissance is concerned with bringing to bear the printed sources of bygone times, in this particular case those of the Renaissance and Reformation, in electronic form.

The widespread availability of many of these sources in digital form is a relatively novel phenomenon. An essay on resources in Reformation research published as recently as 2008 could make no mention, for instance, of the vast array of continental sources that were rapidly becoming available from Google Books [2, pp. 25–56]. This example illustrates how quickly things are changing in this digital renaissance. Whereas in the first Renaissance it took decades for printing presses to populate the European continent, the transition to digital sources freely and widely available the world over has taken just a few years.

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Digital Bibliography and the Problem of Curation

There are today at least two basic kinds of projects for digital humanities scholars: 1) the presentation and preservation of native analog texts (primary sources) in a digital environment, whether for research use, classroom use or both and 2) the presentation of research (secondary sources) in a born-digital format. It is the former efforts that this essay addresses, that is, the dynamic between “source,” the primary texts and documents of the 16th and 17th centuries, and “resource,” the digital tools to bring these sources to bear in some way, especially in the display of analog texts in digital form and within the context of religious history and historical methodology.

What does this rapid evolution mean concretely for academic research today? Take the case of the bibliography, a basic element of scholarly research. Imagine the class of texts that in the best possible world are relevant to a topic, all those texts that have ever existed, or will ever exist, that relate to what is being researched. Let us call this broadest class of theoretically possible-to-include texts archetypal. This broadest class is the standard for which scholars strive in our bibliographic work.

The class of texts that are actually acquirable for us depends on a number of contextual circumstances, however. Depending on when we live, some texts might not yet have been created or might not yet have been discovered or, worse yet, might have been created but not survived in any concrete form or recorded memory. This narrower class of acquirable texts, different in each context because of any number of variables, we might call ectypal, that bibliography of which we are actually capable, corresponding in a greater or lesser measure to the archetypal bibliography.

Whereas research standards used to depend on factors like travel budgets, archival access and local library holdings, they now also include factors like download ability and digital accessibility. As the church historians and research methodologists James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller wrote in 1995, “[t]he areas in which students can safely ignore the new methods and source mediums are becoming fewer, and even those scholars working in areas as yet untouched by this technology can still benefit from an exposure to the conceptual elegance of unimpeded research, and exhaustive, near-perfect bibliographies” [3, p. 74]. What the digital renaissance has done is to broaden the class of texts for ectypal (near-perfect) bibliographies to more closely correspond to our hypothetical, archetypal (perfect) bibliography.

But if the reach of our ectypal bibliographies comes increasingly closer to our ideal archetypal bibliographies, the challenge is for our grasp to sufficiently match that reach. This digital renaissance raises serious issues for the orderly accessibility of digital sources. This is, at its core, a problem of curation – the management, organization, preservation and care for and the stewardship of – a set of digital artifacts.

The Post-Reformation Digital Library

The Post-Reformation Digital Library (PRDL; www.prdl.org) is an example of one kind of response to this current situation, a resource intended to provide streamlined access to a specialized set of sources. Apart from its usefulness for a particular area of scholarship (in this case early modern religious history), the PRDL is a case study of what can be done in reaction to this dynamic of source and resource. This library is a model with some application across a number of different disciplines: philosophy, language, literature, medicine, history and so on.

The Post-Reformation Digital Library is a select database of digital books relating to the development of theology and philosophy during the Reformation and post-Reformation/early modern era (the late 15th-18th centuries). Late medieval and patristic works printed and referenced in the early modern era are also included, as well as select modern editions, especially Opera, of relevant authors now available on the web. PRDL spans publicly accessible collections from major research libraries, independent scholarly initiatives and corporate documentation projects. With the proliferation of digital books scattered across various places on the web, it can be difficult for the individual scholar to find or keep track of all the new content that is appearing almost daily. The PRDL is a collaborative effort to organize this content for scholars of early modern theology.

The core of the PRDL project involves the organization of thousands of documents available in digital form from sources including Google Books and the Internet Archive. Also included are the offerings of a range of select digital libraries from Europe and North America, which are beginning to
make digitized forms of their holdings available to the public. The project covers the work of thousands of authors from a wide variety of theological, philosophical and ecclesiastical traditions.

The PRDL had its beginnings in a group of doctoral students associated with the Calvin Theological Seminary, specifically doctoral students in historical theology studying with Dr. Richard Muller. At some point in 2008, through a series of informal discussions as well as disciplinary-focused colloquia, they determined that there was an obvious need to join together to more systematically catalog the various digital sources that were becoming newly available every day. The hope was that collaboration might eliminate redundancies since many students were spending time finding the same works repeatedly and also that such efforts would eliminate lacunae, tapping into respective areas and figures of expertise and focus to cover theological sources in the period more broadly.

The project was also focused on the practical problem faced by many of our colleagues that upon graduation, when heading to other institutions, sometimes domestically but more often abroad, they were not able to easily access the quality of sources made readily available by the Hekman Library and Meeter Center at Calvin College and Seminary. Dr. Muller initiated the effort by providing a document with a finding list of 207 theological works and 76 philosophical works (mostly available from Google Books and based on the bibliography for his four-volume work, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics). The effort first began with a large email list of potentially interested scholars who could add to and amend this list as appropriate, but this approach quickly became unwieldy.

Eventually the list was moved to a wiki format, specifically PBWorks (formerly PBWiki), which would allow users to add links to other sources they had found. A small core of active participants took the initiative to arrange the finding list more formally and systematically. The participants focused on a basic arrangement of the authors to be covered. As the various lists began to take shape, discussions began about hosting a public version of the site. Going public necessitated some additional formalization of the work, and so an editorial board was formed and an agreement was negotiated for the Meeter Center to host PRDL.

Once a basic level of coverage in the major areas was achieved, the pages were migrated from the PBWiki site to Calvin College’s LibGuides system, a fairly common web format used by a number of libraries for study guides and bibliographies, as well as a number of other functions. Student workers helped with the migration, and PRDL (http://libguides.calvin.edu/prdl) went public in the fall of 2009.

As of April 1, 2010, PRDL covered roughly 800 authors from a variety of traditions. Given the expertise of the scholars on the executive board, the strength of the PRDL has been its coverage of the Reformed tradition, so that more than half of the 800 authors were Reformed authors from the 16th and 17th centuries. Todd Rester, a PRDL executive board member, rightly called this a veritable “Abbadie to Zwingli” of Reformed theology [4].

Recognizing that there are significant limits on the initial bibliographic form of PRDL, the executive board took steps over the last half of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 to begin to address these shortcomings, resulting in the launch of a new version of PRDL on its own website in the fall of 2011.

The most significant aesthetic and functional difference between the two iterations of the PRDL is that the project has moved from a digital bibliographical format to a database-driven format. This change allows the site to show in real-time the number of authors that are covered as well as the number of works, in addition to allowing increasingly focused and narrow search options. For instance, the front page of PRDL now dynamically updates these stats (currently including coverage of more than 2,600 authors). Extremely complex searches are now also possible by variables including genre, topic, publication information or related biblical text (in the case of biblical commentaries, sermons, disputations and so on).

PRDL has also expanded coverage to include more of the newer digitization efforts, particularly those at major European universities. PRDL also formed an editorial advisory board with scholars from around North America and Europe in the spring of 2011, whose main responsibility is to provide guidance about authors and sources in other theological traditions.

Source and Resource in History’s Digital Future

The Post-Reformation Digital Library represents one attempt among
many to come to grips with the challenging dynamic of digital source and resource in research methodology today. It is a project with limited scope, but perhaps for this very reason it represents a fruitful and instructive effort that demonstrates the kinds of things that can be possible for history’s digital future. At one level there are and must continue to be analogous projects creating digital bibliographies for the purposes of other disciplines such as law, politics, literature, philosophy and language.

But at a broader level PRDL represents one possible and hopeful future for digital history. Richard Muller once wrote, “where there is text, there is hope” [5, p. viii]. Given various digital efforts around the world and attempts to organize these resources and make their sources available in a coherent fashion, there is increasing access to the texts of the early modern era. For this reason there is growing hope that we might better understand the “historical Calvin” in Muller’s case, and in the case of the Post-Reformation Digital Library, everyone from the historical Abbadie to the historical Zwingli.

One of the notable characteristics of the Renaissance of the early modern era was the application of critical sources, methods and linguistic tools to the received scholastic method. In a similar way today’s digital renaissance has critically altered research methodology, ushering in an era in which scholarship must make responsible use of the digital sources and resources. As Bradley and Muller write, “The scholar who neglects current technological advances in the manipulation and accessing of sources puts himself or herself in the position of the student who refuses to adopt the methodological advances of the Enlightenment; they become, by definition, precritical” [3, p. 74]. As both the Post-Reformation Digital Library and the ad fontes impulse of the Renaissance show, the first step of today’s digital renaissance is taken with a new and hopeful return “to the sources.”

Resources Mentioned in the Article


