



DIGITAL Enlightenment STUDIES

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Review

Kahn A. and Rubin-Detlev K. 2021. CatCor: Correspondence of Catherine the Great.
<https://catcor.seh.ox.ac.uk>

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The British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies has awarded their annual prize for best digital resource to CatCor: Correspondence of Catherine the Great,¹ which launched in late 2021 and is hosted by St Edmund Hall, Oxford. The resource was designed by Andrew Kahn (Professor of Russian Literature, University of Oxford) and Kelsey Rubin-Detlev (Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Southern California) with additional support from Glenn Roe as the scholarly and digital humanities advisor, and a team of research assistants.

CatCor is a multimethodological platform that allows scholars to analyse the scale and complexity of Catherine the Great's correspondence – a key piece of evidence for how she governed and reasoned through her writing. This is the first time her correspondence has been published digitally and as an open-ended project, in the form of a representative sample of letters. This pilot project already contains all of the key elements that turn a digital database into a useful resource: it unifies what was once a vast, scattered corpus of letters that did not have a single print edition or digital repository available, it provides a space to visualise and analyse this remarkable correspondence, and it furthers scholarship because both the original texts and their translations, as well as their metadata, are fully searchable and linked to source files.

¹ See <https://www.bsecs.org.uk/prizes-and-awards>.



Uniting the corpus is one of the main scholarly goals of the project. As Kahn explains in a Voltaire Foundation blog post: ‘“How many letters did Catherine write?” is an obvious question and starting point. The best guesstimate is that close to 5000 letters survive but the number might well rise to over 6000 or on some accounts closer to 10 000. For reasons of dynastic politics, her letters were never properly collected into a scholarly edition’ (Kahn 2021). Some parts of this extensive corpus had been published in historical journals, or as separate correspondences, such as the collections of letters to her most famous correspondents, but if one wanted to go beyond, and examine the whole corpus, or even search a complete inventory, that was not possible at all: ‘The solution to the problem of accessing, reading, searching, and using this unique correspondence seemed to lie through the new resources of the Digital Age’ (Kahn 2021). Rubin-Detlev and Kahn went beyond inventorying and cataloguing to produce a first draft of a searchable digital database that adds scholarly value to the 19th-century print editions, by being ‘the most extensive and only inventory of letters with open access links to the print sources’ (Kahn 2021). Uniting the metadata of the correspondence so that it can be analysed in its totality is a major upgrade, and it proves to be especially important for a corpus such as this one, since Catherine’s ‘mastery of the art of epistolary networking was instrumental to her success: it allowed her to accomplish her tasks as empress and to project her power and influence across her empire and across Europe’ (Rubin-Detlev and Kahn 2019, p.48). She relied on this outreach not only to expand her imperial ambitions in the geopolitical sphere, but also to become fully integrated in the Republic of Letters, asserting her influence in ways that can only be understood fully by examining the intricacies of her whole correspondence.

Once a unified digital space for the letters had been developed, the next upgrade was creating the tools to analyse and reveal connections in the database, such as contrasting patterns between Catherine’s own correspondence and the broader communication networks of the Enlightenment. Visualising the corpus is exactly what makes the user understand how this dual dynamic of individual and collective identity flows through epistolary exchange, proving that ‘databases of this type help us map interpersonal and political relations in the period’ (Kahn 2018). A mixture of searching, browsing and mapping provides different entry points into the correspondence, depending on the user’s own research objectives, while also making possible cross-searching or statistical analysis. By dissecting the corpus and presenting it through different methods, its usability is increased, because the contents are not only findable but also explorable. The corpus can be searched as well as explored by using the filters provided in the right-hand column where you can choose between letters written in French or Russian, between addresses or locations, between subjects and mentioned people, places, events, organisations or works. Additionally, editorial notes with hyperlinks that are cross-referenced to the filters can be found throughout the full-text letters, so that any user can immediately find out more about the names, places, events and objects that are mentioned as they are reading the correspondence, without having to search for those entities separately.



The corpus can also be analysed by searching the calendar, where there are currently almost 8000 letters organised and tagged chronologically. Only 1049 offer the full-text option, but, as the editors indicate in the 'About' section of the website, 'we believe it is useful to include the calendar in order to show visitors to the website the scope of the task and be open about work in progress'. There is also the option of browsing specific people, places, events, organisations, works or subjects that appear in the correspondence, by wandering through the database in a more exploratory manner than the keyword or filtered search allows. These little 'drawers' facilitate a less directed way of exploring the corpus: they can be opened up to look through all the letters relating to the peace treaty between Prussia and France, for instance, or to deliberately engage with the unexpected as a way of exploring the corpus. For example, in the 'Personal' category drawer of the 'Subjects' section there is a subcategory titled 'Self-portraits', which contains some wonderful passages which could potentially become the starting point for a wider study of how Catherine describes and presents herself through the correspondence over the years, blending 'the personal and the political' (Rubin-Detlev and Kahn 2019, p.49).

The last tool is a map based on discoverable metadata that will reframe future social-network analysis research on the corpus, through the use of networks and graph theory. This feature is an excellent example of how digital humanities mapping tools allow scholars to gain complex understandings of geospatial data through synoptic and visually powerful methods. By exploring epistolary networks through a virtual recreation of their routes, Catherine's correspondence is not only visualised differently (in its totality, rather than through isolated exchanges), but also filtered differently, hence providing a new outlook on the corpus that allows one to conduct research in ways that were not possible with the print editions, such as applying available network analysis algorithms to date and location metadata in order to reveal decisive patterns and information that would take years to assemble and unveil from the actual corpus of content. The options of filtering by years and correspondent, as well as a timeline function, provide layers of analysis that can be adapted to various scholarly needs or research questions, yet more ways in which the corpus is open to discoveries regarding how Catherine used letter-writing to disseminate information, whilst she positioned herself within correspondence networks internationally. Nevertheless, knowing how many of her letters have incomplete data, including location data, could generate very useful information about how representative the current cartographic distribution is, compared to both the total known and unknown number of letters. This is one of the many possible upgrades that this project, and digital projects in general, would benefit from, depending on time and budget constraints, as the editors explain: 'longer term, our aim is to secure funding and to digitize, mark up and annotate all of Catherine's available letters' (Kahn and Rubin-Detlev 2021).

The fact that this is a pilot database means that focusing on its possibilities can overshadow its realities. All editorial notes and translations of a corpus that is now united, as well as the different searchability options, and the fact the letters have been encoded in TEI XML, prove that the overarching goal has certainly been



achieved: to make available a first searchable database of Catherine's correspondence that is fully compatible with current digital textual editing standards. In the upcoming years, I am sure this scholarly resource will be quoted and used in a vast array of research projects in many different disciplines on Catherine's reign and her century, as it finally allows users to analyse all the nuances in this complex corpus encompassing multiple networks.

References

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