

The use of Virtual Research Environments and eScience to enhance use of online resources: the History of Political Discourse VRE Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential for Virtual Research Environments and eScience techniques to enhance collaboration in the Arts and Humanities generally and in the History of Political discourse in particular. The adoption of such approaches – facilitating more intensive collaboration and use of online resources – is particularly appropriate in a research and teaching landscape transformed by the growth in digital resources. As such, this paper reports on the activities of the Early Modern VRE Research Group which has piloted the use of Access Grid and Sakai to support collaborative research in the history of political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that new technologies and practices associated with Virtual Research Environments (VREs) and eScience communication techniques can 1) facilitate the greater degree of collaboration which is called for by recent scholarly developments in the history of political discourse, and 2) enhance the already considerable benefits which digital resources have brought to the study of early modern texts and their contexts. It reports on the innovative work of a consortium comprising the University of Hull and the University of East Anglia (both UK), implementing such technologies in the delivery of a jointly-taught, dual-site MA Programme and in the practice of a dispersed Research Group studying early-modern political discourse. Important lessons have been learnt from the delivery of the dual-site MA programme, but the present paper focuses on the activities of the ‘Virtual Research Group’.

SCHOLARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

What is the scholarly and research need for the use of VREs and eScience techniques for the study of the history of political discourse? Recent developments in the history of political thought have transformed that discipline from the history of political ideas *tout court*, to the history of political discourses. By this we mean that although the study of canonical texts has not been abandoned, it has been transformed by a greater awareness of the context, the broad cultural milieu in which they were created. This has been accompanied by an active engagement with other forms of expression and cultural products: encompassing those produced by non-elite and marginalized groups, those produced in other genres or media, ranging from popular printed ‘ephemera’, broadsheets, pamphlets and songs, court depositions, visual sources of various sorts through to rituals and gestures. All these forms of expression provide evidence of political discourse, in the broad sense towards

which that term drives. They provide context and counterpoint to the ideas laid out by more formal theorists or professional politicians. Important methodological features of this process might be characterised thus:

- The need for cultural products expressing political ideas to be fully contextualised in order to be properly understood has been accepted. But in turn, this gives rise to necessary but challenging debates about the relative significance and the *interrelation* of a plurality of contexts: whether diachronic or synchronic, religious, economic, cultural, social, gender-based etc, as well as the social dynamics of expression, covering affective, friendship, patron-client, household, village, state....
- The methodological realisation, best enunciated perhaps by Reinhart Koselleck and the continental school of conceptual historians, that social history is necessarily a history of concepts, and a history of concepts is necessarily a study of discourse and language.¹
- The ‘linguistic turn’ taken by historians of political ideas, and an expanding appreciation of literary forms and genres, has been met by a new historicism in the study of literary texts.

The upshot of these developments is an erosion of boundaries between hitherto discrete approaches and the creation of a fertile interdisciplinarity. This makes for an exciting period in this branch of history. Above all, as I have indicated, historians of political discourse are increasingly ambitious in terms of the range and variety of sources they feel it is necessary to bring to bear on the subject. This in turn has created a demand for collaborative scholarship in order best to combine complementary approaches to different sources and sets of evidence, and in order to encourage genuinely comparative studies of the interrelation of text and contexts. What is more, a lot of innovative work has been encouraged by the increased availability of a wide range of digital resources.

EXPLOSION IN DIGITAL RESOURCES

The creation of large databases providing access to digital resources has been an incredibly exciting development for historians of all stripes. There are innumerable such resources and their impact has surely been immense. For historians with an interest in early modern texts, the most important are Early English Books Online (EEBO) and Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), both of which are commercial endeavours. Between them one can access from one's desktop almost any printed work produced in these Islands between roughly 1480 and 1800. It is an astonishing resource. In the UK, the creation of digital resources for history by Arts and Humanities Research Council funded projects has also been significant: take the Newton project, or the Hartlib Papers. The international dimensions of digital resource creation also deserves mention. Privately-funded American databases such as the Liberty and Constitution online libraries are extremely useful. And, as an historian with European interests I would also like to mention *Gallica*, provided by the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*² and a remarkable Spanish project, *La biblioteca virtual Saavedra Fajardo de pensamiento político*,³ which provides eBooks, archival facsimiles, etc.

The immediate availability of the sources in such collections has undoubtedly had a transformative effect on scholarship and pedagogy. In the history of political discourse, resources such as EEBO have amplified the significant interpretative and methodological trends which I have already mentioned. The ready availability of pamphlets, ephemera and the textual records of various 'lost' voices have accentuated the debate over 'which context matters' and further contributed to the shattering (or diversification) of the canon. Likewise, for example, the ease with which students and scholars might access contemporary translations (as opposed to modern critical editions) has arguably turned minds further towards the re-packaging, reception and re-reading of certain texts (as opposed simply to their 'production'). Finally, in the case of EEBO, as the work of the Text Creation Partnership progresses the prospect of an expanding corpus of full-text, key-word searchable documents offers implications of a transformative nature, holding out the possibility of collaboration with corpus linguists and the integration of their techniques with more traditional methods of textual analysis. What is the best way to react to and exploit these developments? This is the question our VRE project has sought to offer some preliminary answers.

THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE VRE

The VRE for the History of Political Discourse⁴ project received initial funding from the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and then a further grant, explicitly to expand our work, from the British Academy. This funding has allowed us to explore the potential for collaborative research in our sub-discipline. We have explored the use of two main technological solutions through three associated strands of activity: Access Grid⁵ and the Sakai⁶ collaborative environment.

Three Strands of Activity

1. Our initial funding, from the JISC was to establish the MA in the History of Political Discourse, using VRE and eScience technology to allow collaborative teaching between the University of Hull and UEA. We use Access Grid to run joint seminars in the core units or modules; and we support the students' learning experience with our Sakai VRE. The emphasis in the MA's pedagogy is upon the acquisition of up-to-the minute research skills. As much as is possible, we encourage the students to take ownership of their virtual space and use it for collaboration.
2. Extra funding from the British Academy was given explicitly to expand our activities and our VRE through creating a Research Group using collaborative technologies to advance their work. The Early Modern VRE Research Group uses Access Grid to hold monthly research seminars and uses Sakai for asynchronous collaboration. Our aim has been to encourage established, world-class scholars to take advantage of technology with which they have hitherto had little experience. The current project has taken the working title: *Different constructions of the Commonwealth and polity*. It's purpose to develop a rich collaborative and synthetic analysis of certain key terms in early modern political discourse, including Republic, Commonwealth and their cognates. The project is explicitly a pilot for a larger scale collaboration on a broader set of keyword/concepts, for which we have applied for AHRC funding.
3. The third strand of activity is more aspirational in nature. It seeks to pilot the use of Sakai to support a large scale community research forum. Scoping exercises have been held and gaps identified. We think that there is community enthusiasm for a large scale collaborative portal, but, in the case of Sakai at least, further technological progress is required before function truly coincides with aspiration.

All of these strands of activity have brought important insights into the potential of collaborative

technologies to enhance research and teaching in early modern studies. The focus here, however, will be upon the research agenda and the activities of the Early Modern VRE Research Group.

THE EARLY MODERN VRE RESEARCH GROUP

The expansion of the project facilitated by British Academy funding has two aims: the creation of the Virtual Research Community, meeting in regular Access Grid Seminars and supported by an online Collaborative Environment; and to pursue an innovative and exciting research agenda. The 'Early Modern VRE Research Group' was launched at a face-to-face workshop held at UEA on 11 September 2006. Participants were introduced to ways in which supporting technology would be used (monthly Access Grid seminars supported by the Sakai portal); and the project's scholarly objectives were discussed and defined (interdisciplinary collaboration under the working title of 'Different constructions of the Commonwealth and polity'). This theme was chosen collectively by the members of the research group because it was felt that it offered the most fertile territory for the sort of interdisciplinary collaboration and consideration of diachronic issues that the technological platform would facilitate. Although conscious of the potential obstacles (perhaps more cultural than technological) to certain forms of collaboration, participants – many of whom were hitherto little aware of VRE technologies – expressed resounding enthusiasm for exploring the transformative potential of technologically enhanced collaboration for Arts and Humanities research. The group we have assembled is composed of leading scholars in the field and, for the purposes of disseminating the potential of this technology, usefully distributed across a range of institutions around the UK.

The participants espouse a diversity of approaches to the early modern period (their disciplines ranging from political science, history of political thought, history of political discourse, social and cultural history, and English literature) and, geographically, their interests cover at least Great Britain, North America and France. This diversity is core to the project's research objectives: the VRE technology at our disposal allows research *collaboration* to be sustained at a previously unimaginable intensity; the project is motivated by the belief that this will have a transformative impact upon the nature of research and research outputs, and that this will be even more dramatically the case when the different approaches represented in our group collide on a regular basis. In the present project, we aim to enhance historical understanding of a number of key terms and concepts (currently Commonwealth, Republic and

their associated networks of value-laden words) by pooling the expertise of scholars across disciplines and across time. Each scholar brings to the table her or his distinctive disciplinary approach, guiding questions, means of analysis and source materials. Integral to this approach is a collective analysis of conceptual innovation and linguistic change, an exploration of the processes of conceptual redefinition *and* a reflection on the methodologies required of such exploration. 'Virtual' research seminars have been held on a monthly basis since November 2006, and each has generally involved 12-15 of the 22 project participants at 8-10 sites. Those unable to attend particular meetings can listen to recordings of them and read documentation via the VRE site. This represents a dramatic improvement on what an equivalent research group could hope to achieve by using conventional transport to overcome distance! We have purchased 10 Desktop Access Grid licenses allowing more flexible participation, not governed by room availability, and holding out the possibility of smaller ad hoc working groups. What is more, our March seminar featured the transatlantic participation of Professor Michael Winship, University of Georgia, in a seminar devoted to republicanism in seventeenth century North America. The potential for this and similar groups to expand internationally is self-evident and would seem to depend only on the expanding availability of the technology.



Fig 3: Our third Virtual Research Group Seminar: discussing Professor Glenn Burgess's paper on 'Commonwealth'

Participants have used the online collaborative environment to share papers, recommended reading etc prior to seminars; and to exchange comments, discussion afterwards. Above all, use has been made of the Wiki: a set of easily expandable web pages which to which all members of the Research Group can contribute.

Here interesting human factors have been observed. A dynamic tension exists within the subject. On the one hand our participants are eager to collaborate and to exploit to the full the potential for intense, sustained debate which the technological platforms offer. On the other, the scholarly culture largely eschews collaborative authorship and traditionally asserts a strong sense individual ownership of academic work. Analogous opportunities and challenges have been thrust upon the scholarly historical community by the ‘open-source research model’ and the ‘wiki way’, as analysed by Roy Rozenzweig.⁷ As correctly identified in that article, the most significant obstacles to scholarly collaboration are social, to do with the ingrained ‘possessive individualism’ which characterises much historical practice. On the one hand, such attitudes seem to be encouraged by the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise. On the other, as our experience with the VRE Research Group seems to show, early modern scholars do subscribe, to a large extent, to Merton’s ‘communism of the scientific ethos’.⁸ It is too early to say exactly what sort of model for publication we will finally adopt. Attribution and intellectual recognition are clearly important. But the Research Group’s participants have expressed a strong commitment to collaboration, to the exchange of ideas and even appropriate forms of joint ownership of outputs. As participants share ideas, sources, references and so on in the VRE, we have developed a useful function for the Sakai wiki which allows participants to mark their contribution.

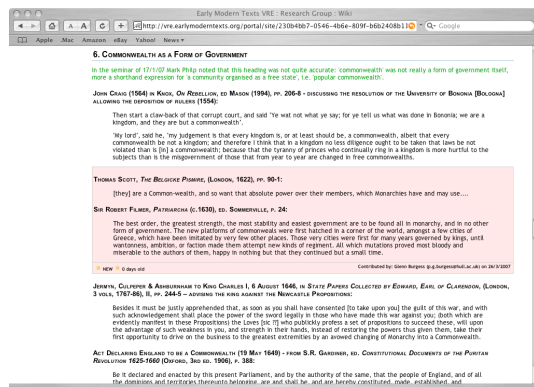


Fig 4: Contribution Macro

Some seminars have been audio recorded, and when possible these have been made available as podcasts through the online VRE (rather as it is possible to ‘listen again’ to BBC Radio 4’s programmes via the web). An Access Grid technology called Memetic⁹ has also been used to create annotated audio-visual recordings of most seminars: unfortunately, the current state of technology only allows re-use within an Access Grid room, but it is an area of development which we are tracking.

The VRG’s Research Agenda

As indicated above, a substantial ingredient in the Early Modern VRE Research Group’s innovation is to encourage and facilitate collaboration between scholars representing different historical sub-disciplines, and other cognate disciplines, applying diverse approaches and examining disparate sources and evidence. Examining a key term such as Commonwealth, the group brings together scholarly insight into the discourse used by different social groups, through a variety of media, over a period of three and half centuries, in Great Britain, France and North America. The Research Group’s aim is to take the matter considerably further: the potential for dramatic innovation, we posit, lies in the means for sustained collaboration which the technological platforms allow. Between November 2006 and June 2007, the group’s AG seminars have tackled the following issues: the history of concepts, the relationship between words and concepts; honesty/*honestas*; Commonwealth and related terms; republicanism; Commonwealth in 1649; and republicanism in North America; *Res Publica* and *République* in a French context; Plebeian views of the Commonwealth; Partisan uses of standard forms and the concept of counsel. Discussion papers have been shared before seminars by means of the VRE-Wiki. Already this constitutes a bank of material – citations, commentaries, interpretative and methodological observations – which is being expanded and refined. The Group has considered methodological issues and analysed key substantive terms.

The Group is conscious of the challenges to be confronted by raising such issues, and of the difficulty of distilling coherence and synthesis from the ferment of debate. The group’s collaboration through AG seminars and the VRE-Wiki down to its second face-to-face meeting in September 2007, has been focused towards this end. Such collaboration is indeed part of the experiment. We are interested to learn how scholars react when confronted by different evidence-sets, variant modes of argumentation, sub-disciplinary assumptions; how readily they will work together (rather than alone or in very small groups, which is the norm for most research in the humanities) and how the technology can help achieve more intense and sustained collaboration, so as to arrive and a richer and more satisfactory synthesis.

Preliminary answers to the questions we have been asking will be offered by two (collaboratively) written articles: the first considering offering an analysis of the related summation terms, Commonwealth, Common Weale, Commonalty; Republic and *res publica*; the second, tackling methodological issues encountered through the groups work.

eScience in Early Modern Studies: User Feedback

The Virtual Research Group is built around an original and exciting research agenda and one which is in harmony with the potential offered by the VRE it is using. Furthermore, it is performing a useful task of disseminating the techniques to a substantial group of scholars. Response to the Sakai interface has been very favourable. Likewise, participants have been extremely enthusiastic about the AG seminars. Both technologies have posed issues, generally of a human and cultural/organisational nature rather than strictly technical. Beyond technical problems associated with network traffic, firewalls etc, the perennial issue with AG is the (in)adequate expense of human resources for operation or training. It is quite simple: sufficient expenditure largely overcomes problems caused by sound quality etc. Almost all problems we have encountered can be put down to a failure or inability to invest sufficient human resource to the preparation and operation of AG nodes by participating institutions. Some nodes are run not as a service (with a fully funded operator), but on a 'best efforts' understanding, operated on a goodwill basis. This is an unfortunate state of affairs for a clearly transformative technology. Occasionally it has been the participants themselves who have failed to invest the necessary time to get used to the technology, to expend the learning investment required for future gains. Perhaps, in these relatively unusual cases, the advantages have seemed too distant, have been inadequately explained or have simply not been apparent in the context of that individuals work and research agenda. Engagement with the VRE tools, both the online environment and AG, has varied from participant to participant. The more web and IT savvy have tackled them of their own accord and with little support. Others have required careful induction and explanation, whether to use the wiki or to install their desktop AG. This mirrors our findings with the MA programme. A little hand-holding goes a long way. We see induction and training, dissemination of technology and practice, as an essential part of enhancing research collaboration in early modern studies and to expand such techniques beyond the 'easy adopters'. A further factor to be taken into account is the increasingly comprehensive costing of research time. Our current project is a pilot in which FEC is paid only for PIs. Fully committed participation on the part of the bulk of our contributors can only come if and when the project is funded as a major research project.

Constructions of the Early Modern Polity

As noted above, the current research group is explicitly a pilot for a larger endeavour – for which we hope to receive further funding – entitled 'Constructions of the Early Modern Polity'. Expanding considerably our current focus, this project will set out to investigate the relationship between socio-political practice and the language used to describe the polity. It is particularly interested in the deployment, evolution and composition of summative concepts (such as 'commonwealth' and 'state') and relating these to processes of contestation in order to analyse linguistic and conceptual change. By deploying collaborative technologies for a major and sustained research project, with conventional and electronic outputs, we hope to achieve a new understanding of the early modern political discourse, an understanding transformed in its depth, interdisciplinary richness and breadth. We seek equally to test our hypothesis that sustained, technology-aided collaboration can indeed have a transformative effect upon humanistic research.

The Early Modern VRE Research Group and the proposed 'Constructions of the Early Modern Polity' project present one model of collaboration using emergent technologies. The protocols for collaboration, (possibly fine-grained) attribution, web-publication and access are yet fully to be determined; they form interesting, relatively uncharted territories. The model, however, is clear: it puts eScience technologies and VRE-Wiki collaboration tools at the disposal of a large, but relatively circumscribed research group. Other scoping activities we have conducted sought to identify the desiderata which would allow these initiative to expand and offer the collaboration techniques we have explored to larger scholarly community. We hope to be able to extend and expand the project to develop such functionality and this vision further. In the meantime, we are looking for opportunities to initiate other research groups using the technology, and which, if appropriate may contribute to a future Early Modern Texts Forum. We hope that initiatives in the history of censorship and the incorporation of text-mining techniques pioneered by corpus linguists will thus bear fruit. We envisage an umbrella for a series of projects expanding from the Research Group already established. Collectively, we hope they will form a heterogeneous virtual community of interrelated related projects, workgroups and researchers. And we hope the outputs of this activity will create a resource which will become an attractive point of reference in itself.

CONCLUSION

At the time of submission, one can say with confidence that Access Grid is a tool of considerable potential utility for humanities researchers. By allowing a group of dispersed scholars to meet regularly for a sustained series of research seminars, it makes possible something highly desirable, yet previously unachievable. Similarly, it is clear that Sakai performs admirably as a platform for asynchronous collaboration between and in support of these seminars. How feasible, and indeed desirable, it is to push such collaboration towards fine-grained collaborative authorship of more conventional scholarly articles,

composed using the Sakai Wiki, remains fully to be explored. It will be possible to give preliminary indications in September 2007. What is certain, is that the material created collaboratively during the seminar series (citations, discussion pieces, presentations) already form a valuable body of material to support more conventionally published outputs. Through such methods early modern scholars can better publish their evidence, supporting material and the discussions which helped form their interpretations. Historical writing can perhaps become more 'open source'.

¹ On the contribution, influence and potential of *Begriffsgeschichte*, see: M. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* (1995); Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karen Tilmans and Frank Van Vree, eds., *The History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives* (Amsterdam, 1998); Pasi Ihalainen, 'Methods and Sources for a Conceptual Approach to Political Discourse', in Id., *The Discourse of Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Helsinki, 1999), pp.37-60.

² <http://www.bnf.fr>

³ <http://saavedrafajardo.um.es/WEB/HTML/inicio.html?Open>

⁴ See <http://www.earlymoderntexts.org> and the public pages at <http://vre.earlymoderntexts.org>

⁵ See <http://www.accessgrid.org> and <http://www.agsc.ja.net>

⁶ <http://www.sakaiproject.org>

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig, 'Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past' in *The Journal of American History*, 93 (2006), pp. 117-147, html at <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1072501471&sid=1&Fmt=4&clientId=25727&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

⁸ Robert K. Merton, "The Normative Structure of Science," 1942, in *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, by Robert K. Merton (Chicago, 1973), p. 275, quoted by Rosenzweig.

⁹ <http://www.memetic-vre.net/>