

Books as Artefacts, Data, and Meaning: New Computational Workflows for Book History

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How did the production and circulation of books shape the fortunes of ideas? This talk explores how computational book history can help explain the formation of intellectual reputations, the transformation of arguments and the emergence of canons. Drawing on recent work in the Helsinki Computational History Group, it connects these questions to the material and commercial conditions of eighteenth-century publishing. Identifying shared printers' ornaments helps reconstruct publishing relationships concealed by imprints, placing authors such as Bernard Mandeville in a different intellectual context. Research on David Hume's reception traces how the selective reuse of his writings reshaped their significance. Translation mining extends this investigation across languages, revealing appropriations that conventional accounts of translated works can overlook. Bibliographical and computational work thus changes the evidence through which we understand intellectual history.

Agentic AI opens further possibilities for pursuing these historical questions across catalogues, images and texts, allowing researchers to develop and revise analyses within a continuous investigation. It also sharpens a warning from a decade of work on machine learning and bibliographical data: inherited cataloguing assumptions and gaps in the surviving record can easily become misleading historical conclusions. Letting an agent run unchecked risks carrying these problems into increasingly elaborate interpretations. The promise of combining FAIR data practices with agentic workflows lies in expanding the historical questions we can investigate while keeping the passage from evidence to interpretation visible and contestable.