Cultures of Knowledge: An Intellectual Geography of the Seventeenth-Century Republic Letters

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This combined poster and software demonstration will introduce 'Cultures of Knowledge: An Intellectual Geography of the Seventeenth-Century Republic Letters', launched in January 2009, and based in the Humanities Division of the University of Oxford with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Comprising a diverse group of academics and technical experts from the Faculties of History, English, Theology, and Bodleian Libraries, as well as from partner institutions in Britain and east-central Europe, the Project is seeking to reconstruct the correspondence networks that were central to the revolutionary intellectual developments of the seventeenth century. One group is working to catalogue, edit, and preserve the rich archives of scientific correspondence deposited in the Bodleian Library. Another is working with colleagues in Sheffield, Prague, Cracow, and Budapest to enhance and link letter collections elsewhere. Finally, a third group, based in the Systems and e-Research Service (SERS) of Bodleian Libraries, is developing a digital system capable of organising metadata on these materials into an online union catalogue of intellectual correspondence. It is this central feature of our collaboration that we wish to share at DH2010.

While meticulously edited and annotated hard copy editions of finite corpora remain indispensable, the intellectual and methodological imperatives for looking beyond traditional modes of publication are overwhelming in the context of the Republic of Letters. No correspondence is an island unto itself. On the contrary, every single letter links at least two different correspondence networks: that of its sender, and that of its recipient. Many seventeenth-century letters passed through multiple hands, either because they were written by or addressed to more than one person, because they passed through intermediaries, or because they were (re)circulated through broader circles of friends and associates after receipt. Moreover, the provision of increasingly frequent, fast, and inexpensive postal services – what has been described as the early modern European 'media revolution' – meant that these systems of connections extended over enormous distances. Traditional editions of letters to and from single eminent individuals fail to capture the multilateral, spatially-dispersed character of early modern epistolary cultures, and additional tools are needed in mapping the broader networks which surrounded these canonical figures (networks which are becoming central to research in the history of science and related fields).

To this end, capitalizing on the unprecedented opportunities created by 'digital revolution' of recent decades, we are proposing to create the nucleus of a web-mounted union catalogue of seventeenth-century correspondence which, for the first time, will provide scholars with a means of navigating the vast, uncharted sea of correspondence that surrounded the comparatively well-surveyed islands of seventeenth-century intellectuals. In its first phase, it will combine three large datasets generated by the Project or already hosted by the Bodleian Library, namely: a digitized version of the existing Bodleian catalogue of seventeenth-century manuscript correspondence (c.26,000 letters); digital calendars of six discrete correspondences generated by our individual research projects (cataloguing the letters of John Aubrey, Jan Amos Comenius, Samuel Hartlib, Edward Lhwyd, Martin Lister, and John Wallis [c.10,000 letters]); and metadata from the seventeenth-century correspondence already included in the Electronic Enlightenment (c.7,000 letters).[1] This will result in an integrated database of over 40,000 letters which will provide both a platform for our own future efforts in the field and, it is hoped, a critical mass of material

necessary to attract further contributions from elsewhere.

The poster will outline the technological as well as the conceptual underpinnings of this enterprise. We will describe the system architecture of the union catalogue, the Digital Asset Management System (DAMS), an innovative platform developed to support digital library projects within the University of Oxford. The DAMS, based on Fedora software, provides a robust and flexible mechanism for the storage of digital objects within an RDF/semantic web framework. Predicated upon adaptability, scalability, interoperability, and long-term preservation, the system is particularly suitable for our purposes. It allows content to be openly accessible to, and available for reuse by, a geographically dispersed scholarly network; will enable us to share data with electronic repositories elsewhere (and vice versa); and will ensure that the union catalogue will remain accessible to international research long beyond the lifecycle of our original grant. We will also describe the metadata standards by which individual correspondences will be styled as Fedora objects within the system, the RDF ontologies by which they will be related, and the software for web-based record editing, as well as data collection and import, which has been developed especially for the Project. During the poster session itself we will provide a live demonstration of a pilot implementation of the union catalogue. This will showcase its key features (full-text faceted search engine; predefined browsable views; links to select transcriptions and digital images; look-and-feel), as well as the interface for online editing that will allow individual records to be amended, and new records added, by a widely distributed community of academic contributors.

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Further Information

http://www.culturesofknowledge.org

More bibliography at http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/cofk/bibliographies

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Notes

1. See `http://www.e-enlightenment.com/`