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A look at what "open scholarship" meant in 16th-century Venice, at the very dawn of age of print.

Breaking SFU Aldines Out of the Vaults

Aldus Manutius and Open Social Scholarship in the Sixteenth Century

ALESSANDRA BORDINI

Simon Fraser University

abordini@sfu.ca

JOHN MAXWELL

Simon Fraser University

jmax@sfu.ca

OCTOBER 31, 2019



Open Scholarship in Venice, as imagined by Canaletto (1697—1768)

What Is Aldus@SFU?

The year 2015 marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the death of pioneering Renaissance scholar-publisher Aldus Manutius (ca. 1451–1515). To honour the occasion, we—the Publishing Program and Simon Fraser University Library—joined forces to make available online SFU's Wosk–McDonald Aldine Collection, comprising more than one hundred books published by the Aldine Press between 1501 and 1580.

The collaborative initiative, called Aldus@SFU, began with the full-page digitization of twenty-one Aldine volumes, scanned as high-resolution images, all hosted on SFU's Islandora repository. For each book, we created rich descriptive MODS (Metadata Object Description Schema) metadata and developed a prototype website that provided different layers of interpretive context to the volumes, including a set of essays on Aldus's work and achievements, solicited from

both eminent scholars and public bibliophiles, including TV rare book expert Rebecca Romney and New York Times bestselling novelist Robin Sloan.

From the start, the long-term ambition of the project has been to develop, in collaboration with other Aldine-collecting institutions around the world, a distributed digital collection, likely using the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) and shared infrastructure. This vision capitalizes on the promise of an interconnected online world of archives and rare book collections, allowing us—scholars, teachers, researchers, and, in general, cultural heritage caretakers—to rethink the traditional model of archives and special collections as a locked vault, accessible only by a chosen few.¹ Instead, the remediation of special collections in (and as) a networked digital environment allows the rare books vault to become an open resource for a variety of interested audiences. Appropriately, this shift towards knowledge mobilization happened before, and Aldus Manutius was at the centre of it.

What Can the Sixteenth-Century “Economy of Learning” Teach Us about Open Social Scholarship?²

Aldus Manutius was the foremost scholarly publisher of the Renaissance and easily the most successful of his time. Aldus opened his printing shop in Venice in about 1490. From the outset, his declared intent was to publish all the best books of the Greek tradition, without errors and in a new typeface of *summa bellezza* (“utmost beauty”).³ At that time, the number of Greek texts printed in Italy was negligible—despite Venice being the chosen destination of a growing community of Greek émigrés as well as the direct beneficiary of a wealth of precious Greek manuscripts following the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

In 1468, the Byzantine Patriarch Cardinal Bessarion bequeathed his outstanding manuscript collection, comprising more than one thousand volumes, to the Republic of Venice. In the letter accompanying the deed of donation, Bessarion requested that “all the works of the wise men of Greece”—which he had carefully and laboriously assembled over the years—be preserved “in a place that is both safe and accessible, for the general good of all readers, be they Greek or Latin.”⁴ But the Cardinal’s wish remained unfulfilled for a long time, perhaps predictably, for reasons that had everything to do with human incompetence and negligence, if not utter indifference. Indeed, the largest collections of Greek works had been locked up in the vaults of St Mark’s Basilica for years, “packed into crates and getting in the way,” and did not find adequate storage until nearly a century after the donation.⁵ The treasures of the Byzantine Empire stayed hidden, out of sight.

Before coming to Venice to become a printer, Aldus Manutius was a scholar (and devotee) of Greek and the private tutor of the sons of the Italian aristocracy. He knew first-hand the value of the great scholarly works of classical antiquity, as well as the difficulty of accessing and circulating good copies of such books, Greek texts in particular. It is hard to say with certainty what motivated Aldus's decision to abandon his decade-long teaching career for publishing. And yet, he did it; to put it in modern parlance, he *pivoted*. Capitalizing on a largely unexplored market, Aldus turned the limited sales potential of Greek books into a successful commercial opportunity. Fuelled by his lifelong interest in Greek letters and culture, Aldus did what any modern publisher does: he took the gamble of producing books that until then had been “the minority interest of a few specialized scholars” and created a wider audience for them.⁶

Between 1495 and 1501, the Aldine Press produced a number of Greek works that was unprecedented in Europe, printing about twenty Greek incunabula; by the time of Aldus's death in 1515, the firm had released something like thirty *first editions* of Greek works.⁷ The number of copies distributed across Europe was equally impressive. Aldine scholar Martin Lowry notes that, according to authoritative sources, the average press-run of the firm was 1,000 copies for a single edition; but the number for the most popular octavo editions (small and portable) must have been much higher, reaching 3,000 copies during the firm's most productive years (1499–1504, and after 1512). Even on purely numerical grounds, Lowry observes, the Aldine Press can be regarded as “the most important focus for the distribution of literature to contemporary Europe.”⁸

As remarkable as these numbers may be, however, they tell only part of the story. It is impossible to understand the lasting impact of the Aldine Press on the cultural history of Western Europe without mentioning two of Aldus's most celebrated achievements: the development of the octavo format and the invention of italic type. The adoption of a small, pocket-sized format for secular texts, so that they could easily be carried and read anywhere, connected the feature of portability with the notion of reading for pleasure for the first time in history. The development of the new italic type was not a printing efficiency (as many have said), but rather as an attempt to provide readers with a product that was at once innovative and familiar: the invention of a script based on contemporary cursive handwriting fulfilled precisely that function.

Aldus's famous technological innovations served a larger twofold cultural mission: the transmission of the Greek literary heritage and, in the language of the humanist scholars, the “encouragement of learning.”⁹ Such an ambitious endeavour was motivated by the humanist scholar's hope for a better, more enlightened society. In a memorable passage from his preface to the *Thesaurus Cornucopia* (1496), Aldus rejoices at the thought that his publications could be “very

well received and of great benefit to all,” wishing that all the “book buriers” who were “mean enough to be dismayed to see a benefit shared by all [would] die of envy, succumb to grief and a miserable end, and finally hang themselves.”¹⁰ The passage, in all its polemical vigour, is an uncompromising declaration against any form of resistance to the broad circulation of knowledge.¹¹

Aldus's Print Shop as A Centre for Collaborative Scholarship

Through the printing of practically all the major texts of classical antiquity, both Greek and Latin, Aldus made an unparalleled contribution to the establishment of the Classical canon, “[placing it] at the centre of Western educational practice, where it remained for nearly five centuries.”¹² The establishment of that canon, it is important to note, was more than a mere literary *event*. It was a painstaking material and aesthetic process of many years, involving the organization of labour and scholarship, access to the best sources, the development of key printing technologies, and the aesthetic and scholarly development of a wealth of printing and publishing standards—from typography and pagination to punctuation and orthography. Aldus's development of a sales network centred on the trading port of Venice allowed this new, open circulation of texts to reach scholars around the Mediterranean. The achievement is not just editorial: it is about production, design, and marketing; it is also about user interface design and networks, and architectures of collaboration.

The lasting fame of the Aldine Press is inextricably tied to the name of its founder. The publisher's well-defined and inspired vision was, after all, the unifying thread that made the Aldine editions so distinctly recognizable. Yet, it would be a mistake to attribute the success of the press exclusively to the drive and efforts of a single individual. A key component of what made Aldus's enterprise stand out was the presence of a well-oiled network of learned and skilled collaborators: from the distinguished scholar-editors who assisted in preparing the manuscripts for publication, to lesser known laboratory assistants who worked as compositors, typesetters, and pressmen. Among the Greek collaborators, the Cretan philologists Marcus Musurus and Demetrios Doukas, and John Gregoropolous, Aldus's chief proofreader, deserve a special mention;¹³ among the Italian scholars, Giambattista Egnazio, Scipione Forteguerra, Girolamo Aleandro, Pietro Bembo, and Andrea Navagero.

Rather than merely printing the manuscripts that authors brought to his shop, Aldus actively participated in seeking out and preparing the text for publication, working side-by-side with his collaborators and personally supervising the printing process from start to finish.¹⁴ Al-

aldus's house-workshop was a remarkably hybrid environment: it was a vibrant laboratory of ideas and projects, a place of scholarly collaboration and liberal exchange of knowledge. In this sense, Harris's definition of Aldus as a "plurality of beings" seems particularly apt.¹⁵ Indeed, in the 1508 edition of his *Adagia*, Erasmus of Rotterdam singles out kindness and open-mindedness as the key factors to the firm's commercial success; describing his experience as a writer-in-residence at the Aldine workshop, the Dutch humanist praises the Italian scholars for generously providing him with rare unpublished material, and expresses gratitude to his host, Aldus, for "[keeping] nothing back among his treasures."¹⁶ The kind of generosity described by Erasmus was not a one-way arrangement; rather, it was a mutually beneficial alliance. In addition to gaining access to the valuable knowledge and skills provided by his collaborators and friends, Aldus also relied on their generosity for the acquisition of the material to be published. As noted earlier, the vast collection of Greek manuscripts that would form the core of the Marciana Library was not easily accessible, and, in all likelihood, Aldus obtained the great majority of source texts through his private connections.¹⁷ From the documentary sources, however scattered, we can claim with some degree of certainty that the private libraries of Marcus Musurus and Pietro Bembo played a vital role in Aldus's publishing activities.¹⁸

In conclusion, it was the "openness of mind" and generosity among peers—not as empty ideals but, rather, as concrete, ongoing practices—coupled with a newfound confidence in the printing press as a vehicle for spreading literacy, that allowed Aldus to "[build] up a library which has no other limits than the world itself."¹⁹

Following Aldus's Example Today

In late fifteenth-century Venice, priceless book collections such as Bessarion's did not receive the attention that they deserved; the authorities did not consider or treat them as an invaluable public treasure to be preserved. Predatory, self-interested, or negligent behaviour towards cultural heritage materials often resulted in "great and deplorable losses of good books."²⁰ The value and potential of these books as intellectual objects and objects of learning was inevitably and dramatically diminished. The Aldine Press changed that: in printing and circulating—in thousands of copies—the most important texts of classical antiquity, Aldus succeeded in turning these works from inaccessible (and neglected) repositories of knowledge into widely distributed articulations of Renaissance learning.

Five hundred years on, these volumes are once again secured and guarded with reverential care in the vaults of special collections libraries around the world; today, more often than not,

these materials are still inaccessible, isolated, and, in the worst cases, utterly invisible to the public. We know that this is not the destiny that either Bessarion or Aldus had in mind for their books. Centuries later, the Aldus@SFU project wants to break them out of the vaults—again.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this endeavour. Indeed, this move is a common theme in library special collections around the world. John Overholt from Harvard's Houghton Library puts it boldly: "The future of special collections is distribution."²¹ Such a positioning puts special collections squarely within the realm of open social scholarship. At the 2017 INKE meeting, Matt Huculak spoke of the tension between the traditional curatorial role of the library and the spirit of open social scholarship, a tension resolvable "by faceting datastreams of information and layering them so that 'trusted' metadata produced by librarians and archivists can live side-by-side with contextual material produced by the public."²²

Today, we find ourselves in a similar place as Aldus at the dawn of the printing era, when the future of library collections relied on the distribution system of a "pan-European integrated [book] market."²³ Digging into the history, we learn that Aldus faced a set of challenges that, when listed, are remarkably similar to those discussed at an INKE meeting in midwinter. Let us consider these in turn:

i. Collaboration

Aldus wouldn't have been able to achieve much on his own. As a printer-publisher-businessman, he needed to gather together and sustain a collection of editorial expertise, support and funding, craftsmanship and skilled labour, and social networks that would carry the intellectual, political, and social capital that he needed to make his business profitable. What digital humanities project is any different? Even though Aldus did understand and recognize the value of the work of all those who contributed to his publications, we must note that the Aldine editions do not feature long, comprehensive lists crediting all the individuals who worked on them.²⁴

ii. Technology standards

Aldus wanted to get the Greek and Latin classics into wider circulation. The new technology of print allowed him to do so. Printing presses, papermaking, typesetting, binding, and the competencies to align these activities into a sustainable business were new (less than fifty years after Gutenberg), but robust enough to provide a stable model. Aldus didn't need to invent paper,

type metal, printer's ink, or presses; he was able to rely on existing technology standards, making his press part of a larger, pan-European network of printers and booksellers.

iii. Prototyping

Not all the technology that Aldus needed was readily available—or had even been invented—and this presented risks. To print the Greek classics, Aldus needed Greek type, and while this had been done before, it had not been done to his standards. During his lifetime, Aldus prototyped Greek printing characters over four iterations, to the point of being heralded as the key innovator in this area, despite the fact that Greek typography continued to evolve after his death.²⁵ Some of the Aldine prototypes were more editorial than material innovations: the semicolon, for instance, as well as the standardized systems for page numbering that we all take for granted today. And, of course, we cannot overlook Aldus's most important prototype of all: the small, portable, hand-sized volumes (the original “mobile device”) that allowed scholars to conveniently take books with them anywhere they wanted.²⁶

iv. UI and UX design

Aldus was one of the first printers to think instrumentally about the reading experience, from the form of the book itself to its typographic layout (Aldus's typographic standards have been emulated ever since), to the role of the preface and other paratextual elements—most famously, his anchor-and-dolphin device—used as marketing stratagems to attract the readers' attention and convince them to purchase the books.

v. Metadata

By vocation, Aldus was a minimalist, as reflected both in the sober aesthetics of his most typical production and in the philological treatment of the text. Where the medieval manuscript tradition had been to layer a classical work with commentary and annotations, Aldus saw fit to package these works simply, in line with the humanist ideal of preserving the integrity of the original texts. In a way, even the metadata associated with his carefully edited volumes could be regarded as minimal, relying on nothing more than a title page and a preface (usually written in epistolary form and in a friendly tone) as primary access points to connect the reader to the resource.

vi. Search

Once one has standardized page numbering, the preparation of an alphabetical page index becomes possible. The early Aldine Press gave us not only one of the most extraordinary indexes ever created, but also the first paged index ever printed, allowing access to the contents of massive volumes such as Perottus' *Thesaurus Cornucopia* (1499) in entirely new ways.²⁷ This set the standard for search technology for hundreds of years.

vii. Digital Preservation and Management

How to ensure that the products of his ambitious educational and scholarly project would still be available centuries later? The answer from the age of print is well known to us now: “lots of copies keeps stuff safe.” This resulted in preserving not only the physical volumes, but also, by virtue of the network effects, the context and language they are written in. In the context of our Aldus@SFU project, addressing long-term preservation needs means, ideally, investing time and resources in a robust and widely supported digital repository. When SFU Library migrated its digital collections to a new open-source platform, Islandora, such significant undertaking was made on the promise of the new system offering greater flexibility and scalability, as well as better performance. Fittingly, Mark Leggot defines Islandora as a multi-layered ecosystem, describing it as “a number of separate open source systems that are brought together into a single software context to provide best-practice digital preservation services.”²⁸ Combining the Drupal content management system with the Fedora Commons repository, the Islandora ecosystem offers an array of solutions for managing, preserving, and presenting digital assets in a single environment. That which can be considered Islandora's greatest strength, however, is also a potential weakness. As Shea-Tinn Yeh et al. illustrate, the high level of complexity of Islandora's back-end, consisting of a range of interdependent components (or “subsystems”), may generate a “domino effect” when an issue occurs in any of the systems, making it hard to identify the root cause of the failure(s) and, hence, find a solution.²⁹ *In practice, despite its wealth of features and functions, Islandora's complexity has meant that development—and support—are often slow and somewhat cumbersome.*

viii. Commitment to diversity and inclusivity

Admittedly, we have found virtually no evidence of this in early fifteenth-century Venice, as compared to most DH projects today. Indeed, the only woman directly mentioned in the Aldine story is Maria Torresani, the daughter of Aldus's business partner Andrea Torresani; the two were wed in a marriage that consummated the business arrangement. In a typically uncredited role, Maria presumably brought into the world the sons who would later take over the Aldine

press. Beyond that, the contributions of Maria Torresani, and everyone else not in Aldus's circle of nobles and businessmen, are invisible.

Reversing the Treasure Paradigm

The most powerful lesson that we—as both custodians of Aldus's tradition and proponent of open social scholarship—can take from Aldus Manutius has little to do with this or that specific technological advancement, but has a great deal to do with the intellectual and ethical values that are behind those advancements and inspired his mission as a publisher. Aldus believed that, by offering access to the books he deemed key to learning, he could reach a wider public, serving the needs of a variety of readers, not just those who were already well-read in classical studies. Aldus wanted to unlock the wealth of knowledge contained in the books he treasured the most and make them available for the present and future generations. He successfully created a vibrant scholarly environment of intellectual exchange, fellowship, and co-operation. His painstaking efforts were continually sustained by an unwavering faith in the “public quality of learning”: the idea of knowledge as a common good that needs to be shared.³⁰

This lesson calls for a broader reflection on the role and impact of specials collections on individuals and society at large. What Aldus's pioneering example of open social scholarship can teach us today, in the twenty-first century, is that treating cultural heritage materials as precious treasures *shouldn't necessarily mean* keeping them locked or hidden away from the public. What we need to do, in essence, is to break or, better, reverse what could be called the *treasure paradigm* that still informs perceptions of value commonly associated with special collections. Instead of defining the “special” in special collections solely in terms of exclusiveness and inaccessibility, we need to articulate it (also) in terms of *openness* and *accessibility*. In other words, the paradigm, from “the more hidden, the more special (hence, valuable),” needs to be recast to “the more accessible, the more special”—this is the lesson that Aldus's success teaches us.³¹

In planning and designing Aldus@SFU, we have increasingly been aware of Aldus's presence in our practice; his example has, in many ways, inspired us to think more broadly about this project and the legacies that it represents. At first, this worked for us on the level of detail: the Aldine example in typography and layout has been an important source of inspiration. But as we have moved forward, it has become clear to us that the most important lessons from the history of the Aldine Press were not just about design and aesthetics; they were also about architecture, strategy, and, ultimately, a social project. We came to a deeper understanding that Aldus's achievement wasn't just in running a canny printing shop, but rather in being a critical

node in an emerging network of learning and literacy that spread across the early modern world in the decades that followed. In this sense, the scope of our initiative transcends the specific needs of our individual holdings and becomes part of a larger, action-oriented conversation about making special collections interconnected, interactive, and globally accessible in the age of the decentralized web.

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Notes:

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- . Lorcan Dempsey, "The Inside Out Library: Scale, Learning, Engagement," keynote address at the BOBCATSSS Conference in Ankara, Turkey, 23 January, 2013. [↩](#)
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- . These are all straightforwardly prototypes in the sense described by Galey and Ruecker (Alan Galey, and Stan Ruecker, "How a Prototype Argues," *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 25, no. 4 [2010]: 405-424). [↩](#)
- . Harris, 375. [↩](#)
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- . Willinsky, 194. [↩](#)
- . It is important to clarify that this "call to action" can never be interpreted as universal, and that there are contexts—especially in the legacy of colonialism that Renaissance Venice con-

tributed to—in which issues of access need to be weighed in fuller cultural context. We note, for instance, Kim Christen’s recent “We Have Never Been Neutral: Search, Discovery, and the Politics of Access,” presentation at the OCLC Distinguished Seminar Series, Dublin, Ohio, July 13, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMd6-IS3cmU>. ↩

DOI:

[10.21810/pop.2019.007](https://doi.org/10.21810/pop.2019.007)

Citation:

[Alessandra Bordini](#), [John Maxwell](#), 2019. "Breaking SFU Aldines Out of the Vaults: Aldus Manutius and Open Social Scholarship in the Sixteenth Century." *Pop! Public. Open. Participatory*. no. 1 (2019-10-31).
<https://popjournal.ca/issue01/bordini>

Abstract:

Aldus@SFU is the digital home of Simon Fraser University Library’s Wosk–McDonald Aldine Collection, making widely available selected volumes from the press of Renaissance Italy’s leading publisher, Aldus Manutius (ca. 1451–1515). The project aims to connect these important materials to wider, multiple audiences in an effort to turn the collection into a truly open resource for the public good. In pursuing this goal, a number of lessons about the practice of open social scholarship have become apparent, inspired by Aldus’s work and his long-lasting contribution to humanist learning. In this article, while avoiding overly simplistic historical parallels, we identify various points of alignment between today’s digital humanities projects and Aldus’s own ambitious “knowledge project”: the production and circulation of the major works of classical antiquity.

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ISSN 2563-6111

