USC Digital Voltaire: Centering Digital Humanities in the Traditions of Library and Archival Science

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abstract: USC Digital Voltaire, a digital, multimodal critical edition of autograph letters, aims to combine the traditional scope of humanities inquiry with the affordances and methodologies of digital scholarship, and to support scholarly inquiry at all levels, beyond the disciplines associated with Voltaire and the Enlightenment. Digital editing, and digital editions in particular, will likely expand in the next few decades as a multitude of assets become digitized and made available as online collections. One important question is: What role will librarians and archivists play in this era? USC Digital Voltaire points in one possible, creative direction.

Voltaire's Autograph Letters at USC

At the University of Southern California (USC) Special Collections Department, researchers can find 31 original (autograph) letters and four poems covering the years 1742 to 1777 by Voltaire, the pen name of François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778. Voltaire’s clear writing style, humor, and sharp intelligence made him one of the greatest writers of the French Enlightenment, a period of intellectual ferment in the late 17th and the 18th centuries. His correspondents included other leading figures of the Enlightenment, such as the mathematician and philosopher Jean le Rond d’Alembert; Frederick II (Frederick the Great), king of Prussia; and Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of King Louis XV of France. Voltaire’s voluminous correspondence currently comprises over 22,000 published letters, of which 16,136 are by Voltaire.¹ The correspondence offers a multifaceted, private, and, at times, moving expression of the writer’s innermost thoughts and feelings, through epistolary exchanges.

The letters in the USC collection, though only part of the enormous Voltaire correspondence spread over 70 years,² offer an engaging, multilayered perspective of one of the leading minds that defined the Enlightenment. Of great interest is the wealth of

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topics the letters cover: religious freedom and freedom of expression in France; the Roman Catholic Church and its social impact; Voltaire’s judicial campaigns in favor of the victims of intolerance; Frederick the Great’s military campaigns during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years War (1754–1763); discussions on the theatrical life of the period; Voltaire’s remarks on many of his own works, as well as his commentaries (at times biting) on his contemporaries’ writings; and descriptions of his own health.

A Unique Opportunity

As digital technologies and social media provide new ways for us to create and publish content, librarians and archivists are well situated to explore the ways in which the methodologies and approaches of digital scholarship can further their traditional work. Given the position of academic libraries at the intersection of disciplines, their role as the custodians of unique archives, and librarians’ expertise in teaching research skills (including information literacy), libraries are natural homes for students’ extensive exploration of digital scholarship (outside of students’ departmental affiliations). At the same time, such work allows librarians and archivists to activate archival collections by enabling use and establishing participatory relationships around archival records.

The Voltaire letters in USC’s collection thus provided a unique opportunity. On the one hand, the letters themselves, and the broad set of topics upon which they touch, are uniquely suited for the construction of a digital critical edition in which facsimiles, transcriptions, and translations of those letters are connected to a network of cultural and historical mini-essays. On the other hand, by enriching these letters via a digital, multimodal critical edition, we had an opportunity, as librarians, to engage in emerging modes of scholarly communication and to lay the foundation for an experimental librarian-led digital humanities project: USC Digital Voltaire (http://scalar.usc.edu/works/voltaire/index).

Because digital productions are multimodal—that is, they deliver information in multiple modes, such as text, sound, and images—such productions can help us to visualize and better understand the past. USC Digital Voltaire allows users to work with an array of tools to
uncover patterns of information and different meanings they might not otherwise see, thus giving the opportunity for scholars and students to ask new questions and approach the letters with a larger frame of reference.

Since the start of this project, we focused on the creation of a digital critical edition that includes both a seamless integration of digital resources and a digital methodological base that highlights the underlying production of ideas as a collective phenomenon during the Enlightenment. As a result, USC Digital Voltaire puts us in the role of “witnesses” to the vibrant milieu in which Voltaire lived. It allows us to explore (and understand) the human experience (as illustrated in these letters) and to feel a profound sense of connection to Voltaire and his correspondents. For an overview of this project, see Danielle Mihram’s 2017 article “The University of Southern California Voltaire Letters: A Polymathic Multimodal Digital Project.”

Developing a Digital Critical Edition: USC Digital Voltaire

At the core of USC Digital Voltaire is a set of 35 pages, one for each of the 31 letters and 4 poems in USC’s collection Voltaire Correspondence, 1742–1777. Each page contains a digital facsimile and an English translation of the letter or poem it features (see Figure 1). The digital facsimiles are high-resolution, and the captions for each lead the reader directly to the USC Digital Library (http://digitallibrary.usc.edu), where the digital master copies and all associated metadata (tagging or coding to facilitate information retrieval) are kept. In this way, documents can be inspected as visual artifacts immediately adjacent to their translation. The translated text of each document is also annotated with expandable notes, offering additional information on keywords.

Figure 1. Letters in USC [University of Southern California] Digital Voltaire are translated and annotated adjacent to their digital facsimile.
Pages that feature letters to or from Voltaire are embedded within multiple contexts in our project. As a digital critical edition, *USC Digital Voltaire* offers readers the ability to engage Voltaire’s letters as a chronologically ordered set of communiqués and as a cluster of materials whose complex interconnections can be visualized, navigated, and explored. Readers of *USC Digital Voltaire* can access Voltaire’s letters as a series of pathways arranged by sender or receiver, and they can engage with the letters embedded within a constellation of cultural, political, and biographical events via an interactive timeline (see Figure 2). They can also navigate between letters by way of a network of mini-essays on people, places, and events. This network of essays allows readers to maneuver “up” and “down” a hierarchical structure among the letters, mini-essays, and keyword indexes. From each page featuring a letter, readers can move “up” to keyword mini-essays for individual people, places, or events mentioned in that letter. From those mini-essays, readers can then either navigate back “down” to any letter associated with that keyword or further “up” to an index of all keywords of that type (for example, an index of all people or places mentioned in this collection of letters) and then back “down” again. Using a series of visualizations (see Figure 3), readers can also probe the interconnections between multiple letters and keywords.

Alongside the multiple linear and nonlinear assemblages of letters, *USC Digital Voltaire* offers a series of more traditionally structured essays that frame the institutional context and provenance for the collection of letters. Our hope is that, together, these features will constitute a kind of virtual humanities laboratory, allowing scholars and students to immerse themselves in a research environment of interconnected primary and contextual material from which they can develop their own hypotheses.

**USC Digital Voltaire as a Model for Digital Humanities Initiatives in the Academic Library**

Like many digital humanities projects, *USC Digital Voltaire* is a blend of scholarly genres. We see it as a digital critical edition of Voltaire’s selected correspondence between 1742 and 1777. But to properly advance our project as a new model for digital humanities work within academic libraries, it is important to situate it within the larger cohort of digital projects with which it shares affinities: digital editions, digital archives, and online digital exhibits.

Digital editions and digital archives have several, often overlapping, meanings. The distinction between these two types of projects has been the subject of some discussion. In the predominant view, a digital edition is a project that brings together material by or about an author or an author’s work; or material that relates to a topic, period, or event and that makes a scholarly or editorial intervention regarding that material. In this...
Figure 2. Using an interactive timeline, readers can explore letters to and from Voltaire chronologically as well as visualize how those letters are embedded within a constellation of cultural, political, and biographical events.

Figure 3. A variety of visualizations allow readers to explore the multiple vectors along which letters are organized in USC Digital Voltaire.

view, a digital archive differs from a digital edition as a project that is not scholarly or editorial in scope—that offers no commentary, annotations, or original editorial work. Instead, it aggregates, into one online research environment, a comprehensive or near-comprehensive set of primary and secondary material relating to an author, topic, period, or event. While the distinction between digital archives and digital editions may remain contested, together they share a set of overlapping aims and features with USC Digital Voltaire. First, USC Digital Voltaire is an editorial endeavor, offering translations, transcriptions, and scholarly commentary on the textual and physical features of the letters
in its collection. USC Digital Voltaire also attempts to situate its collected letters within a web of informational and contextual material. The letters are individually annotated with links to a wide range of historical and cultural mini-essays, and those essays are themselves part of an overall network of keywords and indexes that connect letters to one another via people, places, or themes. Like many digital archives and editions, USC Digital Voltaire incorporates, at its core, a set of tools that allow researchers to organize items, by way of this network of extratextual material, in a way beneficial for their use and to visualize complex connections between them.

USC Digital Voltaire includes an additional layer of scholarly production beyond the editorial work at its core and the network of informational content that allows researchers to contextualize that work. USC Digital Voltaire was also built to showcase an institutional collection, the Voltaire Correspondence, 1742–1777, housed at USC’s Special Collections and hosted online at the USC Digital Library. It is, for that reason, an outlier among digital editions, which customarily focus on either a single work or, more often, bring together a set of documents from multiple collections to exhaustively cover a given author, topic, period, or event. In this way, USC Digital Voltaire aligns with a newer genre in the digital humanities: the online digital exhibit. Digital exhibits can take many forms, but in recent years, they have been built predominantly using Omeka, a Web publishing platform developed at the Center for History and New Media for creating media-rich online exhibits. These projects often showcase specific archival collections while also, at times, offering some of the standard features and functionality found in digital editions and digital archives. These types of projects are, by and large, built by librarians, archivists, and museum professionals to increase scholarly engagement with a collection at an institution. However, a key difference, and one important for our purposes, is that, unlike digital editions and archives, online exhibits are not editorial in scope. Rather, their scholarly intervention comes at the level of the collected works as a whole, often explicitly addressing the provenance and institutional context of the archival collection they make available.

Whereas digital editions and digital archives offer scholarly and editorial interventions of individual items in a collection, online digital exhibits offer critical assessments of entire collections.

USC Digital Voltaire differs from other, similar projects: it does both. Its critical apparatus is applied at the level of the document and the collection. The same questions that are asked of individual letters within the collection—questions about their origin, historical context, and material status—are asked of the collection as a whole. What is the collection’s provenance and history? How was it acquired? What is its institutional context, and how might that reflect on individual items in the collection? What were the digital preservation methods for the collection? How was its metadata record constructed, and how is that different from other collections?
In this way, *USC Digital Voltaire* is not a critical edition of a work, an oeuvre, or a set of papers in a traditional sense. Rather, it is a critical edition of an institutional collection, a cross between a digital edition and a digital exhibit. As a critical edition, then, it offers a way to blend these genres, and in doing so, to foreground the nature of archival collections while also doing important editorial work and offering a wide array of digital research tools. *USC Digital Voltaire* represents one way to think about what digital archives and editions might look like when created by library professionals.

*USC Digital Voltaire* was conceived, designed, and implemented by five subject specialist librarians, two metadata librarians, and two library staff members, one specializing in Web design and the other in digital scholarly communication. In both the makeup of our team and in the focus of the project, *USC Digital Voltaire* seeks to center digital humanities within the library squarely in the traditions of library and archival science. As a digital humanities project, library professionals established its scholarly objectives and carried out its critical interventions. It thus takes seriously a challenge put forth by library-focused digital humanists—Trevor Muñoz, Bethany Nowviskie, and Miriam Posner, among others—who wish to move digital humanities in the library away from a service model. As Muñoz advocates in “Digital Humanities in the Library Isn’t a Service,” “Librarianship is intellectual work,” and digital humanities in the library can and should be re-centered on the research questions and scholarly priorities that drive that work.

Digital editions, and the scholarly efforts they represent, may be a vital area to begin the kind of shift for which Muñoz and others advocate. The next few decades will likely bring an expansion of digital editing, and digital editions in particular, as more and more assets are digitized and made available as online collections. One question we should ask ourselves is: What role will librarians and archivists play in this era? We think *USC Digital Voltaire* points in one possible direction.

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**USC Digital Voltaire** as a Model for Student Engagement

One of the stated goals of *USC Digital Voltaire* is

Through collaboration with our teaching faculty, first to develop a model and a tool for classroom instruction and research, this in tandem with mounting institutional pressures to teach students multiple literacies and new multimodal forms of expression, and then to engage students at all levels of scholarship and research in the humanities (italics added).
With USC Digital Voltaire, we have established a workflow in which students can create and submit a variety of content: annotations, mini-essays, visualizations, or films. In addition, students may be asked to embed their content within the overall hypermedia structure of the project—that is, to think about the multiple contexts in which that content may live and the various pathways by which readers may navigate to and from it. Work on USC Digital Voltaire may thus require students to master content related to Voltaire’s letters and poems and, at the same time, urge them to apply critical digital literacy skills in situating that content within an architecture of scholarly information. In this way, USC Digital Voltaire, and the pedagogical workflows described in this article, may facilitate core aspects of the Association of College and Research Libraries “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education” by encouraging students to see themselves as both producers and consumers of knowledge, and as contributors to informational and scholarly ecosystems. In addition, asking students to reflect on issues of information structure while generating scholarly content invites them to take part in shaping our expansive, multimedia critical edition. In doing so, the project takes seriously the role undergraduates can have in thinking through the organization, interactivity, and readability of emergent scholarly genres in the digital humanities.

In fall 2017, one of our faculty colleagues in the Department of French and Italian included an assignment in her undergraduate course Equality and Difference around the Enlightenment that provided detailed guidelines on annotating letters in USC Digital Voltaire that are not yet annotated. One outcome of this initiative was the awarding of a USC Provost’s Undergrad Research Fellowship for summer 2018 to one of these students, who has undertaken to write “mini-essays” for several additional letters in our USC Digital Voltaire. The outcome, which supports our goal for student engagement, is particularly encouraging as we begin to develop opportunities for students to create scholarly modules (including visualizations, music, and cinematic art) related to Voltaire and the Enlightenment. Additional students plan to compete for such an award in summer 2019.

Student interest in our project has led to another undergraduate’s desire to work with us as a partner in the creation of a second digital humanities project, Emotionally Intelligent Robots, which explores the complexities of human-machine interaction, including our emotional bonds with machines, our efforts to replicate or artificially model humanity, and what it means to be human. The student has received a yearlong research award for the academic year 2018–2019 from the USC Undergraduate Research Associates Program. As such, this burgeoning project closely aligns with the New Media Consortium and the Consortium for School Networking’s 2016 K–12 Horizon Report. The report identifies “students as creators” and creative skills as positive outcomes of allowing students to take control of their own learning, so that they may set their own goals and design ways to meet them. Nonetheless, such opportunities for students to create must be carefully planned, and our collaborative curricular and mentoring initiatives with departmental faculty are precious assets as we move forward.
As we look ahead, we also see USC Digital Voltaire as a potential space for students outside our university to engage in digital research and writing. USC Digital Voltaire is modeled on such projects as the Map of Early Modern London, a collaborative project of the University of Victoria in Canada that relies on content created by students and other qualified users to develop an interactive map of London between about 1560 and 1640. Our hope is to allow faculty from a variety of colleges and universities to assign students to write entries that will be published live to our site after undergoing an online review process. Projects like the Map of Early Modern London fill a much-needed gap for both faculty and students who wish to work digitally. For faculty, they constitute a ready-made, turnkey suite of features with which to impart digital research and writing skills to their students. Such projects are particularly welcome for educators who either lack the necessary digital resources to get started or would rather have their students gain such skills while collaborating on a bona fide, public-facing digital humanities project. For students, these projects offer the opportunity to develop digital writing skills, gain experience with the peer and editorial review process, and acquire a publication credit with a known project.

Looking Ahead

One of USC Digital Voltaire’s major goals is to support scholarly inquiry at all levels, beyond the traditional disciplines that are generally associated with Voltaire and the Enlightenment. We aim to develop national and international strategic alliances by bringing together scholars and students from different fields of the humanities, including history, literature, philosophy, and art history, together with disciplines in the social sciences, such as international relations and political science.

As a start, and as a result of Danielle Mihram’s research travel in June 2018 to the Institut et Musée Voltaire (Voltaire Institute and Museum) in Geneva, Switzerland, we have begun to establish a “scholarly bridge” between our project and the institute’s digital initiatives. We hope that, as USC Digital Voltaire continues to grow, our collaborations with library colleagues at other institutions will lead to projects that center digital humanities within the library, squarely in the traditions of library and archival science. We also look forward to the possibility of learning of any colleague’s interest in such collaborations.

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Notes

1. These manuscripts are acknowledged in the various publications of Voltaire’s correspondence, including the Electronic Enlightenment—Letters & Lives Online (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2008–2018), http://www.e-enlightenment.com/, where our collection is noted as the “James Harmon Hoose Library of Philosophy, USC [University of Southern California] Libraries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California [state], United States (SHELFMARK: MS fF840, v935d).”

2. Voltaire himself was aware of the scope of his correspondence: On January 15, 1761, in his letter (EE: D9542) to Madame du Deffand, Voltaire (then aged 67) stated that he was “crushed by a correspondence stretching from Pondicherry to Rome” (“accablé d’une correspondance qui s’étend de Pondichéry jusqu’à Rome”). (Pondicherry was a French colonial settlement in India until 1954.) For an informative essay on Voltaire’s correspondence, see Christiane Mervaud, “Voltaire’s Correspondence,” chap. 10 in The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 153–66.


5. For this reason, we chose Scalar as the platform in which to build our edition. Scalar is an authoring and publishing platform developed by and for scholars at the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture. It is meant to facilitate and encourage media-rich, multimodal scholarly writing, especially work that is connected to online archives and that is structured in ways difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in print. Scalar was thus well-suited to our purposes, as we sought to build an edition with an extensive set of interrelated features.


7. See “Transcription Conventions for the Voltaire Correspondence at USC,” http://scalar.usc.edu/works/voltaire/transcription-conventions-for-the-voltaire-correspondence-at-usc.


12. In this context, see John W. White and Heather Cabert, eds., Laying the Foundation: Digital Humanities in Academic Libraries (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2016).


14. USC, “USC Provost’s Undergrad Research Fellowships,” http://undergrad.usc.edu/experience/research/undergrad_research/: “Each undergraduate student funded by the program will receive a stipend in the amount of $3000 to support research in any academic field for a period of not less than eight weeks at 20 hours per week during the awarded term.”

15. USC, “USC Undergraduate Research Associates Program,” http://undergrad.usc.edu/faculty/urap/: “In the humanities, undergraduates should have the opportunity to work with primary materials, perhaps linked to their professor’s research projects. As undergraduates advance through the program, their learning experiences should become closer and closer to the activity of the graduate student . . . The goal of this program is to provide resources that enable faculty to integrate undergraduates into their scholarly and professional activities.”


