
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Edelstein, Dan, Paula Findlen, and Nicole Coleman. Mapping the Republic of Letters

Catherine Medici

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

Volume 42, Number 4, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068584ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068584ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Medici, C. (2019). Review of [Edelstein, Dan, Paula Findlen, and Nicole Coleman. Mapping the Republic of Letters]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 180–184. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068584ar>

Edelstein, Dan, and Paula Findlen, principal investigators and project leaders; Nicole Coleman, co-principal investigator and technical lead.

Mapping the Republic of Letters. Other.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2008. Accessed 15 August 2019. republicofletters.stanford.edu.

Mapping the Republic of Letters is an ambitious project from Stanford University that through a series of case studies seeks to understand the realities, extent, and evolution of the social, physical, and correspondence networks of the Republic of Letters of the Enlightenment. Mapping the Republic of Letters developed data visualization tools, guidelines, and collaborations to achieve these aims. Launched in 2008, Mapping the Republic of Letters is led by Paula Findlen and Dan Edelstein, with Nicole Coleman as a co-investigator. As it is conceived as a place for partnerships for those working on Enlightenment correspondence, each case study has its own project lead and team. The case studies that make up the project are “strategic in geographic range and in time period, and in their breadth and scope. [...] The wide range of case studies gives us multiple points of intersection with the Republic of Letters.”¹ Twelve case studies can be found on a sortable landing page with categories of “Correspondence,” “Publication,” and “Travel.”

Each case study includes the project lead and team information as well as the start date. There is also a narrative describing the sources that will create the data and the goals of each study. From the narratives, it is clear that many of the projects date from the early days of Mapping the Republic of Letters (2010–12). The case studies provide an overview of plans for projects being undertaken and in progress at the time. Many of the case studies depend on visualizations created using tools developed by the DensityDesign Research Lab. These visualizations provided information about the networks and correspondences in a variety of ways, but are now only seen as tantalizing thumbnail images to related links, as all the linked visualizations no longer exist. Visualizations convey information and significance, and without them the case studies are incomplete and lack connection to each other. It would be helpful to have some language or other notation about projects that are no longer active, and

1. “Case Studies,” *Mapping the Republic of Letters*, accessed 5 July 2019, republicofletters.stanford.edu/casestudies/index.html.

about significant findings. Additionally, while the case study format is intended to provide multiple ways of looking at the Republic of Letters and types of information sources, without any larger conclusions or connections between them, it is difficult to see a unified project.

Mapping the Republic of Letters has transitioned to a more focused output of projects, also referred to as publications: *British Architects on the Grand Tour Eighteenth Century Italy* (2015, 2017), *How England Fell off the Map of Voltaire's Enlightenment* (2015, 2018), *The Correspondence Network of Benjamin Franklin: The London Decades* (2012, 2016), "John Locke likes this": *An Ego-network Analysis of Locke's Letters* (2010–16), *Society Theater Database Project* (2015–17), and *A Jesuit's Letters: Athanasius Kircher at the Edges of His World* (forthcoming). These six projects represent more completed work that meets the stated goals of Mapping the Republic of Letters; they create resources, tools, and methods of use to other scholars. Each project site page opens on a painting of the topic along with simple navigation at the top of the page. Each project site features an introduction stating its goals, process, outcomes, and any other pertinent information. The page scrolls to a project index that includes publications, visualizations of the data, a schema that explains the data, and a link to the data itself. The individual navigation within each project is helpful, but navigating between the projects is not possible, nor is getting back to the main page listing all the projects. This is another feature that makes it difficult to see Mapping the Republic of Letters as a unified whole.

Within the introduction to the publication section, the process of creating a digital project—moving from historical sources to historical data, to visualizations, to further reading and analysis, to asking and finally answering questions raised by the data—is made clear. Visualizations are not only eye-catching, but also serve the process of historical inquiry. They show patterns or highlight what may have otherwise been unseen, and with investigation and contextualization provide new insights; however, without further research, they lack a deeper meaning. Within each project, co-investigators include a schema in which they explain their data model and how they came to the value in their data set. This not only explains the data of the particular project, but also makes the data methodology applicable for similar types of projects or inquiries. There are various levels of transparency about methods and tools used in this process. *The Correspondence Network of Benjamin Franklin: The London Decades* by Claire Rydell Arcenas is particularly thorough in this

respect, explaining the information recorded from each of Franklin's papers and how the team's questions about the makeup of Franklin's social network guided the information they recorded. Discussion of particulars such as modernizing place names and naming conventions for individuals may be especially useful to others undertaking correspondence studies.² The data tables for each project are visualized and available for download as .tsv files, and the transparency provided by the schema makes it more usable for others. Thus, in addition to being of interest to those studying British architects, Voltaire, Kircher, Franklin, Locke, and society theatre, the data and schema could be useful to anyone studying correspondence networks, literary and theatre networks, and professional networks, especially in an early modern context. Overall, however, the focus on canonical male figures is noticeable. It is unfortunate that none of the publications has women as their focus or uses gender as a category of analysis; given their source materials, the projects almost completely exclude women from the data. The "Salons" case study shows this possibility of focusing on women and/or using a gendered analysis while recent scholarship has argued for women's place within the Republic of Letters. It would have been appropriate to make a stronger effort to include women in such a prominent project.

On each project schema and visualization page, there is information about the tools used. The data visualizations largely use Palladio, an open source application developed at Stanford for Mapping the Republic of Letters by the Humanities + Design Lab.³ Palladio is a visualization platform designed for humanistic research into networks and allows data to be visualized on a map or as relationships between data as nodes and links. Manipulation of the data by facets, timeline, and timespan allows for both analysis and visualizations. Visualizations use HTML, CSS, Javascript, JSON, and Markdown files, and can be broken into bricks and embedded into websites. Code for Palladio and the bricks is available on GitHub. Palladio as a tool is an excellent introductory resource for data and network analysis, especially for humanists, and as such, Mapping the Republic of Letters has achieved its goal of developing "sophisticated, interactive visualization tools" ("About the Project"). British

2. Claire Rydell Arcenas, "Schema for Benjamin Franklin's Correspondence Network during the London Years," PDF, Stanford Digital Repository, 2016, republicofletters.stanford.edu/publications/franklin/schema/.

3. Palladio, October 2016, hdlab.stanford.edu/palladio/.

Architects on the Grand Tour also uses an interactive visualization, called Timechart, created for the project representing the times and places each architect visited or lived. These visualizations are interactive and represent significant findings within the data. For example, within the British Architects on the Grand Tour project, the timespan filter shows how travel destinations changed over time. The filters can be viewed on the project page or loaded in Palladio for more extensive interaction with the data.⁴ The visualizations and the authors' choices for inclusion can make clear arguments from the data.

These publications or projects are reached via the main navigation under the Publications tab. Once in the section, the design and layout changes to highlight the subjects of the projects and a stylized version of the Mapping the Republic of Letters logo of a seal. Additionally, there is no link back to the main Mapping the Republic of Letters site from the navigation. These publications represent a main output of Mapping the Republic of Letters, but they appear somewhat separate from it. Alongside the issues of missing visualizations in the case studies, this gap suggests that Mapping the Republic of Letters would benefit from some updating and stabilization to remove broken links and to highlight the outcomes, projects, publications and their data sets, and visualizations that have become the focused output of the project. This would make Mapping the Republic of Letters sustainable in the future while recognizing previous iterations.

Mapping the Republic of Letters is a large-scale digital project that has been a mainstay when it comes to early modern digital humanities and network analysis. Since its beginnings, the collaborators have established impressive goals, such as developing visualization tools and creating international collaborations, which they have achieved with Palladio and partnerships with Cultures of Knowledge Oxford, Groupe d'Alembert CNRS, Circulation of Knowledge and Learned Practices in the 17th-century Dutch Republic CKK. The lack of articulated relationships between various case studies and projects that make up Mapping the Republic of Letters makes it difficult to see as a unified project providing a larger understanding. Because it is broken into many smaller projects, it is not clear that Mapping the Republic of Letters meets one of their key objectives, understanding what the network of the republic

4. Giovanna Ceserani, "Map of Travels with Timespan Filter," Palladio, April 2017, republicofletters.stanford.edu/publications/grandtour/map/.

of letters looked like. Mapping the Republic of Letters has produced a useful tool for visualizing data in Palladio, and the documentation and data of some of their published projects may provide helpful guidance to those pursuing similar types of research, while the projects and publications are important contributions to their fields.

CATHERINE MEDICI

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Sly, Jordan S., project dir.

The Recusant Print Network Project (Beta). Illustrating Print Network with Data-Driven Visualizations (c. 1558–1640).

College Park, MD: University of Maryland. Accessed 23 October 2019.
trpnp.org.

The Recusant Print Network Project, currently in Beta, is an early modern history resource which was generated to ascertain the effectiveness of the recusant printer network through data-driven visualizations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century imprint information. The recusant print network was an important counter-publication network that covertly produced, printed, and circulated illicit Catholic books into England, which relied upon printers in Europe as well as in England. Recusancy was the legal term predominantly used against Catholics and dissenting Protestants who refused to conform to the rites of the Church of England from the accession of Queen Elizabeth I across the rest of the early modern period. Catholic recusants were often fined and imprisoned for their religious nonconformity, and thus they depended upon printers who were willing to produce works that could be smuggled into England and into the homes of Catholic readers for religious piety and intellectual discussions. This was a highly perilous operation, which saw printers having to produce works in secret by altering their locations (for instance, many London printers would advertise that their works were printed in Paris or Douai), and they would often use pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The project was born from the desire of history librarian and doctoral student Jordan S. Sly (University of Maryland, College Park) to help us appreciate how visualizations of early modern title pages can illuminate aspects