Letters from the past

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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 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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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 pace 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.

Useful links:
Mapping the Republic of Letters [project website]
Mapping the Republic of Letters [visualizations and explanations]

People Focus

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