

Medieval Sources Online

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Most famously, Aristotle declared that men are by nature political. It's chancy, of course, to take on the genius of Stagirus, but he did manage to get it wrong once in a very long while (oh, to be so wrong so infrequently!). Chaucer, however, may have had it more accurately (and certainly did so as he anticipated our digital age) when he argued that men by nature 'love newfangledness'. Nothing inspires men more than a new gadget or some new digital gewgaw by which means we can throw about our testosterone ('My smartphone is faster, bigger, more app-endowed...') in yet another, if somewhat oddly geeky, way. Clothes may make the man, but gadgets define his seriousness, his worth, or so we're led to believe, and quite a few of us believe it.

[Medieval Sources Online](#) [2] (or as it appears most often, *Medieval Sourcesonline*) may not be the most newfangled of the newfangled digital offerings, but it is one of the most curious at first glance. Here is a field known for its *laudator temporis acti*, and yet here it is, in all its online glory. But a quick thought erases such nonsense. In another sense, medieval sources should have been online first, given their importance, as well as their variety and delight.⁽¹⁾ Furthermore, much of that age's history, the hagiography, politics, religion and so on is fundamental to understanding everything else that follows.

Thankfully, the long-learned craft, our short lives, and our love of newfangledness all conspired to give us Manchester University Press's *Medieval Sources Online (MSO)*. Currently there are about three thousand pages of materials 'annotated and edited to the high standard expected of a university press.'⁽²⁾ Given that the press in question has more than 100 years of experience in creating such resources, scholars and students of the Middle Ages now have a primary source for teaching and research. New titles added to the series will be added to *MSO* following a two year embargo.

The content of *MSO* is not, when compared to other databases, very formidable. Indeed, one would not use the world formidable at all when describing the numeric content of *MSO*. As of August 2009, only 13 texts were available online. These 13 did include full translations of entire texts (*The Annals of Fulda*, *The Annals of St- Bertin*, *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily* by 'Hugo Falcandus' 1154-69) and more content-specific texts such as *Catholic England*, *Women in England 1275-1525*, *Jews in Western Europe 1400-1600*, *Chronicles of the Revoltuion 1397-1400*,

(the deposition of Richard II and the usurpation of Henry Bolinbroke), *The Black Death, Norman Europe* and more. Janet Nelson of Kings College and Rosemary Horrox of Fitzwilliam College in concert with the Press have been able to attract some of the most recognizable names in Medieval Studies to write for the series. Among these are Timothy Reuter, R. N. Swanson, Jennifer Ward, and P. J. P. Goldberg.

The texts are easy to use. A simple browse feature allows access into the texts and a search mechanism allows for richer, deeper investigation. Universities with subscription access can have unlimited use throughout the campus, and, of course, texts proffered by the Press can be used as texts for individual courses. Most interesting is the print option which allows single copies to be made available to students 'to take the texts away with them to read'.⁽³⁾ Subscriptions are both individual (US \$144) and institution wide (US \$224). Obviously, buying each one of these texts individually (and of course having only one copy each), would cost more than the institution-wide subscriptions, even relying on Amazon for the best possible prices. On the balance, Medieval Sources Online is one of the more affordable online resources for just about any library. Granted, access to a baker's dozen of resources isn't much, but if those resources are among the most important for the field of study (and in this case they are), then any institution offering medieval studies or even medieval courses should give serious consideration to the *MSO* purchase.

What makes this collection useful is the access it offers to original documents. For example, *The Towns of Italy in the Later Middle Ages* offers scholars and students access to documentation and chronology in translation not only to primary sources but also to current debates. And the range – all of Italy – is enormous. 108 documents offer a backdrop to medieval Italy in specific and European medieval history in general.

Horrox's work on the Black Death provides both medieval and contemporary views of the dreaded disease. The horrific malady that is estimated to have killed 25 million people in Europe in the 14th century is now attributed to flea bites. But lacking such scientific knowledge, it's no wonder that many thought divine retribution was being visited upon them. It is doubtless, too, at least one reason why Chaucer described our teary vale as 'lyfe so short'. Horrox's book has contemporary significance even today, given the staggering revelation of the 'Black Death's' recrudescence. In August of this year, an outbreak of the plague in the province of Qinghai caused the Chinese government to quarantine the town of Ziketan and its 10,000 residents.⁽⁴⁾ This is the sixth outbreak of the plague since 2001, according to the World Health Organization. The final third of Horrox's book provides a glimpse into the social and psychological impact and its devastating economic impact of the disease. The book covers Sicily, Florence, Avignon, Padua, Bristol and more.

The reach of these and other sources is far beyond their themes of even the period covered. Students of literature, history, sociology, geography, economics, philosophy and religion will benefit from access to these materials. Given the nominal cost, most students in these areas would benefit greatly from this exposure, even if their major field of study is not literature. But Medieval Sources Online has more to offer than just the resources. Its portal is also of importance to those interested in medieval studies. The portal is public and so is open to anyone, whether subscribing or not, and so its many resources are available to any who know about it. The portal links users to important medieval sources on the web. The link, 'Women in medieval times,' for example, provides access to key medieval women and their work: women in the law, in commerce, and women at home in medieval times. Links to the spirituality of women in medieval times is also included. 'The Black Death' links users to sources, sometimes digitized ones, to reactions to the disease as well as the 'Peasant's Revolt of 1381'.

'The Anglo-Saxons' links users to sources on or about Beowulf, Bede, archeological sites, and what life was like during these times. 'The Crusaders' provides links to artwork, military orders, Saladin, the Byzantine Empire, Jews, the First and Second Crusades and a great deal more. 'Magna Carta and King John' gives readers access to various online renditions of the original text and documents contemporaneous with it. 'The Vikings' link takes readers to *Heimskringla*, the Chronicle of Kings of Norway and other sources in the *Medieval and Classical Library*. Other links provide access to monasticism, the Norman Conquest, and like-minded subjects. Following these excellent links are others to search engines and megasearch engines (e.g. Dogpile) that will provide students new to medieval studies a research lantern to light their way.

Why can't students simply 'google' medieval studies? Doubtless they can and will, but this page acts as the first level of filter. Google, despite what it says, is more about quantity over quality. Only persistent researchers are willing to go beyond the first page or two, most students believing the first screen enough.⁽⁵⁾ Weaning students from the one-search-fits-all approach is troublesome enough. But weaning them from thinking that's the end of any type of research is more difficult still. The portal provides professors with a way of telling students where to begin since beginning (and ending) at Google is all too commonplace. Of course, a single portal will not do this, but it is at least a start.

Many of the links in the portal come from *The ORB: Online Reference Sources for Medieval Studies* website and its associated *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* site, so why not just send students there? While that is certainly an option, the said site can be daunting to the uninitiated. Medieval Sources Online organizes the material in such a way that not only guides students in the right direction, but also provides them with ideas for research.

Having said all that, the portal did have some problems. In more than one case, sources ended in dead links. I tried on several different days in different weeks to be sure this simply wasn't a glitch in my service or my institution's service, but alas, no. Either the links are broken because the sites are no longer maintained, a persistent uniform resource locator (PURL) was not used to begin with, or the sites are no longer being maintained. But it could be for no other reason than because the sites are on the web and fall victim to link rot.

Link rot (or linkrot, as it's sometimes written) is a process whereby either the links fail or the site itself is changed but some or many of the links do not.⁽⁶⁾ It is a problem on the web and one that has not entirely vanished with PURLs and other Web upgrades. Some links fail in as many as 36 months or as few as 18. This is less of a problem with aggregate databases (e.g. *Academic Search Premier*, *Lexis-Nexis*) as it is with open or public sites on the web, but both experience link rot (either through links themselves or their associated footnotes).⁽⁷⁾ What users are to do at this point remains a mystery; and if it's puzzling to superannuated users of the Web, what must it be to the novice or the casual student?⁽⁸⁾ PURLs solve part of the problem, allowing for permanent link-tracing regardless of what happens to the site other than complete takedown or dismantlement. Link rot continues as one of a number of problems bedeviling the Web, one that will not soon disappear until standards and other guidelines are imposed upon a medium that delights in its own wildness.⁽⁹⁾

Another rather annoying problem with the Web and with Medieval Sources Online is ascertaining when the last update occurred on the site. The 'publication' date on the site is copyrighted 'by Manchester Press 1991–2004'. Does this mean that Manchester carried out its project until 2004 and dropped it, or is this the last date of the last update. Either way, an answer would be useful, so I sought one by emailing the contact listed at Medieval Sources Online, asking not only about this, but also a few other questions. More than a month has passed and I do not have either an acknowledgement of the inquiry nor do I know if anyone is regularly monitoring the site. Some brief statement or *nota bene* to this effect would be most helpful. Never one to give up immediately, I surfed over the Manchester University Press (<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/> [3]) and fished (not phished, mind you) about for an answer. While it's still possible to find *MSO* titles by searching MUP's site, there's no word about *MSO*, save for the web address listing on its FAQ page. After an hour of poking about, I finally emailed various contact listing

for a reply. MUP replied to my inquiry, directing me to email *MSO*.

Much of this trouble could be easily bypassed if web administrators would simply keep up sites, if only minimally. While I find *MSO* an excellent site, this kind of silence serves neither its reputation nor that of MUP. But this is yet another problem if we intend the Web to become our world's global library – and nothing I've seen so far tells me this is *not* what many desire. It may not be your desire or mine, it is without question the desire and the design of Google, Gates, et al. Not one to demonize either of those eponyms, let me hasten to say that many in my own profession – librarianship – also seek this endgame. They are succeeding while so many nagging problems, like the furiously maddening dripping faucet that cannot be fixed or stopped, are draining our intellectual capital. We'll have this digital and global village library, but it may one day appear to have been designed by the digital village idiot.

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way, but we're all in a rush – no one seems to know why – to get, well, where we're not sure either, but certainly away, far away from paper and those things like magazines and books so dependent upon it. Whether it's the revenge of the eco-freaks or a case of the green-with-envy crowd run amok is anyone's guess. But we are losing to the digital world a great deal of material, even material it feigns to support and provide access to. The problem is that when digital materials manifest difficulties, the first rule of thumb is to deny them while quickly moving on to the next digital project. In the digital wild world anything is possible, and there are no police. Readers of my earlier reviews will recall the Orwellian brouhaha in which Amazon and its Kindle put out the fire by summarily deleting Orwell's books.

The move enraged readers everywhere, to say nothing of the irony of the author in question and the Big Brother-like move. It also sparked at least one lawsuit.[\(10\)](#) Is this merely a digital hiccup or the tip of the proverbial iceberg? It's too early to say but probably not a mere hiccup; it is part of the overall problem of trying to change quickly from what has worked well for more than half a millennium to something that has only worked – and not always well – for only a few decades.[\(11\)](#) Perhaps if we all took a collective digital breath, we might be able to figure out what works in this medium and what doesn't and be content with that which remains. But I dream while I digress.

Contrary to what readers might be thinking, this oneiric discussion does have more than passing bearing on *MSO*. The missing link, as it were, in the evolution, so to say, from print to digital is a common platform upon which all things digital can work. Kindle has taken the early lead, but more gizmos and gadgets loom on the horizon.[\(12\)](#) *MSO*, alive or dead, may one day be relegated to access only upon new widgets now emerging, or, as is more likely the case, ones that have yet to be invented. The dizzying array makes the prospect of reading almost as laborious as sex has become since *Playboy*, et al.

Trevelyan, as it's well known, argued that our education had succeeded in creating a vast population able to read but largely unable to distinguish what is worth reading. I fear we may soon be upon those days where, education or no, reading will not be a matter of a discriminating intellect knowing what to read, but of access, availability, ease of digitization and whether or not the text has been 'erased' for whatever the reason contingent upon reading at all. We'll have a vast population of tech-loaded individuals but with Kindle-only or Google-only regulated reading. Ah, but it's brave, new world, after all.

In the interregnum, however, we can rejoice in sources like *MSO* because it does what the Web does, indeed, do so very, very well: it makes what may not yet have been known, known to all – at least for the time being.

Notes

1. I think here of Lewis' famous quip that the literature of the Renaissance was but a drop in the proverbial bucket to the literature of the Middle Ages. His quip may appear overdrawn to some but Lewis made a strong case in both *The Discarded Image* and the *Allegory of Love*. Anyone who has read at all the literature of the Middle Ages will likely be quick to agree.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. <[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. <[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Joseph Brownstein, 'Blast from the past: plague strikes China', 5 August 2009 <[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For more on the search habits of students see Andy Guess, 'Research methods "Beyond Google"', *Inside Higher Education*, 17 June 2009 <[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See Susan Lyons, 'Persistent identification of electronic documents and the future of footnotes', *Law Library Journal*, 97, 4 (Fall 2005).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. At the risk of self-promotion, see my *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library*, (Jefferson, NC, 2007), as another place to examine this phenomenon. Chapter four of that book details the unsolved problems that really must be resolved if our online futures are not to end in a black hole, or, as is more likely the case, 'Error 404 File not found'.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. This 'casual student' could be *any* student as recent studies indicate students aren't the tech-gurus we take them to be. Yes, they use Facebook or Twitter, but if asked to move beyond that or to think critically about using the Web, they are as often at a loss as the nearly retired professor who is hanging on just to get full retirement. This is why many institutions are turning to Information Literacy to solve this problem.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Let me add, too, that it will not surprise me in the least for some of the links added here to end in a '404 error not found' *cul de sac*. It won't be from my not trying to prevent this but from the nature of the beast that is the Web.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Geoffrey Fowler, 'Lawsuit: Amazon ate my homework', *WSJ Blogs. Digits*, 30 July 2009 <[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Cory Doctorow, 'Jeff Bezos' Kindle apology: please tell us what the Kindle can do' *BoingBoing*, 23 July 2009<[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Cliff Edwards, 'Barnes & Noble: who needs Amazon's Kindle?', *Business Week: The Tech Beat*, 20 July 2009 <[Back to \(12\)](#)

Other reviews:

[4]

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Links

- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3773>
- [2] <http://www.medievalsources.co.uk/>
- [3] <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/>
- [4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>