THE ERNiE PROJECT: AN OPEN ACCESS ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ROMANTIC NATIONALISM IN EUROPE

An interview with
Prof. dr Joep Leerssen

OPEN SCIENCE INSIGHTS

INTERVIEW
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OPEN + SCIENCE INSIGHTS

ERNiE covers manifestations of Romantic Nationalism in Europe during the long 19th century. It contains c. 1700 analytical articles on themes and persons, as well as historical documentation (Letters, Writings, Images, Music etc.). It traces and visualizes the transnational rise of national culture-building in 19th-century Europe. ERNiE is open-access and can be consulted at www.ernie.uva. nl. This online version is being corrected, expanded and updated on an ongoing basis.

LOOKING BACK AT THE OPEN ACCESS ERNiE PROJECT, CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF OPEN PRACTICES THAT HAVE BEEN APPLIED?

"The setup was synthetic and encyclopaedic from the start. It goes without saying that this requires the cooperation of numerous authors. However, I wanted an encyclopedia that would mainly clarify the relationships between the keywords, so I initially opted for an editorial preparation space in a wiki format, so that authors could read, comment on, and use each other's articles.

The wiki was initially conceived as a tool, but has taken on a life of its own in the conceptualization, design and presentation of the encyclopaedia."

WHICH SUCCESSES AND SETBACKS DID YOU ENCOUNTER WHEN IT COMES TO OPEN WORKING?

"It is fair to say that experts are not naturally inclined to shape their articles dialogically, in mutual consultation. And in that sense the encyclopaedia has not become a "wiki" in the sense that there is a clear academic (auctorial and editorial) final responsibility. It is not a platform for users to present their own thing. We did aim for free access from the start. The work had been pre-funded by the taxpayers through the NWO Spinoza Prize, so it should reach readers on a non-profit basis. We use a Creative Commons License to make clear what the user can and may do with the

content. We have also designed the website in such a way that users can compile their own selections and download them as PDF.

What we ran into is the problem of a high threshold. We still do. To be able to handle technically refined material in a technically sophisticated design, some technical skills are indispensable. The easier you make it for the end user, the more work you will incur as a "curator" of the data. To find the right balance in that relationship is a constant challenge."

HAS ERNiE CHANGED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF OPEN SCIENCE / SCHOLARSHIP (ALSO IN VIEW OF SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS (AND NEEDS) IN THE HUMANITIES)?

''Yes it has. Data in the humanities are often complex and diffuse and non-numerical. There is therefore a need for
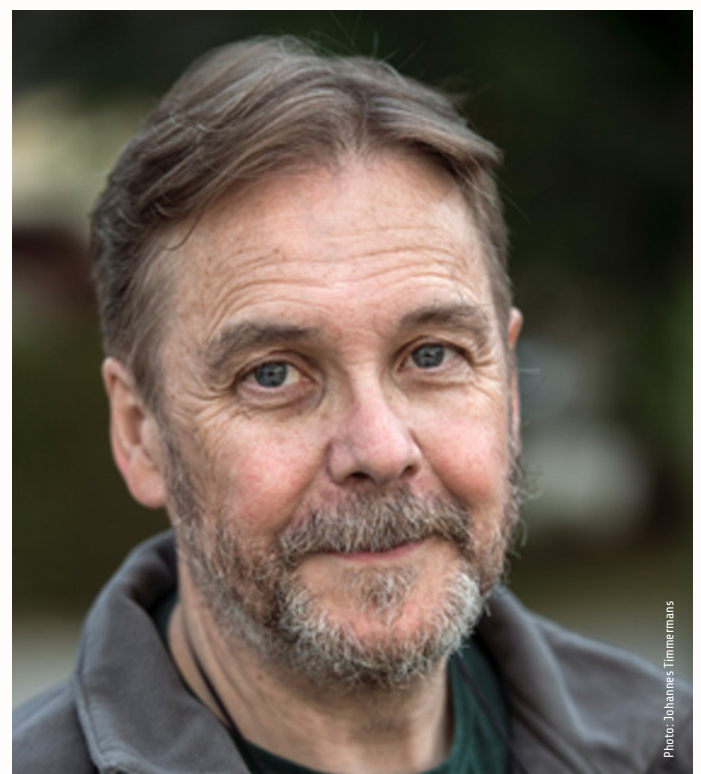

Photo: Johannes Timmermans

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a multimedia, relational database, that is less numerical-quantitative in its data structure than the still common Excel-based models, and can therefore also handle discursive, visual and audio files.

Based on my experiences with ERNiE, I am working to develop new forms of public history, in which the data is collected from the public through crowdsourcing, structured within a scientific dataset, and presented to the public online again. This integrated triangle – of a) scientific database with; b) a "foolproof", simple form for amateur data entry and; c) a front end for public presentation can be applied to heritage management but also oral history and memory studies. A conceptual pilot (www.limburgsevaandels.nl) is now being tested by the Centre for the Social History of Limburg and Maastricht University.

CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF HOW OPEN WORKING WITHIN ERNiE HAS INCREASED THE VISIBILITY OF THE TEAM AND YOURSELF WITHIN AND / OR OUTSIDE THE ACADEMIC WORLD?

"It has been one of ERNiE's ambitions from the start to position the Netherlands (the University of Amsterdam and the Huizinga Institute) as a "hub" in nationalism research – a scientific counterpart of Schiphol or the port of Rotterdam. The open working practices were fundamentally a challenge to "methodological nationalism" and that can best be done from a small but centrally located country. The open structure of the method was therefore also a reflection of the theoretical concept. Just as ERNiE wanted to map transnational networks, it has created a transnational network itself. Scholars in Slovenia and Iceland are now working together thanks to the connections we have made with the project. Conversely, this "hub" function has also greatly increased our visibility. We maintain that through regular newsletters. The concept of "romantic nationalism" (still a puzzling neologism in 2008) has also become a commonterm.

The attractive visual presentation, especially the network visualisations, increase the international outreach and are a special form of valorisation. This became apparent, among other things, in Berlin Science Week 2020, and the installation in the Brothers Grimm Museum in Kassel, Germany."

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Links

The Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism ERNiE Project
www.ernie.uva.nl

The Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism (books)
www.aup.nl/en/book/9789462981188/encyclopedia-of-romantic-nationalism-in-europe

Centre for the Social History of Limburg
www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/research/centre-social-history-limburg

Limburgse Vaandels
www.limburgsevaandels.nl

The Brothers Grimm Museum
www.grimmwelt.de/en/

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