

Shelf 83

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The problem

The library in the Yorkshire Museum has been collected by York Philosophical Society over a period exceeding a 150 years. The collection is uncatalogued and the books are not available for inspection by museum visitors or for volunteers of the Society working at the museum. They were not able to be made available for participants on the Jam.

The solution

Taking a shelf essentially at random, it became clear that digital editions of some of the books existed online. This meant theoretically they could be connected with the physical copies. This could be done using digital imagery online (using images of the shelves with bibliographic data and linking to the digital collections) or it could be done offline using QR codes, NFC tags, iBeacon or other technology.

These technologies all exhibit some friction but if the object of the exercise is to allow people to examine copies of the books on their own devices, they are a cheap and easy way to experiment with this.

Posters were produced linking a shelf of eight books to digitised versions of the same texts located on Google Books, the Internet Archive and the collection of the Hathi Trust. These sources (such as <https://archive.org/details/historyantiquiti02poul>) offer diverse viewing experiences and it could be tested which is preferred by users. QR codes were used to link the digital and paper artifacts along with URL shortcodes – which can be more reliable!

Recordings of short extracts of the books were also made and uploaded to Soundcloud (at for example <http://bit.ly/1R7SHzC>, <http://bit.ly/1KBgjKx>, <http://bit.ly/1KJaQ2k>). This is a straightforward way of rendering what are large, complex and at times difficult to read (due to age, printing style or poor quality scanning) in a more manageable and accessible format.

The resulting prototype is relatively low fidelity but positive results have also been achieved by projects such as LibraryThing in printing facsimiles of bookcases at full (or near full height) with QR codes digitally inserted onto the spines of the books to create an attractive and useful resource.

In this way, the books are readable online at no cost and without any physical access to the volumes themselves having been required.

Because the project relies on existing technologies, it works equally well on mobile and desktop platforms and a version for the museum's website could be produced in due course.