ArchivalGossip.com: A Scholarly Take on Nineteenth-Century Tattle Tales

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Team

Principal Investigator(s): Dr. Katrin Horn, assistant professor, University of Bayreuth

Thanks to funding by the German Research Foundation (Project number 401052633), Katrin Horn could employ a team of one research associate and two student assistants between April 2019 and September 2022 to build ArchivalGossip.com. Katrin Horn, assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Bayreuth, originally envisioned ArchivalGossip.com as supplement to a book project on the uses of gossip in nineteenth-century US American literature and culture. She also designed the digital project, collected a majority of its primary material, and is in charge of administrative tasks. Selina Foltinek, research associate at the University of Bayreuth, manages the website’s and database’s content, structures the data, and creates visualizations via different DH tools. Lisa Kratzer and Arunima Kundu are two student assistants at the University of Bayreuth who add and transcribe primary sources to the database, and annotate Omeka items. In the first stages of the digital project, student assistant Faruk Akdag modified and shaped the project website’s layout. For short bio statements by all team members, see https://www.archivalgossip.com/the-team/.

Project URL(s)

Project Website: https://www.archivalgossip.com/

Project Database and Online Archive: https://www.archivalgossip.com/collection/
**Project Abstract**

*ArchivalGossip.com* is the digital outlet of the ongoing American Studies research project “*Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in Nineteenth-Century US American Culture*” (2019-2022). Examining realist fiction, life writing, newspaper articles, and magazines, the project seeks to answer the questions of what and how gossip knows, and what this knowledge is worth. The project asserts that gossip offers women a literally and figuratively valuable commodity and a tool for managing their reputation. Through gossip, they assert their space within local as well as transatlantic communities and influence their economic position. Gossip is thus analyzed in this project as a vital source of private, implicit, or otherwise ‘unofficial’ knowledge and an influential structure for knowledge dissemination. Gossip also became a profession in the nineteenth century as increasing numbers of articles and columns relied on its suggestion of intimate exchange in public settings.

The digital part of the project collects letters, diaries, cartoons, photographs and paintings, auto/biographies, and newspaper articles (from a large number of mostly US American archives and online databases) as well as information on people and events. Since gossip relies on networks, the project needs not only to store, sort, annotate, and visualize multiple documents, but also to illustrate their relation to each other. To this end, our database enables users to trace relations between people (e.g. “married to,” “friends with”) and references (e.g. “addressed to,” “mentions,” “critical of,” “implies personal knowledge of”) in intuitive relationship-visualizations. The database and its diverse plugins furthermore facilitate work with different media formats and tracing relational agency of female actors in diverse ways: chronologically (timelines: *Neatline Time*), geospatially (*Geolocation* mapping tool), and according to research questions (exhibits, tags).

*ArchivalGossip.com* thus offers

- important contexts to discuss the history of sexuality by letting nineteenth-century women describe their relationships in their own words, and by learning from private communication what kind of “transgression” was worth talking about at what time;
- access to primary sources and their transcriptions about women’s increased public role and how they carefully managed their public reputation to allow them to balance domestic ideals and professional engagements;
- biographical information;
- network visualizations and narratives;
- information about gossip as a source and as a mode of inquiry for historical questions, which counters the focus on scholarly, legal, and otherwise ‘official’ (=straight, white, male) epistemological forms in most history of knowledge scholarship;


- voices of female (letter) writers by providing digital access to their work, and by facilitating scalable reading through a combination of distant and close reading.

**Time Needed**

*When did you begin this project? When did you complete this project?*

**Time Span:** September 1, 2019 - September 30, 2022

**Length:** 3 years

Over the course of these three years, Selina Foltinek worked about 20 hours per week on the digital project transcribing letters, training transcription software, performing editorial tasks, researching relevant DH tools, and maintaining the website itself. Student assistants, who were employed for 20 out of 36 months (usually on a 20-hour per month basis), supported her by adding and describing items to the digital collection. As project coordinator, Katrin Horn spent five hours per week on the project on average, including administrative tasks related to the digital project and coordinating with Selina Foltinek on the project’s design (e.g. which material to add, what terminology to use, which exhibits to build). The workload of the project manager was
particularly high in the early stages of setting up the project and over the last six months as we sunsetted the project. Starting in October 2022 (after the end of the funding period and the storing of data in repositories), Katrin Horn and Selina Foltinek will not regularly upload new items anymore but will continue to maintain the site with Omeka and WordPress updates.

**Outcomes**

*What is the outcome of the project?*

During the past three years, the team set up an [Omeka database](ArchivalGossip.com/collection) that is freely available to the public based on our transcription and annotation of hundreds of primary sources from the nineteenth century. Additionally, we have built a [WordPress website](ArchivalGossip.com) to add information on sources and archives to help contextualize our own research (bibliographies, archival information, annotation guidelines, information on the team), and created blog posts to accompany the items featured in our digital collections. The website is run via [Reclaim Hosting](https://reclaimhosting.com).

The Omeka database comprises almost 1,000 items listed in two collections ([Cushmania](https://ArchivalGossip.com/collection/cushmania) and [Gossip Columns and Columnists](https://ArchivalGossip.com/collection/gossip-columns-and-columnists)). Importantly, with Omeka it is possible to present original documents right beside transcriptions and metadata. All texts are fully searchable to allow users to find content particularly relevant to their interests. Users can download metadata in different formats.

The project team furthermore uses DH tools such as [Palladio](https://palladiodh.org) to visualize historical data in a more concise manner, for example, by providing graphs with different node sizes that display all historical agents in the database who participate in the exchange of correspondence as well as for specific exhibits and conference talks in which networks or location play a crucial role. Metadata is collected according to Dublin Core Standards and additional, customized fields of item-type-specific information. Transcription of manuscript material is aided via [Transkribus](https://transkribus.eu). The ontology for the relationship-plugin is adapted from the [Southwest Harbor Public Library Archive Relational Model](https://archivessouthwestharbor.org/). For the subject headings, the team has developed their own ontology based on the epistemology and mode of gossip.

Katrin Horn and Selina Foltinek have furthermore presented the digital project as a fruitful intersection of American Studies and Digital Humanities during guest lectures and conference talks. During these occasions and elsewhere fellow researchers have stressed how much they have enjoyed browsing this vast collection of primary material; how exhibits, visualizations, and relationships among the items in our database have shifted their understanding of women’s work as journalists in the nineteenth century; how useful the letters have been for conceptualizing private and public discussions of “female friendship;” and how the items referring to Charlotte Cushman’s career helped them grasp the intricacies of celebrity in this era. The website has also been reviewed in *Reviews in Digital Humanities* and has been selected as a pilot project by [Recovery Hub for American Women Writers](https://www.recoveryhub.org/).
**Resources**

*What tools, resources, programs, or equipment did you use for this project?*

Here is a list of archives and online sources that we have consulted and received data from throughout the years:

- [Anne Whitney Papers](#), Wellesley College Digital Repository: Personal Correspondence about Charlotte Cushman
- Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA
- [Browning's Correspondence](#), Wedgestone Press
- [Charlotte Cushman Papers](#), Duke University, David M. Rubenstein, Rare Book & Manuscript Library: Letter from Frances Anne Kemble to Charlotte Cushman
- [Chronicling America](#)
- Columbia University, Dramatic Museum Archives
- David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University
- EBSCO Research Databases
- Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
- Gale Primary Sources – Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, online resource
- Girton College Archive, Cambridge, UK
- Hampden Booth Library, NYC
- [Hathi Trust](#)
- [Helen Hunt Jackson Papers, Parts 1-6, Colorado College](#): Transcriptions of Letters to and from Charlotte Cushman
- Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA, US
- Huntington Library, San Marino, CA
- Library Company of Philadelphia
- Library of Congress
- Liverpool Record Office
- [Louise and Barry Taper Collection](#), Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
- Massachusetts Historical Society
- National Library of Scotland
- New York Historical Society
- New York Public Library
- [Newspapers.com](#)
- [Newspaper Archive](#)
- [Nineteenth Century Serials Edition (ncse)](#): English articles about Cushman
- [Readex](#)
In terms of tools, we rely mainly on WordPress and Omeka and its diverse set of plugins for geolocation, timelines, network visualization, and standardization processes, which enable us to set up online spaces for managing and publishing our data. Additionally, we use Transkribus for semi-automatically transcribing nineteenth-century sources (training our own model); mapdevelopers.com for geolocation data; and Palladio and D3 on observable.com to produce visualizations.
Facets (Omeka plugin) to refine search of items. Detail

**Palladio** visualization of letter correspondence produced for a conference talk (“Cushmania” collection).
Force-directed graph, letter correspondence from the collection "Cushmania," code and simulation [here](#).
Palladio visualization of location of items in "Gossip Columns and Columnists" collection with sized nodes.

Timeline of correspondence; built with Neatline Timeline.
Funding

Please describe any costs incurred for this project, and (if relevant) how you secured funding for these costs.

Selina Foltinek’s position as a research assistant working on ArchivalGossip.com is funded by the German Research Foundation as part of their support of the American Studies research project “Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in Nineteenth-Century US American Culture” (2019-2022). This funding also included a travel budget for early research trips to the Library of Congress’s Kluge Center, the New York Public Library, and the Philadelphia Historical Society as well as an international conference in October 2021 (“Speculative Endeavors: Cultures of Knowledge and Capital in the Long Nineteenth Century”). Additional funding and digital support could be secured from the Recovery Hub of Women Writers, since we are one of their pilot cultivation projects (2021/22). Costs for student assistants were partially covered by grants from Bayreuth University’s Equal Opportunities Fund.
Workflow

Please give an overview of the workflow or process you followed to execute this project, including time estimates where possible.

In 2019, Katrin Horn traveled to the Library of Congress’s Kluge Center, the New York Public Library, and the Philadelphia Historical Society to collect primary and secondary sources. In September of that year, we developed a data management strategy and set up WordPress and Omeka. In doing so, we had to further define our research questions and relationship terminology. Additionally, we started writing blog posts. Selina Foltinek participated in the International Summer School “Reflections on Code” at the Academy of Sciences in Mainz and the DARIAH-DE Workshop “Digital tools and methods for historical research,” Leibniz-Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz, where she acquired knowledge about Digital Humanities as a discipline as well as about tools relevant for our research project (e.g. Palladio).

In 2020, we started using Transkribus and trained our first model, which we have improved several times since (for details on this process, see Selina Foltinek’s blog post on the challenges of working with and transcribing handwritten documents). We began building the Cushmania collection and have been adding more Omeka items regularly since then. Further visualizations made available included timelines and geolocation data. We built exhibits according to research questions, added a list of tags, and structured and modified data to make it more accessible for users. New blog posts were posted as well.

In 2021, we built the Gossip Columns and Columnists collection, created visualizations with Palladio and observable.com based on the relationships defined in our database, and added several blog posts. Expanding our knowledge and seeking scholarly exchange, we participated in the international conference Digital Humanities and Gender History (presentation: “Cushmania: Reconstructing Queerness and Celebrity of a Nineteenth-Century Actress). Inspired by Julia Flanders’s feedback, we worked on a gossip ontology. Additionally, we presented on the potentially fruitful combination of Digital Humanities and archival research within an American Studies-framework in the research colloquium of American Literary Studies at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg.

ArchivalGossip.com was reviewed for Reviews in Digital Humanities. We also successfully applied for the Recovery Hub cultivation program, which selected us as one of their pilot projects. In October, we hosted the international conference Speculative Endeavors: Cultures of Knowledge and Capital in the Long Nineteenth Century. Selina Foltinek contributed to the workshop “Digitale Werkzeuge und Methoden zur Textanalyse” at the University of Bayreuth to comment on Digital Humanities Tools and Methods. She further participated in the Oxford Summer School on Digital Humanities, and the Summer School on Digital Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Lausanne.

In 2022, we were granted a six-months, no-cost extension by the DFG to finish work on the digital project and wrap up work on the thematically related monograph and edited collection. At the beginning of the year, we
presented on “Nineteenth-Century Tattle Tales: Tracing Gossip in Archives and Databases” at the University of Würzburg. We are currently adding captions to items in exhibits to increase comprehensibility and layout as well as more blog posts. With our user survey on the website, we hope to further improve usability as we implement comments and suggestions made there. Recently, we added the exhibit “Gossip in Black Periodicals.” We are also in the process of writing our final report and storing our data in repositories (RADAR4Culture stores our collections’ metadata, transcriptions, and relationships in .csv-files and all WordPress-content as PDF files; University of Bayreuth will host a static copy of the entire digital project on their server. Both guarantee at least 10 years of accessibility of our data; the Advanced Research Consortium is currently writing a script to make our database searchable via their relaunch of NINES).

**Challenges & Opportunities**

*What, if anything, changed between beginning your project and its current/final form?*

Initially, we were not planning on going digital and making the sources publicly available, as we were rather looking for a data management tool. As we began to consider options for a database, however, we realized the potential of combining our need for structured data with a more public outreach based on Wordpress and Omeka. In the current form, the digital aspect of the project helps us manage, visualize, transcribe our data and tell a story for the website’s users as well as prompt new research questions.

*Is there anything specific you wish you had known when beginning your project that might help other people to know?*

We wish we had a training for data management, an overview of resources for the opportunities and tools that Digital Humanities offer. In retrospect, it would have also saved us a lot of time if we had been able to decide on all forms of categorization (e. g. tags, relationships, and subject headings) before we began adding items to the collection. This, however, would have meant that we needed to know all items at the outset of the project, which was not the case. Overall, we would have benefited immensely from a research network of different digital projects at our university, but eventually we found this on a national and international level at different institutions:

- [https://de.dariah.eu/](https://de.dariah.eu/);
- [https://forum.omeka.org/](https://forum.omeka.org/);
- [https://recoveryhub.siue.edu/](https://recoveryhub.siue.edu/);
- [https://dhd-blog.org/](https://dhd-blog.org/);
- [https://fortext.net/](https://fortext.net/);
- and many more.

Overall, collaboration is key! DH work is so much more collaborative than more traditional humanities work.
**Next Steps**

*Do you have any plans to follow up on this project or work on something similar in the future?*

Our immediate next step is to ensure the sustainability of our data via its storing in repositories. Ideally, in the long run, the data would be used by us as well as by other researchers to curate online exhibits, create visualizations, do network analysis, etc. in the fields of women’s jobs, production and circulation of intimate knowledge, and LGBTQ+ studies in the nineteenth century, for example. Another step could be to use TEI or NLP for existing as well as new data to be added to the collections in order, for example, to uncover hitherto neglected agents within networks or to identify topics and thus better understand how (intimate) knowledge travelled. This last step depends on successful application for follow-up funding which would allow Katrin Horn to hire a DH or IT specialist. In this context, Katrin Horn would also like to expand the research question to include other forms of networking besides writing and gossiping, such as salon culture.

**Publications & Presentations**

**Articles:**


**Presentations:**

Horn, Katrin, and Selina Foltinek. “Nineteenth-Century Tattle Tales: Tracing Gossip in Archives and Databases.” University of Würzburg, Germany, 26 Jan 2022.


**Reviews:**

Mann, M., Hughes, M., Risam, R., & Guiliano, J. “Review: ArchivalGossip.” *Reviews in Digital Humanities*, II(12), 2021. [https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64f.29ffe4d4](https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64f.29ffe4d4).