

Learning Opportunities for Librarians: Embarking on a Digital Humanities Project

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Title:

Learning Opportunities for Librarians: Embarking on a Digital Humanities Project

Abstract:

In 2015, while exploring new uses of library collections for humanities-driven research, we “discovered” that our Special Collections department possessed a very small collection of letters to and from François-Marie Arouet, known by his pen name as Voltaire. Voltaire’s entire epistolary corpus is comprised of tens of thousands of letters, which have been published in major print and electronic scholarly editions.¹ Our collection had only 30 letters and 4 sheets of poems which may have been appended to some of the letters. They became the basis for an experimental “do it yourself” librarian-led digital humanities project, with the initial goal to create a scholarly edition that could instigate a curated online projects on Voltaire.

Most digital humanities projects start out on a small scale, involving a limited number of researchers and very modest funding. This paper will describe what it actually means to embark on such a project from the perspective of the libraries. The Voltaire letters project was instigated by several librarians interested in making this small cache of letters discoverable within a normative scholarly apparatus. To do that we had to decide on several issues to contextualize the letters within the digital humanities, including framing the letters within a particular scholarly and methodological structure, positioning the letters for potential use within the humanities curriculum, deciding on a digital manifestation, selecting an editorial framework, and developing a roadmap for funding. Lastly, we also needed to decide how this small project would integrate into and contribute to the much larger world of primary resources and scholarship on Voltaire and his vast intellectual output.

Keywords:

François-Marie Arouet Voltaire; Scalar publishing platform; librarian agency; student learning; student engagement

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¹ See for example, Theodore Besterman’s *Voltaire’s Correspondence* (1953 – 1965), or Voltaire’s letters in the University of Oxford’s *Electronic Enlightenment Project* (<http://www.e-enlightenment.com>)

Like much of humanities-oriented research, digital humanities projects often begin on a small scale. In the case of the University of Southern California Libraries, the beginning of the Voltaire letters at USC project involved a discovery of a small collection of 30 letters to and from Voltaire, and 4 sheets of poems that may have been, at some point, appended to some of the letters. The majority of the letters were from Frederick the Great to Voltaire, some were from Voltaire to Frederick the Great, and then there was a smattering of letters between Voltaire and a few other correspondents. According to my colleague, who is also the major force behind our Voltaire letters project, Dr. Danielle Mihram, the overall known corpus of Voltaire's correspondence includes 21,222 letters, of which over 15,000 are by Voltaire himself, spread over a 70 year period and involving 1,800 correspondents.² Compared to this output, our collection at USC is microscopic.

It is precisely because of its size that this ad-hoc collection, which was purchased by the USC Libraries from a book-seller in 1945 for \$123, presented itself as a possible prototype to explore a particular manifestation of humanities research – a curated digital edition that would form a basis for a variety of scholarly and curricular activities. In other words, we in the library had a concrete digital humanities project on our hands.

The concept of digital humanities does not have a precise definition. On a basic level, the digital humanities are based on the interrelationship between computing technology and digital applications to support humanities-based inquiries. As a scholarly endeavor, the digital humanities probably trace their earliest roots to the mid-20th century, when computational technologies became cheap enough to be used to analyze bodies of text.³

Beyond the technological tools, the digital humanities encompass a variety of topics ranging from textual analysis, visualization, digital pedagogy, and the application of new platforms for scholarly communication.⁴ Stephen Ramsay further captures the diffuse understanding of digital humanities when he writes: “Nowadays, the term can mean anything from media studies to electronic art, from data mining to edutech, from scholarly editing to anarchic blogging, while inviting code junkies, digital artists, standards wonks, transhumanists, game theorists, free culture advocates, archivists, librarians, and edupunks under its capacious canvas.”⁵

Perhaps anything and everything can be a digital humanities project! But is this so? To quote Ramsay again, digital humanities is also “a series of concrete instantiations involving money, students, funding agencies...programs, curricula...gatekeepers, and prestige. It might be more than these things, but it **cannot not** be these things.”⁶ (emphasis added).

Is there a role for librarians in digital humanities endeavors, and what is it? This, too, is a question to which answers are evolving. Ordinarily, librarians are approached to participate in digital humanities projects because of the collections that they oversee, skills in project and digital management that are often part of librarians' professional praxis, and because of their

² Mihram and Mihram (2017).

³ Marija Dalbello quoted by Sula (2013) 16.

⁴ Sula (2013) 16.

⁵ Ramsay (2011).

⁶ Ramsay (2011).

knowledge of preservation as it relates to print and electronic collections. Libraries often have a pre-existing intellectual and technological infrastructure to at least nominally support some digital humanities projects. Yet I would suggest that it is useful for librarians to reflect more critically, as Roxanne Shirazi, Jennifer Guiliano and others (not just librarians) have, on whether the role of librarians within digital humanities projects is indeed solely that of service and project management and if so, to whom and for what purpose? Put another way, how do digital humanities project benefit the library and the profession?

All of these issues, briefly described here, played a role in the genesis of our Voltaire letters project. Since the letters were located in the USC Libraries collections, and the initial digitization and metadata services were performed within the libraries, it stood to reason that the librarians would spearhead the development of this scholarly digital project. We wanted to use the letters as a proof of concept for a library-led digital humanities-based scholarly project. To re-use Roxanne Shirazi's words, we did not relish the idea of reproducing the labor structure of the academy, where librarians perform an unacknowledged support service.⁷ Thus, librarians' agency was important in conceiving of and driving the project. By engaging with the Voltaire letters, we wanted to highlight the libraries' collections and to show how our resources could be incorporated into interdisciplinary research and curricular activities. We also wanted the project to serve as a showcase for interdisciplinary digital humanities ideas growing out of the libraries.

We were extremely lucky because we had access to a multi-modal scholarly publishing platform, Scalar, <http://scalar.usc.edu>,⁸ developed by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, which is comprised of a group of researchers with interest in digital and visual cultures, some of whom are based at our university.⁹ We also had access, through our outreach and liaison efforts, to students and faculty who were potentially interested in collaborating on the project, providing editorial assistance, and doing other grunt work. Being from the library, we had resident expertise in digital projects, application of metadata, and in web development, since the university, like many other academic institutions, has home-grown digital collections.

The process of developing a scholarly curated digital humanities project based on our collection of Voltaire letters broke down into three broad categories: administrative, scholarly engagement, and technical.

Administration

Editorial Board:

Somewhat similar to crowdsourcing, a self-interested group of librarians and staff came together to holistically approach the development of a digital edition around the 30 letters and 4 sheets of

⁷ Shirazi (2014).

⁸ Scalar is a semantic web authoring platform, which enables users to assemble media from multiple sources and combine them with their own writing. It requires little technical expertise on the part of authors and contributors.

⁹ The Alliance "seeks to enrich the intellectual potential of...an expanding array of visual practices as they are reshaped within digital culture, while also creating scholarly contexts for the use of digital media," as described in scalar.usc.edu/about.

poems located in our collection. The participants self-identified because of their interest in exploring the interrelationship between this scholarly engagement and some aspect of their work, be it technical, educational, or collections and library services-related. Our project group consisted of librarians and staff from the Special collections, disciplinary, and information technology departments within the library, a faculty member from the liberal arts college, a staff from Scalar, a couple of undergraduate student workers who we were able to hire on a small challenge grant provided by our Dean of Libraries, and several former student workers and library interns who volunteered. There were two principal investigators (PIs) who agreed to act as coordinators and shepherds. All the participants agreed to make certain contributions to the various phases of the initial project, based on their strengths and knowledge.

Funding:

The Dean of our libraries established a successful and popular annual program of allocating competitive grants to innovative research and service projects in the libraries. The “challenge grants” were small, generally between several hundred to several thousand dollars, and provided seed funding to try out interesting ideas.¹⁰ The Voltaire letters project, led by two co-PIs, was one of the successful recent applicants to the challenge grant program, getting funding to hire student assistants to help us with assembling bibliographic and background resources to help us contextualize the letters and the scholarly edition within the institutional context of the USC Libraries. As a side note, while we looked to hire student workers with some knowledge of the French language, we also decided that a function of this project would be to hire students who might otherwise not have opportunities to work in the humanities. We wanted work on the Voltaire letters project to become part of the students’ broader educational experience at the university. Lastly, we had a few volunteers. The rest of us were salaried employees of the university and just added this project to the rest of our responsibilities, since our salaries could not be covered by the challenge grant.

Logistics and communication:

- We established occasional standing meetings for the entire editorial board, as well as frequent standing meetings with student workers and volunteers.
- We set up a listserv to communicate among all members of the project, since almost all of us worked remotely, some at great distance. One of the project co-PIs volunteered to archive the listserv communication. There are, of course, many other ways for groups to regularly communicate. Whatever the means of communication, they need to be easily accessible to the entire group, as well as archive-able, at least on a temporary basis.
- We made an early decision on how and when we would communicate about the project outside of the editorial board, and to what purpose. For example, one of the purposes of our early communication was to help us recruit students and volunteers. We also decided to disseminate some initial, mostly conceptual, information to gauge if any of our non-library faculty would potentially be interested in using the project in their course

¹⁰ The application requirements to the challenge grants are simple. The project descriptions must be short (generally no more than 2 pages) and are funded for a fiscal year only. Participation of non-library faculty, staff, or students on the grant proposals is highly encouraged.

assignments, so that we could pursue these connections once the edition was established. The constituencies for our initial communication were departments within the library, within the University, and, in a few specific cases, external scholarly communities. Our overall plan was to do some basic preliminary communication, and then reach out to these communities more strategically, once we completed the initial phase of this project.

It is important to emphasize that the project was interesting enough to get limited internal funding for student workers, as well as to attract volunteers and various library staff and external faculty. Because this was a self-selected group of very interested people, we had few logistical or communication difficulties in the initial phase.

Scholarly engagement

Despite the small size of this collection of letters, editing, curating, and creating a scholarly project around it required careful contextual planning. Our initial scholarly engagement involved the following:

- Determining whether any of the letters were previously unpublished.
- Determining whether any of the letters translated into English, and if so, when and by who.
- Deciding how to transcribe and translate the letters.¹¹ As part of the Scalar edition, we are including a guide on the conventions for transcribing French eighteenth century manuscripts based on the 2012 edition of Béatrice Beaucourt-Vicidomini's paleographic manual.
- Highlighting people, places, events, allegorical allusions, etc., from the letters. We followed Theodore Besterman's suggestion to not spend a lot of time elaborating on well known topics that have been well described in great detail elsewhere, but to use the letters project to help explore lesser-known themes.¹²
- Creating an index of people, locations, and events mentioned in the letters.
- Creating a contextual bibliography of primary and secondary resources related to the letters, and in the process highlighting our library collections as appropriate.
- Developing a historic timeline placing the letters within specific cultural themes of the eighteenth century.
- Writing an essay on the provenance of the letters and how they came to be in the library collection, as well as an essay on the letters' institutional context in the USC Libraries.
- Writing a paleographic essay that described eighteenth century writing conventions, as well as the role of paleographic analysis within the process of transcription. The essay also contextualizing the handwriting of Voltaire's secretary Jean-Louis Wagnière, who wrote some of the letters in the collection, within this history.
- Examining the paper on which the letters were written, particularly vis-a-vis quality and watermark(s).

¹¹ Frederick's letters presented a particularly interesting example, not least of which because they contained his own poetic verse.

¹² Besterman (1968) 19.

- Agreeing on the editorial nature within a crowd-sources platform – not surprisingly, there was a small core of overall editors who provided copy-editing and contextual oversight over the content of initial submissions.

As was stated earlier in this essay, we engaged undergraduate students to help us in this project, under the assumption that this would be mutually beneficial and educational for all involved. Although digital humanities projects do not always receive formal recognition within academic publishing and promotion processes,¹³ we thought that our students would benefit overall from both engaging with the materials and being listed as contributors and co-authors. Our students, both those employed through the grant and the volunteers, did bibliographic work, examined the actual artifacts (this was very exciting for them!), and researched places, names, and events mentioned in the letters. They also explored the relationship between our collection of letters to the published collections of Voltaire’s works. The students created excel files to capture all of this information (a process that also turned out to be very exciting for them). One of the students who participated in the initial phase of this project began working on compiling a file that identified other items and collections of relevance in our libraries. It is through this work that we discovered in another of our collections a letter from Friedrich Wilhelm II to Voltaire.

Technical

Our technical decisions encompassed fairly standard scholarly editorial practices. These included, for example:

- Developing a comprehensive metadata framework for the letters as they were published within the Scalar platform. The metadata also referenced other major published and public sources of the letters, such as *Voltaire’s Correspondence* edited by Theodore Besterman, the eighteenth century Kehl edition of Voltaire’s works, the *Electronic Enlightenment*, and the USC Digital Library.
- Developing a system of unique digital object identifiers. This is relatively easy to do with a limited number of objects, but the system should be expandable as the edition grows. We also thought that our identifiers should make reference to the identifiers used within the *Electronic Enlightenment*.
- Deciding on how to display digital copies of the originals in relation to their transcription and translation, as well as deciding on the format and placement of footnotes, notes, and other contextual information. In other words, deciding on the hypertextual structure within the electronic edition.
- Agreeing on transcribing the letters to parallel standard textual research practices. The letters were transcribed using the same line breaks as in the original, and the lines were numbered. We also inserted the same line numbering system into the digital images of the letters.
- Agreeing on the use of the semi-diplomatic convention of translating the text of the letters and poems into English.

¹³ Educause (2017) 35.

The technical and technological aspects of the project included contextual essays, such as an essay on the metadata standards used, and an essay describing the convention used in translating the text.

As may be obvious from this description, one of the most important aspects of embarking on such a project involves coming to agreements on tasks, identifying skill-sets and relative knowledge expertise, being flexible and open to new experiences, and making collective decisions on a variety of specific issues fairly quickly and fairly early in the process. Conceptually, such decisions feed into larger questions on what constitutes a critical edition of our small trove of Voltaire letters and for what purpose. Because this project is driven by the initiative of librarians, our perspective is largely, although not exclusively, library-centric. For example, our special collections department has a very strong instructional mission, bringing in undergraduate and graduate classes to use primary materials for their courses. It is our intention that the Voltaire letters project encourage students to think about what constitutes primary sources, how such resources are acquired and discovered, and the various functional ways in which they fit into humanities scholarship.

Going forward and working with some of the teaching faculty, we plan to engage students in the process of adding materials to the project or electronically curating scholarship as it is relevant to Voltaire and the eighteenth century. For this type of student involvement to happen, we need to define an overall framework for crowd-sourced editorial and curatorial practices, and to develop an initial set of best practices to get the curatorial process going.

As the initial phase of this project is coming to an end, this proof of concept will serve as the fulcrum to pursue additional funding beyond the Dean's challenge grant. This includes applying to various opportunities made available through our university's research and grants office, as well as partnering with external stakeholders.

I would like to end this paper with another interesting conundrum of the digital humanities: how do digital humanities projects fit into the overall concept of humanities scholarship? The academic humanities do not have a long history of officially incorporating grey literature, pre-publication, or open-ended commentary on someone's work that is outside of the established structure of the peer review process. Another catalyst for the project was our assumption that the practice of exclusivity in humanities scholarship is beginning to change, and that there was an opportunity for librarians to redefine their role in digital humanities projects.¹⁴

¹⁴ Some of the ideas about the impact of the digital humanities and the practice of humanities scholarship were discussed by Dr. Harald Klinke's during his talk on digital art history at a symposium organized by the Digital Humanities program at the University of Southern California, March 24, 2016.

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