Voltaire@USC

Learning Opportunities for Librarians: Embarking
On a Digital Humanities Project

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What are the Digital Humanities?

"Nowadays, the term can mean anything from media studies to electronic art, from data mining to edutech, from scholarly editing to anarchic blogging, while inviting code junkies, digital artists, standards wonks, transhumanists, game theorists, free culture advocates, archivists, librarians, and edupunks under its capacious canvas."

(Stephen Ramsay, Who's In and Who's Out. January 8, 2011, http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/08/whos-in-and-whos-out/

Digital humanities are also "a series of concrete instantiations involving money, students, funding agencies…programs, curricula…gatekeepers, and prestige. It might be more than these things, but it **cannot not** be these things."
(Ramsay, 2011)

30 letters to and from Voltaire and 4 sheets of poems.
Collection acquired in 1945 for $123 (roughly $1200 today).
Creation of a digital edition.

Correspondents:

- Frederick the Great;
- Pierre-Robert Le Cornier de Cideville;
- Charles Augustin Feriol, comte d'Argental;
- Louis de Valliere;
- Derrey de Rockqueville;
- Sabine Elisabeth Oelgard von Bassewitz;
- Jean le Rond d'Alembert;
- Jeanne Antoinette Pompadour.

Note: The known corpus of Voltaire's letters is comprised of over 21000, of which over 15000 are by Voltaire.

au Roi de Prusse, voy dans l'édition de 75 le 1er vol. le
pieces pag: 199
a Paris ce 15 may 1742

1 quand vous aviez un pere, et dans ce pere un maitre
2 vous etiez philosofe, et viviez sous vos loix
3 aujourd'huy mis au rang des rois
4 et plus qu'eux vous digne de l'etre
5 vous serrez cependant vingt fois maitres a la fois,
6 ces maitres sont tirans; le premier c'est la gloire
7 tiran dont vous aimez les fers,
8 et qui met au bout de nos vers
9 ainsi qu'en vos exploits la Brillante Victoire
10 la politique a son coté
11 moins ebouissante, aussy forte
12 m'edstant rédigeant ou rompant un traitté,
13 vient mesurer vos pas que cette gloire comporte,
14 l'interest, la fidelité
15 quelquefois punissant, et trop souvent contraires,
16 des amis dangereux, des secrets ...faire, ... declares,
17 chaque jour des desseins, et des dangers nouveaux,
18 tout ecouter, tout voir, et tout faire a propos,
19 payer les uns en esperance;
20 les autres en raisons, quelques uns en bons mots

Voltaire to Frederick the Great, 15 May 1742. Leaf 1 of 2.

The letters are copies, in the hand of Jean-Louis Wagnière,
Voltaire's long-time secretary.

Jean Huber, *Voltaire's morning*. 1750-1775, The Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg. Oil on canvas.
Voltaire dictating to Wagnière while dressing.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Huber_-_Voltaire%27s_Morning_-_WGA11784.jpg

Giacomo Casanova, in his *Memoirs* (volume 4, chapter 15) wrote this about his visit to Ferney, Voltaire's home (freely translated from the French):

"Voltaire opened a door and I saw hundreds of papers.

--This, he said, is my correspondence. You can see here about fifty thousand letters to which I have responded.

--Do you have copies of your responses?

--A good number of them. It is the task of a valet whose only job it is."

Francesco Giuseppe Casanova, Portrait of Giacomo Casanova, ca 1750-1755. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Drawing. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Casanova_ritratto.jpg
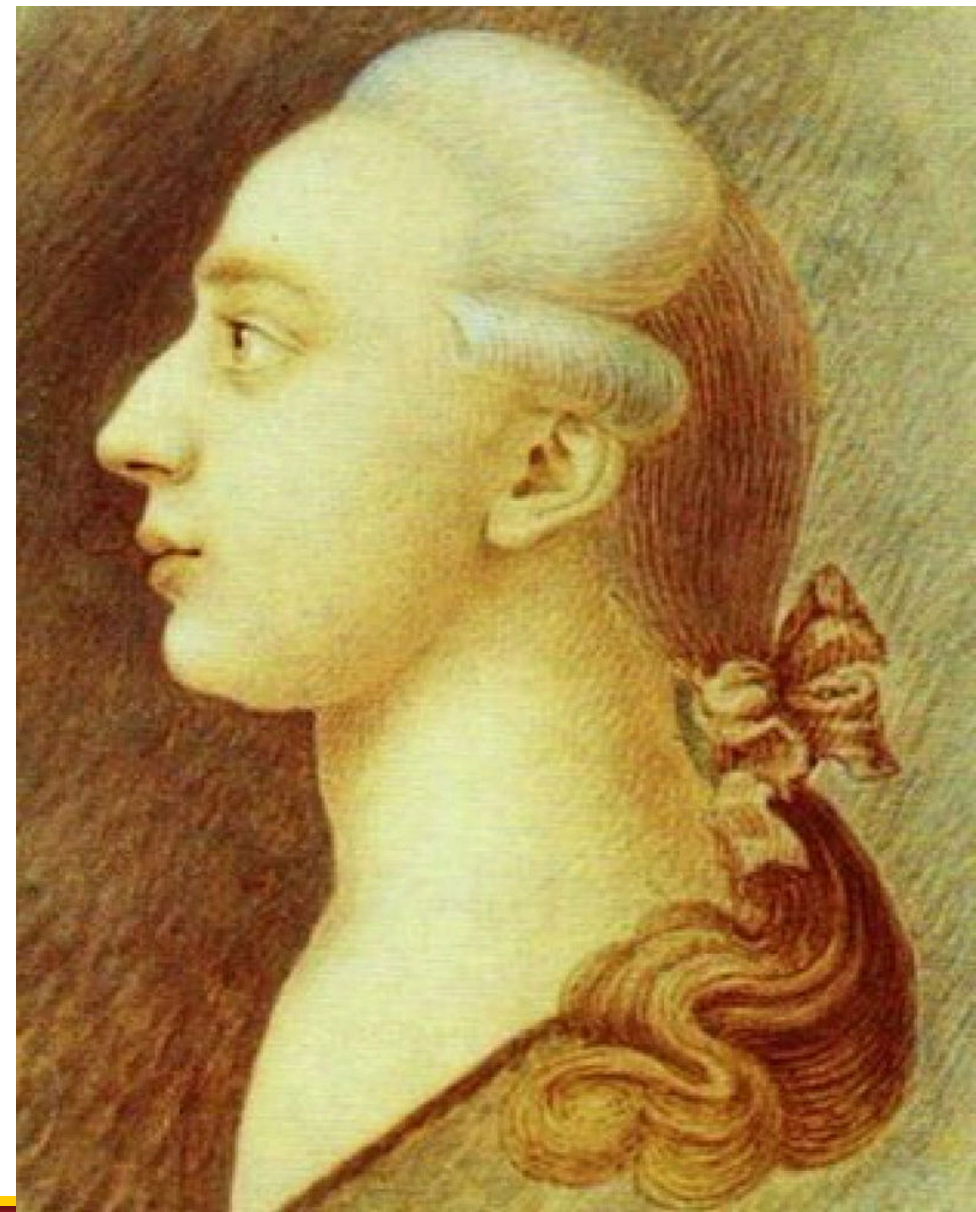
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Voltaire @ USC: Situating the publication of the letters at the intersection of several genres in digital scholarship, digital publishing, and the digital humanities, generally speaking.

Voltaire@USC is a DH project in the early stages – a DIY

Sergio Leone, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 1966.
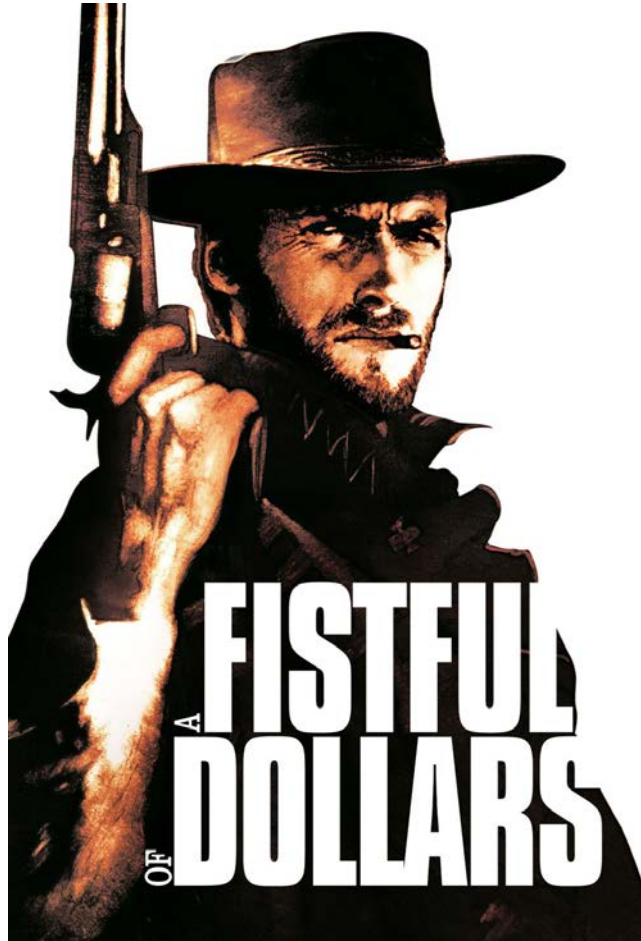Source: http://www.gstatic.com/tv/thumb/movieposters/4161/p4161_p_v8_aq.jpg

- Inconstant funding;
- ad hoc staff support;
- no formal institutional support;
- lack of transparency;
- ad hoc decision-making;
- no space;
- limited technological access;
- little guidance on data management/planning;
- informality;
- grassroots;
- little formal consideration in promotion or scholarship…

Educause Center for Analysis and Research, Building Capacity for Digital Humanities: A Framework for Institutional Planning. ECAR Working Group Paper, May 2017.
Source: https://library.educause.edu/~/media/files/library/2017/5/ewg1702.pdf

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Creating the digital edition of the letters involved the following frameworks:

- Administration

- Technology

- Scholarly Engagement

Administration

Library challenge grant:

- Library as locus for the digital edition;
- Educational opportunity for students.

Sergio Leone, *For a Fistful of Dollars*, 1964.
Source: http://www.gstatic.com/tv/thumb/movieposters/3571/p3571_p_v8_al.jpg

Technology

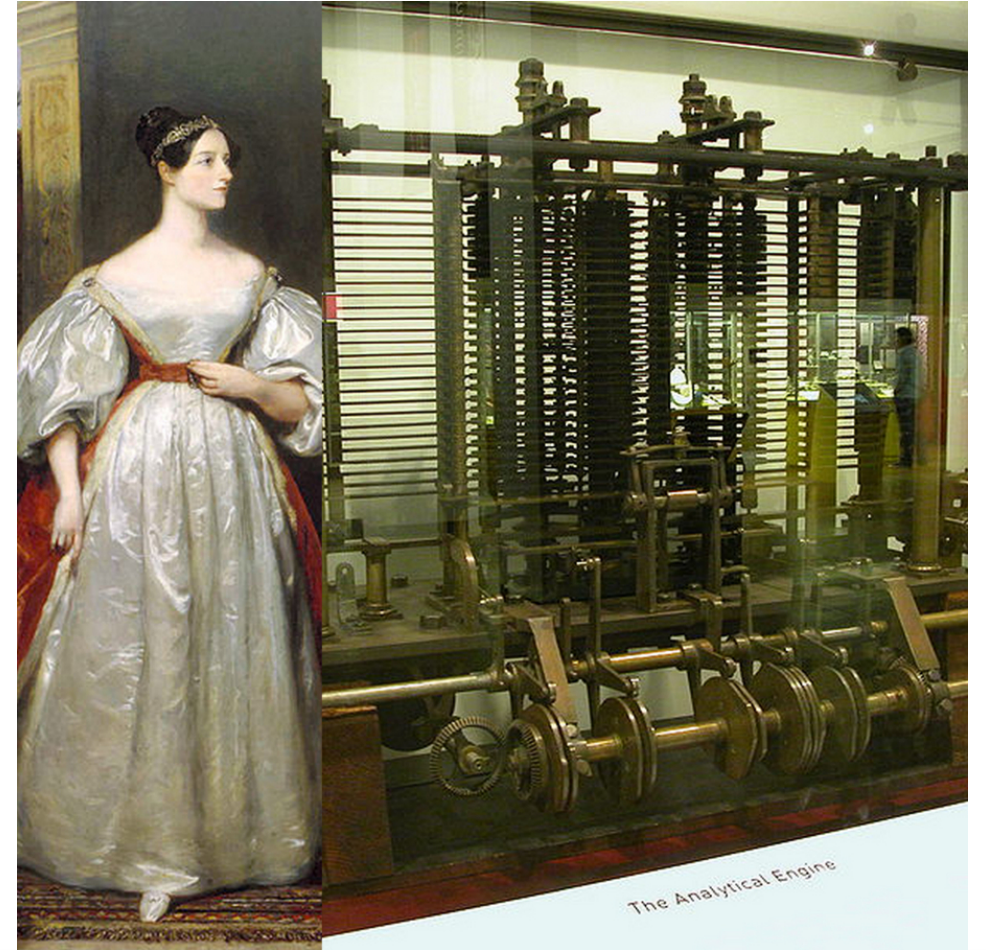Scalar, scalar.usc.edu
Alliance for Networking Visual Culture

Free, open source authoring and publishing platform that enables users to assemble media from multiple sources and juxtapose them with their own long-form, born-digital writing. It requires minimal technical expertise.

USC Voltaire Letters
scalar.usc.edu/works/voltaire/index

Ada Byron Lovelace and the analytics engine.
Source: https://blog.4psa.com/celebrating-ada-lovelace-the-first-computer-programmer-in-history/

The Analytical Engine

Scholarly Engagement

- Historic, institutional, and paleographic context of the letters;
- Metadata, transcription, translation;
- Engaging students as contributors, and potentially as curators

Octavia E. Butler, 1986.
Source: https://theportalist.com/15-fascinating-facts-about-octavia-butler

Moving Forward

- Partnerships;
- Student education;
- Funding;
- Publication as curatorial practice;
- Archivability;
- Proof of concept;
- Difficulties are endemic. This is an experiential process.

Natalia Goncharova, *Cyclist*, 1913. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
Source:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f9/Cyclist_%28Goncharova%2C_1913%29.jpg

A Brief Bibliography

- Educause Center for Analysis and Research (2017): *Building Capacity for Digital Humanities: A Framework for Institutional Planning*. ECAR Working Group Paper, May 2017. Available at https://library.educause.edu/~/media/files/library/2017/5/ewg1702.pdf.

- Ramsay, Stephen (2011): *Who's In and Who's Out*. January 8, 2011. Available at http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/08/whos-in-and-whos-out/.

- Shirazi, Roxanne (2014): *Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities*. July 15, 2014. Available at http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/.

- *USC Voltaire Letters*. Available at scalar.usc.edu/works/voltaire/index .