New Blackfriars

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Comment: Hinari and "Little Things"

It is the sign of a profound thinker that their insights applied to one situation can shed light on many more. The works of the recently canonised Saint John Henry Newman abound in such riches. In his sermon for the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Newman wrote: "how mysteriously little things are in this world connected with great; how single moments, improved or wasted, are the salvation or ruin of all-important interests." (*Parochial and Plain Sermons* II.10).

Newman's words concerned the "little things" of something seemingly obscure, almost hidden: a mother, her husband, and her baby son coming to the Temple in Jerusalem. Only Anna and Simeon recognised that there was a connection, albeit in mysterious ways yet to be revealed, of this little event with the great unfurling of salvation history. And Newman's point is that it is in this sort of way that much of the working out of salvation takes place.

But Newman's insight need not be confined to the religious sphere. Take, for example, Hinari (formerly known as HINARI), the "access to research health programme" run by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Most readers will probably not have heard of it, although it is mentioned on the inside of the back cover of copies of *New Blackfriars*. I suspect too that most researchers and academics in the richer countries of the world haven't heard of it either; but its impact on research and teaching in the developing world has been immense.

The story of its founding is not at all well known, but is an example of little things connecting in an almost mysterious fashion with the great. Before the world wide web and the internet, which became available for general use from about 1995 onwards, researchers and academics from poorer countries (*i.e.* most of the countries of the world) had to rely on friends and contacts at wealthy research and educational institutions to go to their well-stocked libraries, photocopy articles, and then send them to their poorer colleagues. Similarly, when researchers and academics from developing countries found themselves on work trips to wealthy countries, this provided a precious opportunity to visit libraries and to photocopy. They might not have the opportunity again for many years.

The Library at WHO in Geneva was a hub for such busy photocopying. WHO requires that the expert committees looking at topics as diverse as standards for clean water and codes of practice for vaccination programmes, be comprised of delegates from all regions of

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the world. And so, instead of chatting and relaxing, many of the delegates from developing countries would spend their coffee and lunch breaks in the library, photocopying as much as they could before the library closed for the day.

But with the advent of new technologies, things were beginning to change. A sign of this was the publication (30 September 2000) of an editorial in both the *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) and *The Lancet* entitled: "Global Information Flow: Publishers Should Provide Information Free To Resource Poor Countries."

A librarian at WHO, who came from Israel, once one of the poorest countries in the world but whose economy was transformed in large part due to education and research, and so who was well aware of the value of up-to-date scholarship, had an idea after reading the editorial. She picked up the phone and called the Editor of the *BMJ*, whom she did not know, to suggest exploring the possibility of opening access to medical journals to those in the poorer countries of the world. He responded very positively and contacted other publishers to see if they might come on board. Less than a year later, on 9 July 2001, a Letter of Intent "to open access to the primary biomedical literature for developing country researchers and academics" was signed by six publishers, including John Wiley and Blackwell, now Wiley-Blackwell and publisher of *New Blackfriars*. This was the start of Hinari.

The success of Hinari prompted those working in other fields to follow suit. These different initiatives now come under the name of Research4Life. More than 9,000 institutions in more than 120 low- and middle-income countries have free or very low-cost online access to up 100,000 leading journals and books in the fields of health, agriculture, environment, applied sciences and legal information. And since publishers like Wiley-Blackwell have as part of this opened up their wider catalogues, journals like *New Blackfriars* are similarly available. Numerous departments and schools of Theology and Philosophy benefit greatly due to Hinari.

New technologies have been essential to this story. But seemingly little things – networks of assistance, a perspicacious librarian, generous publishers, volunteers and much else – have also played a crucial part. Newman would have approved deeply of the broadening of access to scientific knowledge; he would have rejoiced in the promotion of Theology and Philosophy. He would, I think, have recognised how yet again little things can lead to the great. How perennially insightful St John Henry Newman's observations are.

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