IMPRESS
BEYOND IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT: RELIGION AND FREETHOUGHT IN THE BELGIAN MEDICAL PRESS (1840-1914)

Digital Approaches towards Serial Publications (18th-20th centuries), 11-12 September 2017, Royal Academies Brussels
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AIMS

1. highlight the scientific potential of 19th-century medical heritage and stimulate future digital research by providing a methodological model of analysis
digitization of three major Belgian medical journals, 1840-1914:
▪ *Bulletin de l’Académie Royale de Médecine de Belgique*
▪ *Journal de Médecine, de Chirurgie et de Pharmacologie*
▪ *Journal des Sciences Médicales de Louvain*

selection criteria:
▪ inherent scientific and patrimonial importance
▪ specific research questions
AIMS

2. reconsider the role of ideological conflict in 19th-century Belgian medicine

- study ideological views of Catholic and liberal physicians within scientific exchange: clashes and/or willingness to bypass ideological disagreements
- analyze development of professional and/or scholarly identities: common and/or ideologically specific

Selection of 4 medical subfields where ideological difference was at play:
- mental health
- gynecology
- family medicine
- public health
DIGITAL TOOLS

Why?

▪ Implicit character of ideology in the medical field; fine-grained and large-scale analysis of language is needed to correct equation of 19th medicine with liberalism

How?

▪ automatic information retrieval: topic modeling in order to create subcorpora (Mallet program).

▪ text mining, among others:
  ○ calculation of word/lemma frequencies
  ○ principle component analysis (PCA) to retrieve correlated term-frequencies
  ○ automatic analysis of word embeddings (word2vec models) to reveal the contexts in which words appear, and to detect changes over time in those embeddings.
INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONTEXT

- Bibliothèque numérique Medic@ (Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Santé, Paris): online library in the history of medicine

- 'Mining the History of Medicine' (University of Manchester): development of tools for semantically-oriented research, i.e. to record semantic shifts of medical concepts (19th-20th centuries)

CHALLENGES

- [4-year project constraints: parallel timing digitization – research]

- Digitization: part of a larger effort to preserve scientific heritage versus specific research needs of the project

- Investing in digital expertise versus reliance on ‘external’ expertise

- Impact of selection of digital tools: path dependence

- Need to look beyond the digital corpus

- Need to complement digital analysis with contextualized, hermeneutical textual interpretation