

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Cultures of Knowledge: An Intellectual Geography of the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters

Review Number:

1316

Publish date:

Thursday, 13 September, 2012

Editor:

Howard Hotson

ISBN:

Date of Publication:

2012

Publisher:

University of Oxford

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Vittoria Feola

Network studies are fashionable today, both in the sciences and in the humanities, witness the ever-increasing research grants, books, articles, and calls for papers about knowledge exchange that circulate globally. Scientists working in artificial intelligence, engineering, statistics, and computational linguistics have been doing network analysis for a long time. The humanities have been following suit, and indeed we are all familiar today with the relatively junior offspring of the 'digital humanities'. They allow historians to apply information techniques and technologies for representing and visualizing large datasets to the study of networks in a historical perspective. From the Japanese www.network-studies.org [2] to the Globalisation Studies Network with its partners scattered from Iran to Africa and the Philippines, and from the United States to Europe, networks are in, and so are their websites. But while such websites tend to be descriptive of the research projects behind them, Oxford's project website *Cultures of Knowledge* (www.history.ox.ac.uk/cofk/ [3]) is almost unique for the usefulness of the resources which it makes available free of charge to its viewers.

Cultures of Knowledge was established in 2009 as a collaborative interdisciplinary project based at the University of Oxford with the exclusive funding of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. It comprises a steering committee of ten, with Professor Howard Hotson as Project Director; it has a number of collaborators who work at Oxford as well as elsewhere in the UK and in Europe. Each member and collaborator is involved with their own research project, though all these projects share the same premises. Borrowing from Dickens, one could sum them up thus: from the study of networks past to the creation of networks present for the intellectual geography of the future. The rationale behind *CofK* is the need among

early modern intellectual historians for a platform on which to meet virtually and exchange knowledge about early modern networks through the study of their correspondence. Anyone who has worked on correspondence knows how challenging it can be, due to the wide range of scholarly abilities that are required, from palaeography to languages, and including analysis, exegesis and synthesis, not to mention the basic difficulty of finding the puzzle pieces. If we compare a network of correspondence to a puzzle, and we imagine each letter as a puzzle piece, we get a fairly accurate metaphor for the kind of complex enterprise that intellectual historians embark on when they start their evidence hunt. *CofK* is an overarching project which aims at facilitating this kind of evidence hunt.

Evidence hunt means first of all locating which letters are relevant for one's research, and in which archives they are kept today. Secondly, it implies travelling to those archives, unless one is lucky enough to find digital copies of the sought-after letters. Such an evidence hunt has a strong geographical dimension to it. Students of political science are accustomed to hearing the old mantra that experts in international relations like to repeat to freshers, 'geography makes history'. To the scholar of international treaties as both legal and historical documents this seems a useful oversimplification. To the intellectual historians who gathered at Oxford last September for the annual conference of *CofK*, and launched 'intellectual geography' as a new category for the study of intellectual history, that mantra would seem inappropriate. Or, rather, they would point out, as we can read on the *CofK* website, that networks of scholarship overcame geography and even created new intellectual geographies which did not always overlap with the original physical geographies. All this happened thanks to the geographically neutral medium of the learned letter. An international treaty is by its nature bound to the political geographies from which it stems. On the contrary, intellectual geographers wish to look at the ways in which ideas overcame geographical and political obstacles and generated new ideas when they met in the geographically neutral place of the learned letter. Intellectual geography studies the ways in which geographical conditions impacted on local cultures of knowledge, and the ways in which the learned letter neutralised or diminished the importance of geography in the formation of cultural trends which cut across physical and social spaces. Hence, 'networking early modern correspondence' is the central research goal of *CofK*.

Their IT professionals have been working towards the creation of digital infrastructure which can help not only *CofK* members and collaborators, but indeed anyone utilising their approach. Thanks to the valuable help of the Bodleian Digital Library Systems and Services, the *CofK* website is a rare example of a useful project portal, because not only does it describe in great clarity the aims of the project, it also enables scholars to keep up to date with project developments through the media of podcasts, videos, and all sorts of scholarly news. I find particularly useful the videos of papers presented at the many *CofK* conferences and workshops. How many times have we sulked for having missed what promised to be a ground-breaking lecture? Conversely, videos can also happily reassure the all-too busy scholar (or the scholar on holiday) that actually they did not miss much after all because that paper was not relevant to their research despite its misleading title. Seriously, the possibility of watching lectures and downloading podcasts is a great research facility that *CofK* presents us all with, and is very much in tune with our digital times. However, while most readers of *Reviews in History* will take such things granted, I wish to remind them that not far from their 'intellectual geography' are many continental academics and their students who do not yet use video lectures, podcasts, or iTunes U. The *CofK* website is an Oxford novelty that, hopefully, more and more Continental historians will use in both research and teaching. I certainly do.

But what I regard as the jewel in the crown of *CofK* is *EMLO* ? a potentially new union catalogue of Early Modern Letters Online (<http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk> [4]). 'New digital technologies provide an exciting opportunity to create a new tool and service capable of solving this problem: a scalable, central, freely accessible inventory of correspondence to which individuals and institutions can contribute metadata, texts and images of individual letters, small calendars of individual corpora, and extensive catalogues of institutional holdings'. So far it comprises the card catalogue of a large proportion of the correspondence in the Bodleian Library (48,695 records) and the correspondence of John Aubrey (1,073 records), Jan Amos Comenius (489 records), Samuel Hartlib (4,585 letters), Edward Lhwyd (2,138 records), Martin Lister (1,141 records), John Selden (355 records), John Wallis (2,002 records). It contains 12,079 people, 3,636

locations, 560 organisations and 106 repositories covering a total of 60,532 letters. And much more which users will easily find out by themselves, given that the *EMLO* search form is extremely easy to use. For instance, I just typed 'aubrey' and came up with 37 pages of results. I clicked on the first record, and *EMLO* informed me of its date, authors, origin, abstract, language, its repository and shelf-mark. One can also just browse through the names. I clicked on John Adamson (1787-1855) because of the high number of letters associated with him (59, as opposed to people who figure in the catalogue with just one letter to their credit). The Adamson record popped up neatly, showing an histogram of catalogue statistics for his letters distributed over the years 1807-15. This is one of the ways in which the *CofK* website works on the visualisation of research data.

EMLO is a potentially excellent research tool. But with the end of Mellon funding in 2012 one can only hope that more funding comes through in order for the *CofK* team to finish off the job properly. This would entail putting more records into *EMLO*, and, in my opinion, a collaboration with European institutions, which could feed metadata into *EMLO*. Not only is the latter an obvious development to hope for in view of the very international nature of 'networking early modern correspondence', but it would also avoid embarrassing duplicates.

I recall Howard Hotson's wonderfully surprised face when I told him that the whole of Peiresc's correspondence had already been digitised, and that it was fully available and searchable on a little-known European Union-funded, France-based website, www.e-corpus.org [5]. This had previously come as a shock to me, when, back in September 2007, I was in Carpentras trying to order up some of Peiresc's letters, only to be told nonchalantly by a librarian that she did not understand why I wanted to waste my time down there with the temperature at 35C in the shade, given that the whole correspondence of the 'Prince of the Republic of Letters' (as Peiresc was known to contemporaries) was already on e-corpus. But the Carpentras website did not have a link to *e-corpus* nor did the encyclopedic *peiresc.org* website or indeed other libraries like the Mejanes in Aix (which holds 18th-century copies of the circa 10,000 letters in print). *E-corpus* lacked visibility. One thought that had struck Professor Hotson's mind was to try and put the Peiresc records on *EMLO*. This would seem like the most obvious thing to do to any early modern intellectual historian working on networks of correspondence. Except that this had already been done! Communication and collaboration with Continental scholars seems to me to be absolutely essential if *EMLO* is to thrive.

This brings up the related issue of visibility. Both *CofK* and *e-corpus* are fantastic digital tools. Yet, it is not easy to learn of their existence. *CofK* aims to facilitate the creation of communities of intellectual historians by various means, including *EMLO*. This is a great idea. But it needs publicity, visibility. The *CofK* website is hard to criticise given that James Brown and Miranda Lewis are behind it. Their work is outstanding, the site structure makes sense, everything is explained clearly and everything works, updates are continuous and everything that ends up on the *CofK* website is worth reading. It is a gem of a resource. But I cannot help thinking that such a wonderful research tool and virtual platform needs yet more visibility. I would really urge research libraries both in the UK and elsewhere to put up links to *CofK* and similarly useful websites, such as their Stanford partner, *Mapping the Republic of Letters* (<https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/> [6]), as well as *e-corpus* of course (about which a whole review would be thoroughly necessary, given that it comprises 2,075,282 extremely useful documents). The reason for this is that it is still to library websites that scholars first turn when they begin their puzzle-piece hunt. Only in this way can proper visibility be given to useful tools. We are in need of greater synergies if we are to overcome geographical and mental boundaries. In this way, we could properly use the *CofK* website as a virtual meeting place, where *CofK* participants and sympathisers studying early modern scholarly communities will be able to form new communities. From networks past to networks present for the intellectual geography of the future.

The editors will respond in due course.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1316>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/32385>
- [2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/www.network-studies.org%20>
- [3] <http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/cofk/>
- [4] <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>
- [5] <http://www.e-corp.us.org/>
- [6] <https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>