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## Letters from the past

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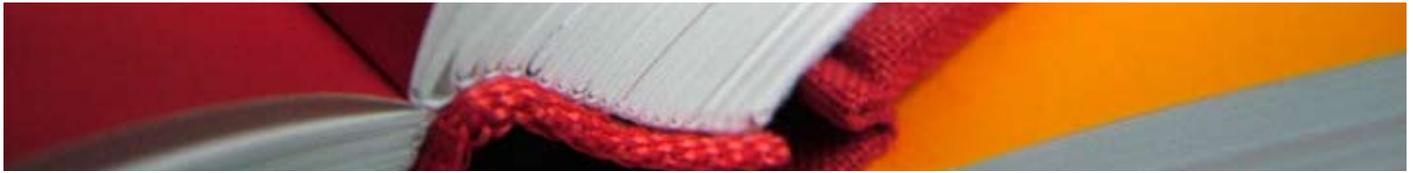
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## Expert opinion



# Letters from the past

MICHELLE PIROTTA

Today, we take scholarly communication so much for granted that we rarely consider how we would share ideas and meet like-minded researchers if there were no journals or research institutes. Yet these are relatively recent developments. The first journals did not appear until the 17th century and universities did not become widespread until the 16th century. Before (and during) these developments, scholars exchanged opinions, hypotheses and conclusions within a forum they called the Republic of Letters.

The Republic of Letters was a forerunner of our modern scholarly communications, incorporating the activities of today's journals, societies and research institutes. Starting in the mid-15th century and reaching its peak during the Enlightenment period of the late 17th and 18th centuries, this was both a real and an imagined community. Ideas were exchanged via handwritten letters and cultural-intellectual gatherings in salons.

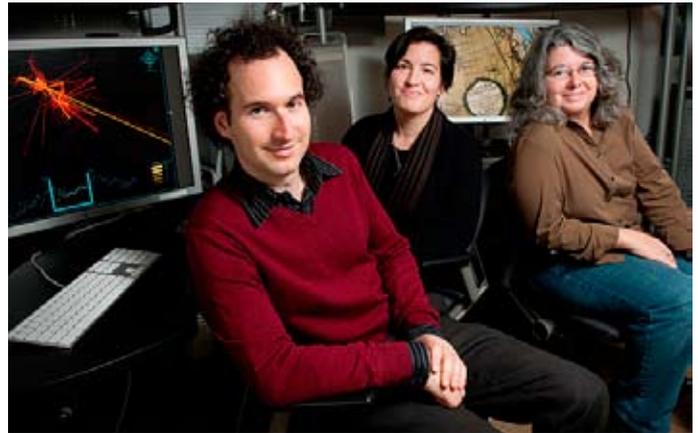
According to Paula Findlen, Ubaldo Pierotti Professor of Italian History and Chair of the History Department at Stanford University: "It was a scholars' Utopia; a kind of transnational, global community of minds."

## Mapping the Republic

Findlen, along with her colleagues at Stanford University, Dan Edelstein, Assistant Professor of French, and Academic Technology Specialist Nicole Coleman, is working on a major collaborative project to map the exchanges within the Republic of Letters.

Producing the maps, however, is only a starting point for the team. They are using them to test theories and gain an overview of the landscape. The maps make it possible to view each writer in context, and to search and compare different thinkers. It is also much easier to see how a correspondent's career developed along with his network.

They have long-term plans to allow researchers to annotate the data and test hypotheses. "Humanities projects can face the challenge of presenting disputed and/or incomplete data in a way that offers most clarity to researchers, so we want to create space for interpretations when we create visualizations," says Coleman. However, simply gathering the data was the team's first obstacle. "We're working with incomplete data. And many



Left to right: Dan Edelstein, Nicole Coleman, Paula Findlen  
Photo: Linda Cicero

**Paula Findlen** is Ubaldo Pierotti Professor of Italian History and Chair of the History Department at Stanford University. Her research focuses on the scientific culture of early modern Italy, the role of the Jesuits in early modern science, the history of collecting, and the Republic of Letters as seen from an Italian perspective.

**Nicole Coleman** is Academic Technology Specialist for the Stanford Humanities Center. She works on large-scale international collaborative research projects, currently focusing on information visualization for humanities research.

**Dan Edelstein** is Assistant Professor of French at Stanford University. He works primarily on 18th-century France, which also serves as a launching pad for forays into the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the early modern period.

gaps will never be filled in because the documents are lost," she explains. "It's a bit like trying to do modern bibliometrics, but you only have *Nature* left," says Edelstein.

While it is feasible to explore the content of the letters, the team chose only to look at metadata. "The discovery of new knowledge in the humanities relies on rich context, which can be obscured when the objective of visualizing this data is primarily about managing complexity or quantity. When gathering these remnants of the past, our big challenge is to

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present it in a way that gives context. Context helps us make sense of it rather than numerical analysis," she adds.

### Exploring the periphery

Findlen is particularly interested in the outliers: people in far-flung locations or those forgotten by history. "We can see how they fit in with and contributed to the flow of ideas. Everyone knows that London and Paris were important, and the maps confirm this. But we can now see how the Republic appeared to its members living outside the capitals, such as Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia," she says.

At the same time, some people were highly prolific, but did not have a big impact, while others wrote few letters, but had a massive impact. In fact, if history has shown us anything, it is that sheer quantity of output is only a small part of the story. Important figures, like Isaac Newton, actually refused to accept correspondence, while others, like Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, have a relatively small output when compared with their impact.

### Establishing past impact

While the output – maps of the Republic of Letters – echo modern bibliometric attempts to map science, the team's starting point is very different. One significant distinction is that where modern bibliometrics aims to establish the impact of living authors, Findlen, Edelstein and Coleman already know who was important.

"What we're really doing," says Edelstein, "is comparing reality with imagination. For instance, many French Enlightenment thinkers believed that England was a haven of liberal,

progressive thinking and hoped to emulate this free society. However, the reality is that key French Enlightenment figures, like Voltaire, weren't really corresponding with England. In fact, less than 1% of his output went to, or came from, England."

### Gossip will always be with us

When drawing parallels between the Republic of Letters and current scholarly communications, it is important to remember that letter writing was a quite different activity from today. While some were personal, many were written with a wider audience in mind. Correspondents in the Republic assumed that their letters would be shared.

According to Edelstein, "these letters were essentially gossip: gossip about ideas, books, publications and other members of the Republic." And this background chatter whereby scholars bounce ideas, vent steam and make private comments has never really stopped, continuing today in emails, blogs and university corridors the world over.

Edelstein adds: "Everyone is part of a community. While we celebrate individual genius, most ideas emerge from debate, and this has never changed. We have always constructed virtual communities, whether by writing letters or joining today's global online networks." Debate is a cornerstone of all academic pursuits, and while our media may change, we will always need to discuss our ideas within a community.

### Useful links:

[Mapping the Republic of Letters \(project website\)](#)

[Mapping the Republic of Letters \(visualizations and explanations\)](#)

## People Focus



# In recognition of peer reviewers

SARAH HUGGETT

Peer review, the assessment procedure of a scholarly manuscript carried out by external experts prior to publication, is an essential part of scholarly communications. It has recently been described as the cornerstone without which "the whole edifice of scientific research and publication would have no foundation". (1) However crucial, peer review goes nonetheless mostly unrewarded.

Researchers are always struggling for time between conducting

and documenting their research, obtaining funding through grant applications, and keeping abreast with the literature in their field. A large proportion of researchers also have to deal with the tasks of teaching and mentoring students, managing labs, and travelling to present their findings. It seems paradoxical, therefore, that a fundamental yet time-consuming task such as peer review is not formally incentivized, especially in our times of budgetary restrictions for science, growing competition for grants, and increasing emphasis on productivity.

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