

GUEST EDITORS' NOTE

In defense of sources in uncertain times

As the new associate editors of *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* (HCSM), we would like to invite you to contribute to the “Sources” section. Identifying and disseminating research sources has a meaning that extends beyond mere documentary description. It involves contextualizing and criticizing documents in multiple formats, pointing out the limits and the potential for utilizing them in the field of historical research; beyond this, it means implementing a radical historicization (Oliveira, 2007) that can make up for the power games that influenced their production, circulation, and institutionalization.

As most historians know, critical analysis of a document or set of documents is a prerequisite for good historical research. The sources not only provide evidence for interpretation by historians, acting as a condition for validation, but also describe pathways, indicate agency, and allow comparisons. At a time when open science is being discussed, the study and dissemination of sources is gaining new momentum for providing greater visibility and transparency to research and enhancing dialog between peers.

In fact, the establishment of history as a discipline was born out of rigorous methods for critiquing sources. This can be seen in the roadmap of topics discussed in nineteenth-century manuals which established history as the science of knowing the past. Although many subsequent reflections have denounced the positivism underlying the early days of the discipline, and it was also strongly affected during the second half of the twentieth century by critiques of rationalism applied to interpreting social phenomena and very authority of the historical text, recent decades have been characterized by a “return” to the sources which avails itself of archival criticism and its place in constituting “cultures of knowledge” (Head, set. 2010), an especially powerful perspective in the field of decolonial studies. From this same vein emerge studies that focus on archives and collections as objects of study rather than mere sources of historical knowledge, investing in their connections with the fields of memory and identities (Burton, 2005).

Today, returning to the sources takes on new meaning. Amid the spread of openly distorted discourse on the past, including conservative negation and revisionism which propagate online, the historical sources emerge as a guarantee, along with the procedures that ensure their veracity. As one of the main figures in the movement to return to the sources says: “The historian does not require people to believe him, under the pretext that he is a professional knowledgeable in his field ..., but rather offers the reader opportunity to verify his information” (Prost, 2008, p.55).

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Now, when history and historians are under attack, along with scientific discourse in general, research sources and the scientific procedures that validate their use take on new dimensions and importance. Through them, we can resume the debate on the status of historical knowledge in the twenty-first century, whether to reflect on manipulations and distortions which are often employed to legitimize policies and interests (Macmillan, 2009), to clarify how history is produced in the global era (Hunt, 2014), or in the face of radical skepticism propagated by so-called post-modernism (Maza, 2017). By maintaining a section devoted to reflection on the sources (understood in a broad sense), HCSM confirms its commitment to a history which has archives and source criticism as one of the pillars of historiographic work. This commitment has been present since the journal was founded, showing the position of its editors in the face of the controversies that have marked the discipline and their writing over the past 25 years.

The “Sources” section encompasses a vast repertoire of possibilities, which reaffirm its own historical path. In its first edition, v.1, n.1, jul.-out. 1994, it was titled “Documents” and ran alongside the “Libraries & Collections” section. This division seems to have confused readers. The terminology went back and forth during the journal’s first year. In v.1, n.2, nov. 1994-fev. 1995, the section was called “Files & Documents”, and included an introduction written by Lina Rodrigues de Farias (nov. 1994-fev. 1995), followed by a translated transcript of the document “Public Health situation and work of International Health Board in Brazil,” which was written in 1920 by Wickliff Rose of the Rockefeller Foundation’s International Health Board. The title of the text referred directly to the name of the section: “Rockefeller Archive”. However, in the same issue, the sister section “Libraries & Collections” presented a text by Flavio Edler (nov. 1994-fev. 1995) entitled “Alternative sources for the history of science”.

Aware of the difficulty in strictly defining historical documents, HCSM instituted the “Sources” section in its third issue, vol.2, n.1, mar.-jun. 1995. This novelty was justified by editor Sergio Goes de Paula (mar.-jun. 1995, p.5): “The ‘Files & Documents’ and ‘Libraries & Collections’ sections have transformed into a single one entitled ‘Sources.’ With this change, it appears that we have eliminated a certain artificiality which had been troubling us and causing us some other difficulties: when not even the editors can tell one section from the other, you know things are bad.”

The return to this trajectory illustrates potential doubts among readers about what to send to which section. Furthermore, a quick look at the articles can serve to guide interested readers who have not yet visited the valuable repertoire of published and fully available articles. There are a wide range of possibilities: introduce projects to build collections or institutional memory; collect and systematize documentary funds; publicize collections of existing documents in private or public archives; present diaries, scientific journals, and personal records and their respective potential as historical sources; analyze official sources such as messages from heads of state and their importance to science and technology policy; contribute translations of rare texts, preceded by an introduction explaining their relevance for the history of science; present private and/or institutional archives and their respective collections.

It should be noted that HCSM has rarely neglected to publish at least one text in “Sources” in its issues. For 25 years, the journal has followed the opening of this field to sources that emerge from time to time. It is what we see, for example, when faced with the need to justify the presence of an article addressing virtual libraries in a history of science journal. In the text “Electronic Libraries”, the researcher Ruth B. Martins opens the section “Libraries & Collections” with the following caveat: “It may surprise the reader to find a journal with the profile of *Manguinhos* apparently turning its back on history and opening its Libraries & Collections section with a discussion on communication between computers” (Martins, jul.-out. 1994, p.135). Jumping to the “Sources” section of v.26, n.1, jan.-mar. 2019, we find the same concern with keeping readers up to date on the relationship between access to sources and technological resources. Here, the title is “Democratizing information to develop knowledge: expanding access to the science and health document collection at Fiocruz”, and researcher Nercilene Sandos da Silva Monteiro (jan.-mar. 2019, p.299) opens the text with the following commentary: “Management of physical and digital documents is indicated as a central component in constituting sources of information for the present and historical sources for the future.”

Two other articles reinforce the social and scientific relevance of this section, and indicate the diversity of possibilities that it embraces. In “War and oranges: a radio lecture on the nutritional value of domestic fruit”, Jaime Rodrigues and Maria da Penha Costa Vasconcellos transcribe a lecture by the sanitarian known as Paula Souza which was transmitted via Rádio Educadora Paulista on April 16, 1940, within the context of the Second World War. According to these authors, the radio program supported “the nutritional value and need to consume oranges as a patriotic act” (Rodrigues, Vasconcellos, out.-dez. 2007, p.1401).

The second text addresses outbreaks of epidemics in Bahia during the 1920s. With “Mosquitoes and the State in the report by the head of the Bahia Department of Health and Rural Prophylaxis, 1922”, Heloísa Helena Rocha calls attention to the correlation of the present with the past in saying:

Mosquitoes (which have stolen so many lives and wrought so much destruction in recurrent outbreaks of dengue and recent episodes of Chikungunya and Zika virus) again haunt the life of Brazilians and those who cross the borders of this vast country, startling everyone and demanding action from public authorities. Fear, panic, risk, threat, alert, and emergency are some of the terms permeating the language that records the increase in the number of confirmed cases of illness and deaths (Rocha, jan.-mar. 2018, p.262).

Beyond illustrating the multiplicity of sources that can be the object of analysis, these texts have something to say about the role of this section in debates on science: they bear witness to strategies for disseminating scientific news, the use of sound recordings and official reports as historical sources, and also refer to the social, political, and scientific role that articles in this section may take on. No less important to be described as “sources” is the fact that they are unpublished documents. These texts not only allow news to be publicized, but also register the position of research in the field of science in general, and particularly in history.

With this explanation, we hope that we have encouraged our colleagues to submit their contributions to the “Sources” section of HCSM. We are motivated to continue the work we have carried out so far, always open to new views on the potential of documents, periodicals, objects, and collections, as well as databases and webpages. The journal accepts contributions on a rolling basis; authors should have a master’s degree at minimum, and manuscripts submitted to this section should not exceed five thousand words. These texts will be submitted to external reviewers, with the same prerequisites that apply to articles published in the “Analysis” section.

We hope to receive submissions from our colleagues and would be glad to respond to any questions you might have.

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