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Book Review: Reassembling the Republic of Letters in the Digital Age: Standards, Systems, Scholarship

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Reassembling the Republic of Letters in the Digital Age: Standards, Systems, Scholarship, ed. Howard Hotson and Thomas Wallnig (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2019). Open access: <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1146>. 470 pp. Print € 55,00 (hardcover), ISBN 9783863954031.

Scholars of the Republic of Letters have been among the strongest advocates of the digital humanities. Projects such as *Mapping the Republic of Letters* (Stanford University), *SKILLNET* (Utrecht University), *Circulation of Knowledge/ePistolarium* (Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands), and *Cultures of Knowledge* (Oxford University) have developed new research approaches based on network analysis, topic modelling, text mining and spatial analysis. Yet the field of digital humanities is trapped in “an endless infancy” – to use the words of Franco Moretti. It has yet to establish its theory, standards, and methodology – even the technical language needs to be refined. To face these challenges, in 2014 Howard Hotson and Thomas Wallnig received a COST Action networking grant from the European Union, which allowed them to assemble a team of over 200 experts from 33 countries. This book is the result of this collaborative effort.

For the purpose of this review, I will dwell mostly on observations relevant to historical network research. The Republic of Letters lends itself to network analysis because it consists of people (nodes) connected by letters (edges). As described in section III.1 of *Reassembling the Republic of Letters*, an estimated 2 million letters from the 16th to the 18th century are scattered throughout the globe. Thanks to digitization, many of these letters have been made accessible on the internet, and their metadata assembled into online catalogues. Yet several challenges confront the historian who wants to harvest data from these catalogues. The main problem is that most catalogues provide information about the letters of one person – the ego – while neglecting the other members of the network – the alters. Technically, these catalogues are known as “data silos” and translate into separate ego-networks. Instead, the Republic of Letters consisted of different overlapping networks. In chapter IV.5, therefore, Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian Ahnert advocate for the creation of a “meta-archive” integrating data from different catalogues.

The creation of a meta-archive, however, is not without problems. The most significant problem is the standardization of epistolary metadata. Libraries and archives use different terms and categories to describe their collections of letters (chapter III.1). Moreover, epistolary metadata – place, dates and people – can be expressed in multiple ways, resulting in records that are often ambiguous, incomplete, and uncertain. For this reason, the second section of the book – “Standards: Dimensions of Data” – proposes a number of shared principles for modelling epistolary metadata in a way that would ease data sharing and, consequently, network analysis.

A specific problem affecting epistolary metadata is the disambiguation of people with the same name. To solve this problem, Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian Ahnert have developed the *Disambiguation Engine*, a tool specifically designed for network analysis (chapter III.2). The *Disambiguation Engine* allows the user to move quickly between the different occurrences of a name to decide from the context if it refers to the same person or not. At the same time, Ahnert and Ahnert

warn against the perils of over-disambiguation, advocating for an “under-connected rather than an over-connected network, which is preferable to erroneously exaggerating a person’s significance” (231).

One of the strengths of *Reassembling the Republic of Letters* is that the authors are transparent about the limits of their models and are not afraid to talk about their failures. Working with digital tools involves a great deal of trial and error. Researchers at the Huygens Institute, for instance, used the tool *ePistolarium* to search for words expressing confidentiality in the letters of Hugo Grotius (chapter III.4). However, as they found out, Grotius and his correspondents relied heavily on implicit language when speaking in a confidential manner. In studying concepts as elusive as confidentiality, we still need to look closely at the letters. Text-analytical methods such as topic modeling are not yet capable of reading between the lines.

In the epilogue of the book, Hotson and Walling write that “high-level innovation is now too demanding for a single project, institution, or even country to undertake alone: instead, it will belong in the future to networks of projects and institutions pursuing the most ambitious objectives collectively.” (459) At the same time, scholars such as Joris van Zundert (*If You Build It, Will We Come?*, 2012) deem large infrastructures to be “intellectually prohibited places” for ideas or approaches that do not fit the preconceived model. This is why *Reassembling the Republic of Letters* proposes to distinguish between core metadata and supplementary data. To ensure interoperability, core metadata – sender, recipient, date, origin, destination, and source reference – should be modelled in the same way. These guidelines, however, do not apply to supplementary data, which include information on the materiality of the letters (e.g. letterlocking), prosopography, genres and topics, among others.

Between 2014 and 2018, *Reassembling the Republic of Letters* offered a forum for experts in various disciplines to work together and build a common understanding of the digital humanities. Collaboration between the DensityDesign Research Lab at the Politecnico di Milano and the Stanford Humanities Center was key to developing network tools such as Palladio, as well as giving rise to a permanent Humanities + Design Research Lab at Stanford University (307). Data-sprints with both humanists and computer scientists produced outcomes “that could never have been achieved otherwise” (307). These experiences show, once again, that collaboration and communication are pivotal to the future of the digital humanities. To interpret the results of quantitative research, historians must acquire knowledge of the tools and methods, while keeping an eye out for close reading.

I hope that digital librarians and project managers will listen to the message of this book and open the doors of their online catalogues, allowing historians to freely gather data from them. Only then will we live up to the promise of meta-archives.