

Report of the International Conference *Interfaces des Lumières. (Dé)constructions numériques d'un héritage* (Paris, 9-10 October 2025)

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On 9 and 10 October 2025, the international conference *Interfaces des Lumières. (Dé)constructions numériques d'un héritage* (*Interfaces of the Enlightenment. Digital (De)constructions of a Heritage*) was held at the Sorbonne in Paris. Organised by Flora Amann (Alliance française of Boston), Servanne Monjour (Sorbonne U.), and Christophe Schuwey (U. Bretagne Sud) under the auspices of the CELLF (Centre d'étude de la langue et des littératures françaises), the event explored the role of digital interfaces in the contemporary (re-)interpretation of the Enlightenment.

In the introductory remarks, the organisers framed the conference around a shared theoretical concern. Monjour emphasised the need for a critical perspective: rather than asking what digital tools can contribute to the study of the Enlightenment, the central question is what the Enlightenment can still tell us today, including through new digital media. Schuwey argued that the notion of interface did not originate with digital technologies but is itself an Enlightenment concern: it should be understood as an intellectual instrument, something that stands between us and reality and enables us to interpret it. Accordingly, the meeting focused on interfaces as tools for the construction and deconstruction of meaning, rather than merely as a mode of data presentation. Amann highlighted the transformations brought about by digital technologies in the study of the Enlightenment, considered as a cultural heritage rather than solely as a historical object. The conference aimed to provide an overview of current research and projects in the field, and to stimulate reflection on how digital mediation is reshaping the reception of the Enlightenment.

The first session, titled «Editing the Enlightenment for the screen», investigated the issue of interfaces through three major undertakings in digital editing. Alain Sandrier (U. of Caen Normandy) and Alexandre Guilbaud (Sorbonne U., Institut de mathématiques de Jussieu) presented *ENCCRE – Édition Numérique Collaborative et CRitique de l'Encyclopédie*. The *Encyclopédie* of Diderot, d'Alembert and Jaucourt served as the guiding thread of the conference and framed both the opening and closing interventions, thereby underscoring its ongoing influence on current debates on the Enlightenment. Sandrier explained that *ENCCRE* was driven by the ambition to create an interface as faithful as possible to its object, aiming to digitally reconstitute the *Encyclopédie*. Such reconstitution also entails a rediscovery. Adapting our reading tools to the specificity of this work not only makes it possible to convey its distinctive complexity and polyphony – moving beyond its monolithic image – but also to render this complexity more readable and explorable than ever before. The *Encyclopédie*'s multiplicity is both internal, rooted in its structure and nomenclature, and external, arising from the diversity of its sources and reuses. *ENCCRE* offers new access to this richness, making the

Encyclopédie readable as a textual palimpsest, a ‘chamber of echoes’ of debates and networks. While the theoretical principles guiding the interface are clear, their practical implementation poses significant challenges. As Guilbaud showed, conveying the *Encyclopédie*’s complexity requires articulating an exceptionally rich body of textual and critical information. As both a consultation and an editing interface, *ENCCRE* must meet the needs of its readers as well as those of its team of some 150 specialists, for whom it also functions as a virtual laboratory.

The richness of eighteenth-century editorial history continues into the realm of digital editions, extending questions of ‘editorial enunciations’ from traditional practices to digital ones, as was further illustrated by Enrico Natale (infolio.ch) in his presentation of [Rousseauonline](#). This long-running initiative, conceived as a ‘digital re-edition’ (since it builds on a pre-existing digital edition from 2012), was initially driven by the aim of making Rousseau’s complete works accessible and searchable online. Developed from the scanning and HTML conversion of a complete printed edition, it gradually evolved from the idea of a closed product to that of an open dataset. Currently, *Rousseauonline* combines digitised facsimiles with encoded texts and offers three consultation interfaces: a table-of-contents interface taken from the printed version, a full-text search module based on *ARTFL*’s PhiloLogic engine, and a geo-referenced interface mapping Rousseau’s places of writing through his correspondence.

The challenge of bringing together a wide variety of objects within a systematic framework was also central to the presentation of the [Inventaire Condorcet](#) by Nicolas Rieucou (U. Paris 8) and Josselin Morvan (U. of Rouen Normandy). The project consists of a comprehensive inventory of Condorcet’s manuscripts, printed works, correspondence, secondary references, as well as chronological tools and other repertoires. The edition also includes transcriptions of selected letters and previously unpublished sources, such as the manuscript reports of the Académie des sciences (*plumitifs*), which significantly enrich the contextualisation of the letters. The specificity of the inventory resides in the close attention given to the material features of the manuscripts (paper, ink, handwriting, layout), grounded in the awareness that digitisation may entail the loss of crucial material information. For this reason, systematic material descriptions alongside digital images are essential, though they also require explicit modelling.

Questions of materiality, methods of description, and accessibility also structured the subsequent roundtable, «The editorialisation of the Enlightenment and its historiographical implications», with the participation of Stéphanie Géhanne-Gavoty (Sorbonne U.), Benoît Melançon (U. of Montreal), Olivier Ritz (U. Paris Cité), and Christophe Schuwey. The discussion converged on the recognition that digital editions are entering a new phase of critical reflection on their added value, following an earlier period marked by widespread but often generic enthusiasm.

The second part of the day opened with a session on the history of Enlightenment literature through the [APIs of the Bibliothèque nationale de France](#). Marie Carlin (BnF/DataLab) presented the BnF’s Application Programming Interfaces strategy within a long-standing commitment to open science and accessibility, from early digital experiments to *Gallica* and the progressive opening of APIs to readers and researchers, while highlighting ongoing technical and legal challenges. Ioana Galleron (U. Sorbonne-Nouvelle) addressed the

tension between data and interfaces, questioning how the Enlightenment is defined and represented at the BnF, where collections prevail over a clearly delimited corpus. Through visual analyses, she reconstructed the presence of Enlightenment materials in terms of language, genre, themes, and chronology, underscoring the need for scholarly input in corpus definition.

The last two sessions of the day shifted the focus from interfaces to databases. Nathalie Vuillemin (U. of Neuchâtel) and Dorothee Rusque (U. Jean Monnet, Saint-Étienne) presented *Les Herbiers de Rousseau*. The project digitally reconstitutes a highly specific object – Rousseau’s herbarium – while addressing the challenges posed by the material’s fragile and atypical nature and by the need for strong interdisciplinary collaboration. To respond to these requirements, the platform brings together botanical, historical, textual, and codicological data. It also includes cross-references to other herbaria, enabling the identification of previously unknown links between collections. Once again, processes of patrimonialisation and heuristic value emerged as closely intertwined.

Interdisciplinarity is also a central concern for *MiMo Text*, a collaborative project on the history of the French novel from 1751 to 1800, presented by Christophe Schöch (U. of Trier). The platform combines textual features from about 200 novels, metadata from reference works, and statements from scholarly publications. Rather than producing fixed facts, it models literary-historical knowledge as sourced, contextualised assertions, resulting in hundreds of thousands of micro-assertions instead of a synthetic narrative. This approach increases transparency, enables networking with other databases, and integrates heterogeneous data at varying levels of detail, while semantic modelling helps manage complexity and maintain detailed source documentation.

Melanie Conroy (U. of Memphis) presented her study on *Wikidata* as a model for a dynamic, evolving prosopography of the Enlightenment. Strengths of the platform include openness, accessibility, participatory contributions, and the creation of profiles for a vast number of historical figures, searchable through cross-cutting criteria such as nationality and profession. Challenges include a predominance of English, limited coverage of historical events beyond the French Revolution, and weak links between events and people. Conroy argued that projects based on prosopographical methods can enrich our understanding of the period.

Sara Harvey (U. of Victoria) concluded the day with a presentation on the international collaborative initiative *RCF – Registres de la Comédie Française*. The project, including manuscripts and printed sources, digitises the theatre registers and creates a database of performances, authors, and receipts, enabling reconstruction of daily programming while situating it within financial and material contexts. *RCF* is significant as an example of how to provide critical and interpretative depth to digital data, linking scholarly research with *recherche-crédation* through digital practice.

During the second day of the conference, interfaces were first examined from the perspective of the reader (session «Interfaces and the Modalities of Reading the Past»), and then from that of the researcher (session «Interfaces and Changes in Interpretative Scale»). The day opened with Olivier Ritz, who raised thought-provoking questions about the readability of digital editions. He focused on eighteenth-century novels, a corpus whose accessibility has been greatly enhanced by digitisation. At the same time, increased

accessibility raises new questions: How readable are these novels in different digital formats? Do people actually read them? What are the differences between scholarly reading and reading by the general public? Ritz explored various technical solutions and argued for their application on a case-by-case basis. He also emphasised the advantage of digital editions in making it much easier to create and display multiple levels of annotation tailored to different types of readers.

The issue of readership was also explored by Timothée Lécho (U. of Fribourg) through the case of *Mercure de France*. This essential source for historians of the eighteenth century is considered a ‘dialogical’ journal, since every reader could potentially become an author and all authors could respond to one another. As a result, *Mercure de France* constitutes a polyphonic and interactive corpus, particularly well-suited to digitisation. Lécho presented the project [Le Mercure de France et l’institution littéraire](#), which includes a database of the journal’s issues and contents, full-text search capabilities, and a dynamic interface with multiple search options.

In the second session, attention shifted from readership to textual interpretation. As Clovis Gladstone (U. of Chicago, *ARTFL*) argued, digital interfaces can act as mediators between close analytical reading and macro reading of Enlightenment texts. This idea has guided the [ARTFL](#) project in addressing the challenges of information overload (nearly 100,000 texts for the Eighteenth century alone) and intertextuality. One particularly effective solution has been the use of bidirectional interfaces implemented through [PhiloLogic](#), a text-analysis and search software developed by *ARTFL*. PhiloLogic not only allows users to perform searches but also provides an interface that helps readers orient themselves within the results and navigate them in an informed way. The reading interface enables immediate and straightforward access to texts, while bidirectional interfaces give researchers greater control over machine-assisted research.

While addressing similar challenges, [COMHIS – Helsinki Computational History Group](#) adopted a different strategy, presented by Mikko Tolonen (U. of Helsinki). The principle lies in treating books simultaneously as material objects, data, and carriers of meaning, with the aim of building a shared knowledge infrastructure for Enlightenment studies. The [Reception Reader](#) software relies on the integration of a wide range of heterogeneous pre-existing resources (such as *ECCO*, *EEBO-TCP*, *ESTC*, the *BBTI*, *Gallica*, *VIAF*, the *British Newspaper Archive*) in order to study reception, patterns of borrowing, and textual dissemination. Refinement of technical solutions increasingly enables a shift from purely lexical to semantic similarity, moving the focus from reception to meaning. This transition also implies a broader conceptual change: rather than thinking in terms of static infrastructures, COMHIS proposes an ecosystemic approach in which interfaces are not endpoints, but modular building blocks within a larger research environment.

Dario Maria Nicolosi (Sorbonne U.) addressed the heuristic value of digital methods by examining how data visualization can reshape research questions, drawing on the [ERC ModERN \(Modelling Enlightenment: Reassembling Intertextual Networks\) project](#). The project takes a data-driven approach, working on pre-existing digitised collections and relying on detection tools and the [Text-Pair](#) sequence aligner to identify textual reuse, complemented by graph-based visualizations. This approach enables the construction of horizontal, non-hierarchical corpora and facilitates the study of reuse across heterogeneous sources through

automatic sequence comparison. At the same time, it raises methodological concerns, including uneven text quality, parameter-dependent results, and the applicability of the model to forms of circulation driven primarily by formal features (such as verses, proverbs, or songs) whose status as influences requires careful interpretation. Nicolosi's communication showed how critical problematisation is always beneficial in a constantly evolving field such as the digital humanities.

This problematisation animated the discussion among participants and the following roundtable entitled «What Participatory Culture Does to the Enlightenment», bringing together Jean-Christophe Abramovici (Sorbonne U.), Flora Amann, Stéphanie Géhanne-Gavoty, and Benoît Melançon. The conversation explored how participatory culture influences Enlightenment studies and, conversely, how the Enlightenment values shaped participatory culture in the era of dematerialisation. A key question framed the debate: how has the 'access paradigm' transformed the ethos of the researcher?

In keeping with the collaborative and participatory culture that ran throughout the conference, Glenn Roe's (U. of Oxford) closing lecture returned to the participatory work par excellence and the emblem of the Enlightenment with which the conference had opened. The *Encyclopédie* was conceived from the outset as an interface *avant la lettre*, a 'library of libraries', and a universal repository of knowledge, reflecting Diderot's vision of hierarchical organisation of knowledge and his conception of readers as active users. Tracing the development of hypertext from the 1960s, Roe highlighted the contemporary approach defended by the [ARTFL Encyclopédie](#): scholars no longer simply read the *Encyclopédie* but work directly with its words. Supervised classification and ontology generation have been applied to reclassify uncategorised articles and analyse Diderot's cross-reference system, while interpreting topics which were not originally categorised allows new patterns to emerge. Finally, Roe showed how AI-based question-and-answer systems could further extend engagement with the *Encyclopédie*'s contents.

In conclusion, *Interfaces des Lumières. (Dé)constructions numériques d'un héritage* proved to be more than a showcase of recent work in Enlightenment digital humanities. Over the course of two days, the conference provided a stimulating immersion into cutting-edge research and practices, while offering, most importantly, a thoughtful exploration of the theoretical frameworks, methodological tensions, and practical challenges that animate and problematise the field today.