

Letters 1916-1923 and the ethics of education in crowd-sourced digital humanities projects, presented by Monika Barget on behalf of the Letters 1916-1923 Project (led by Prof. Susan Schreibman) at the “Lives of Letters” workshop, Manchester University, 16th February 2018:

The *Letters 1916-1923* project collects letters from a comparatively recent and eventful period in Irish and global history. In many cases, the people whose letters we publish have got living relatives who knew the correspondents in person and want their memories to be honoured. But family members are not the only ones who develop deep emotional attachments to the letter writers. As our project is an on-going public humanities project, the users’ exposure to the material is sudden and strong. We digitize and publish letters which might otherwise have been destroyed or forgotten, and many users tell us that they are touched by the life stories of the famous, lesser-known or anonymous people whose letters they read. This individual and immediate confrontation with the objects of our research is inclusive and democratic, but it also raises the question if public humanities projects meet academic ideals of “aperspectival objectivity” (Luc Boltanski).

Above all, the recent extension of our project timeframe from 1916, the year of the Easter Rising, to 1923, also increases the likelihood that we put sensitive or politically controversial material online. Our new project timeframe includes the rise of nationalism in Ireland after 1916, the Anglo-Irish War, and the Irish Civil War between a pro-treaty Irish Free State and forces of the anti-treaty IRA. In 2016, for instance, participants of the German national convention of historians (“Historikertag”¹) lamented a growing discrepancy between the availability of historical sources in our digital age and society’s inability to “read” history. Are letters written a century ago and never intended for publication always self-explanatory? Are modern readers able to contextualize expressions of misogyny or religious discrimination? Can readers understand the cultural norms of early 20th-century letter-writing if they are no longer familiar with the genre? Fearing that a hard-won academic consensus and institutionalized criticism are ultimately sacrificed to ever more eclectic interpretations of history by Islamists or leaders of the “new right”, many professional historians and history teachers do not want to see public humanities projects such as *Letters 1916-1923* replace traditional history education in schools and universities. It is therefore an on-going, interdisciplinary debate if and how historiography may be emotionalized. Public humanities projects such as *Letters 1916-1923* can appear methodologically anachronistic – a throw-back to Enlightenment Europe and above all the

¹ Rudolf Neumaier: Historikertag: Geschichte wird gemacht, 23. September 2016, Süddeutsche Zeitung, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/historikertag-geschichte-wird-gemacht-1.3176533>: History professor Martin Schulze Wessel from Munich, for instance, told German newspapers that professional historians bore responsibility as “guides of society” (“Lotsen der Gesellschaft”). Because professional historians constantly observe and criticize each other, they are, according to Schulze Wessel, equipped for such discussions. The most famous German controversy between historians who believe in a mission to educate the public and historians who believe in the intellectual maturity of society at large is currently fought between Prof Andreas Wirsching (Munich) and Ulrich Herbert (Freiburg). As head of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (“Institut für Zeitgeschichte”), Andreas Wirsching was responsible for the two-volume critical edition of Hitler’s “Mein Kampf”, which became a bestseller in 2017. Aiming to demystify and deconstruct one of the world’s most notorious autobiographies, Wirsching and his team had hedged Hitler’s original text in lengthy annotations, which critics such as Ulrich Herbert considered patronizing, overbearing and “downright ridiculous”.

Scottish Enlightenment, which advocated the necessity of passion and compassion to education and cultural progress. More recent theories – mainly in reaction to the propaganda wars fought in 20th-century dictatorships – have been more skeptical of human emotions and deep personal involvement. In her famous study “The politics of Pity”, political theorist Hannah Arendt, for instance, criticized “spectacles of misery” presented in modern media because they triggered feelings of superiority or strategies of avoidance.

French sociologist Luc Boltanski’s mid-1990s theory of “distant suffering”, however, reconciles contemporary media criticism with a re-evaluation of emotional learning. Tracing philosophical critiques of sentimentalism from the later eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, Boltanski has developed a forward-looking theory of action and commitment, which anticipates what digital humanities are hoping to achieve.

Applying Boltanski’s observations to the scope and material of the *Letters 1916-1923* project, I will argue that our users’ active participation in various volunteer roles empowers them to reflect upon the source material as well as the complex cultural process of “creating history”. Luc Boltanski’s central argument is that totalitarian regimes do not thrive because of excessive pro-regime propaganda, but because vast majorities of the population cling to an “illusion of innocence”, deliberately ignoring alternative information about the crimes committed by their governments. An active avoidance of communication and emotional detachment certainly ensured that Nazi Germany could continue arrests and deportations.

The real challenge of media-transmitted events is not that they appeal to their recipients’ emotions, but that they tend to create emotions in isolation. Western audiences who watch reports about suffering children on TV, for example, do not automatically know how their peers react to the same reports and what reaction is expected of them personally. They will only act if they are addressed as “members of a nation whose collective wealth is the result of the exploitation of poor nations” – that is if their isolated confrontation with a certain event is perpetuated and collectivized.² Boltanski does not judge these narratives of “causal responsibility”³ (p. 17) as true or false, but he points out that they are almost always at play if distant and passive spectators become actors, and must therefore be carefully observed. For digital humanities projects like our own, this can imply providing a public forum where experiences and expectations can be discussed and feeling of insecurity uttered. For Boltanski, only an active spectator is a good spectator, and he is critical of an aggregation of things and actions if it neglects the “constitution of groups”.⁴ In the *Letters 1916-1923* project, we use an outreach mail address, Twitter, Facebook and face-to-face-communication at our outreach events to foster discussion among our users, and we are considering new possibilities of deliberate cooperation among transcribers. This could also help us face the second challenge of people’s

² “One effect of distance is surely that moral responsibility through omission becomes more uncertain and therefore difficult to establish when the causal chain is lengthened. The person who sees from afar is unaware of other people receiving the news, how near they are relative to the case, their readiness to act and whether or not they have pre-commitments.” Luc Boltanski: *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge cultural social studies series), p. 16.

³ Luc Boltanski: *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge cultural social studies series), p. 17.

⁴ Luc Boltanski: *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge cultural social studies series), p. 18.

personal and immediate encounters with private correspondence: that the exposure to intimate thoughts and feelings encourages us to take sides and sometimes makes us biased. We are very eager to raise our users' awareness that the contents of our letters are experiences, not "a pure and simple factual description" of how things were. In the case of the Letters 1916-1923, text transcription and text encoding carried out by members of the public become vital tools of detachment.

One of our transcriber told us: *"Before long I was transcribing on a daily basis and, in the process, learning fascinating background details. This led me to much reading outside of the project on the subject of the 1916 Rising and also Irish involvement in WWI. The insights I have gained through my involvement have been immensely valuable to me in other projects I have undertaken since."*⁵

There might be chances for future research if we asked people not only to transcribe letters but to more actively paraphrase what they have read, and to compare their interpretations with those of others. Public tagging, for instance, is a controversial issue in digital humanities as it reveals that different readers identify different themes as the materials' main content. The third major challenge mentioned by Boltanski is that displays of suffering undoubtedly have a certain entertainment value, which Boltanski calls "the pleasure of pity". In the Western philosophical tradition, fictional suffering in theatres was usually described as wholesome whereas staged displays of real suffering, e.g. in Roman circuses, were condemned as immoral. Modern media which relate stories of personal tragedy, and digital humanities projects, need to strike a similar balance.

Although we use photographs of the letter writers, their families, homes and personal belongings to illustrate and enliven the material in our collection, we ensure that such presentations do not become soap-operatic. In 2016, Prof Susan Schreibman, creator of the Letters project, stated in her article "Notes from the Transcription Desk" that she and her colleagues would like to avoid a "gamification" of the digital collection, but invite "the public to be part of the research process by revisiting their knowledge of the events of 1916 through a deep engagement with primary sources. It has always been the aim of the project, to carefully analyse and re-consider how users and volunteers engage with the letters, and to make the synthetic and fragmentary nature of our whole collection transparent to them all.

Letters 1916-1923 defines itself as a "memory project" which adds new and sometimes unexpected sources from all over the world to a corpus of letters singled out for preservation in archives. We do not need enforce existing interpretations of history, but would like to ensure that users are equipped to adopt a new stance. This is especially important in a time and age when influential and media-savvy opinion-makers, as Boltanski would say, "profess opinions in order to please a public opinion which is itself the result of the artefact of polls, and of the imposition of politicians' categories by political scientists and journalists."⁶ The representation of history in schools and the media should not be instrumentalized to spread "nationalist dogma",

⁵ Quoted in the "Letters of 1916" brochure "Extraordinary times – ordinary lives" published on the occasion of the project launch by Maynooth University in 2016.

⁶ Luc Boltanski: *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge cultural social studies series), p. 172.

but it is also dangerous if competing historical narratives flourish in semi-public spaces such as members-only online forums. Therefore, society needs to create reliable procedures and transparent institutions that prevent even politically relevant history from being politically exploited. The letters in our collection, for instance, can explain why Ireland developed in a certain way, but that does not pre-determine future decisions. Historians, archivists, digital editors, teachers or journalists should not try and give all the answers but ask the right questions.⁷ In the Letters 1916-1923 project, we tell our volunteers that “history” – meaning our knowledge of the past – is permanently under construction, and that each letter, telegraph, postcard or memo added to our collection can give it a new turn. The realization that they, too, are part of the large cultural process of “creating history”⁸ deeply touches our contributors and transcribers. The fact that they are engaging with individual life stories does not blind them to the larger context because they know that they are part of a collective which can view and even review their work on the Letters project.

Our user analysis in 2016 has revealed that up to forty people have touched a single letter from the first upload to the final transcription and encoding. As Luc Boltanski has stressed, both the sentimentalist spectator and the pure spectator “who is completely independent of the scene he views” are extreme positions which do not suit our modern age. In fact, both the spectators’ commitment and their noncommitment are morally valid reactions as long as they are informed. For this purpose, we regularly stage outreach events in different parts of the country, actively collaborate with school, integrate the Letters project in teaching modules, and carefully display the broad range of our collected correspondence. As Dominic Price, a teacher working with the Letters 1916-1923 Project said, the project did not only “make archival material, the daily lived reality of 1916, accessible through social media” but also “encouraged a conversation about the events, what they meant in 1916 and what they mean now in 2016.”⁹

A large-scale participation of the public in the collection and contextualization of sources does not necessarily affirm opinions expressed in the sources but introduces a new form of critique from which professional researchers can profit. Both professional historians and members of the public interested in history should collaborate to uncover more “news from the past”.¹⁰

⁷ “But if, in contrast with the community relationship, the public sphere really is characterized by the ideal of an aperspectival objectivity which favours the publicity of matters of debate, how will it admit the integration of diverse and local sufferings within a general picture nourished on the particular examples required by the demonstration of a politics of pity? Specifically, if the public sphere requires communication without deformation, how will it lend itself to distantly observed suffering being conveyed by the speech of spectators who in the fabrication of their account are subject, as we have seen, to the constraint we have called, for convenience sake, the prohibition of the ‘that’s how it is. It is just this tension that the metaphor of the theatre highlights.” Luc Boltanski: *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge cultural social studies series), p. 32/33.

⁸ One of the strength of all digital humanities projects is that they make us aware that history is an on-going process rather than a result. Although it is fact-based, history is constantly ‘created’, and the participation of the public in the collection and contextualization of sources takes away some of the aura of the definite truth which traditional publication can exhibit.

⁹ Quoted in the “Letters of 1916” brochure “Extraordinary times – ordinary lives” published on the occasion of the project launch by Maynooth University in 2016.

¹⁰ Rudolf Neumaier: *Historikertag: Geschichte wird gemacht*, 23. September 2016, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/historikertag-geschichte-wird-gemacht-1.3176533>