New Repositories of Scanned Books Offer Benefits to Library Users

By Kevin O'Brien

Large-scale book scanning and metadata projects are making significant additions to the world of information resources readily available to library users. Major digitization undertakings such as the Internet Archive and the HathiTrust Digital Library have broken new ground in making digital surrogates of large numbers of public domain books freely available and searchable on the web.

The content of these digital repositories comes from the shelves of the hundreds of libraries that have elected to contribute books and metadata. Scanning of the items takes place either on-site or at centralized locations, often organized under the auspices of consortial digitization efforts.

UIC participates in one such initiative administered by the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) and the Open Content Alliance (OCA), the cooperative outreach effort of the Internet Archive. Under this program, CARLI solicits lists of books to be scanned from its 80 member libraries on a quarterly basis. Books meeting the requirements for inclusion in the project are sent to a designated scanning center in the Midwest. The resulting scanned images and metadata are then made freely accessible by the Internet Archive, a non-profit organization dedicated to facilitating long-term retrieval and access of these materials.

The content of each book in the Internet Archive is viewable inside a browser application which permits a variety of page view options. The text of the book is searchable through optical character recognition software processing of the scanned images. Additionally, each book is downloadable in a variety of file formats including PDF and several e-reader options. Because the scanned books have been in use in the libraries that own them, any condition issues or marginalia added by readers over the years is visible.

UIC currently has a collection of over 500 books available. The bulk of this material comes from the Richard J. Daley Library Special Collection Department's Lawrence J. Gutter Collection of Chicagoana. Additional titles were contributed from the Special Collections Department of the Library of the Health Sciences.
Among this latter group is a fascinating record of the history of the practice of medicine in the history of Chicago, Medical and Dental Colleges of the West (1896), edited by the writer and journalist H.G. Cutler (1856-1928). This work profiles the prominent medical education institutions of the time, as well as offering brief biographies of the contemporary leading physicians and surgeons. Included is a chapter on the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the forerunner of the University of Illinois at Chicago - College of Medicine, authored by faculty members Daniel A.K. Steele and William E. Quine. This book was made available in the most recent group of UIC items contributed to the project and is now freely available to anyone with access to the web.

This photogravure illustration of the College of Physicians and Surgeons appears in Medical and Dental Colleges of the West.
While traditional printed books will be with us for a long time to come, digital book surrogates are becoming increasingly integrated into library collections. These scanned books offer ease of use because of their ready availability, combined with the added attraction of full text searchability. The Special Collections Department looks forward to offering the advantages of this new trend in librarianship by adding more books from our collection to the Internet Archive in the near future.

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