Impact Report:

Discover How the Gale-ASECS Fellowships Helped Inspire New Research Inquiries

Read How One Fellow Used Digital Humanities Tools to Understand the Representation of Speech and Communication Disorders in the Eighteenth Century

Jared Richman
Associate Professor of English, Colorado College, United States
Gale-ASECS Non-Residential Fellowship

MEET THE SCHOLAR

As one of five researchers awarded a fellowship from Gale and the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in 2022, Jared Richman used digital humanities tools to enhance his research on how figures represented and politicized speech and communication disorders in the eighteenth century. Richman’s project, “Voicing Disability in Eighteenth-Century Print Culture,” builds on the work of other disability scholars in the field.

All Gale-ASECS Non-Residential Fellowship recipients were granted access to Gale’s Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) and Gale Digital Scholar Lab (the Lab) for a six-month period of research. ECCO is the most comprehensive online historical archive supporting eighteenth-century studies, connecting researchers to every significant English-language and foreign-language title printed in the United Kingdom between the years 1701 and 1800. The expanse of content housed in ECCO meets substantial research potential in the Lab, an industry-leading, text- and data-mining research environment that removes barriers to digital scholarship.

Fellows received training to use the text- and data-mining tools available in the Lab to explore ECCO and advance their work using digital humanities methods. Read on to see how Richman used this powerful cloud-based analysis platform to build a robust body of data, run meaningful analyses using digital humanities tools, and open new research pathways.
BUILDING ON CRITICAL INSIGHTS OF DISABILITY SCHOLARS

During the Gale-ASECS fellowship, Richman aimed to discover insights into the commentary on speech and communication disorders during the eighteenth century. When summarizing his research, Richman said, “This project delineates how the eighteenth century, and its questions regarding the very definition of humanity, represented and politicized speech and nonnormative verbalization.”

The scholar further explained, “I understand language and its vocalization as a contested space crucial to ongoing efforts to define human nature. It has remained so from the early modern era to the present moment. Thus, by bringing together the history of elocution with the discourse of disability in an early modern context, I build on the work of disability scholars such as Lennard Davis, David Turner, Christopher Mounsey, Felicity Nussbaum, and Helen Deutsch alongside historians of language and speech like Paula McDowell, Jack Lynch, and Janet Sorensen.”

ESTABLISHING A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Before even beginning to search for his data, Richman needed to further define the type of content he was seeking. He noted, “To discuss speech (and disabilities associated with speech), we must begin by delimiting our field of inquiry. This is no easy task when it comes to the long eighteenth century and the Enlightenment attitudes and practices with which that century is often associated. Perhaps because it was marked by an explosion in print culture, the period took a keen interest in the different ways in which verbal communication took place. Grumble, mumble, ramble, maunt, mant, babble, burble, blurt, blather, chatter, flatter, lisp, sputter, stutter, stammer, prattle, tattle, utter, whisper, ejaculate, blurt, groan, moan: in order to announce how a thing was, eighteenth-century Britons inherited, invented, or newly applied a bevy of terms to describe modes or forms of speech.

“Thus, the crucial question with which I started for this project was how and where might we locate renderings of vocal disability in eighteenth-century print culture?” Richman outlined. “Some scholars have suggested [despite evidence to the contrary] that ‘disability’ was not a viable category for identity and embodiment in the eighteenth century [with the term not achieving its modern definition until the middle of the nineteenth]. I contend, however, that the lack of the term as a settled category does not indicate a lack of disability representation in early modern texts—far from it.”

Richman elaborated, “The early modern era, with its emphasis on linguistic correctness and standardization, was precisely the period in which the idea of ‘disability’ as we know it was, in fact, being codified throughout a host of disciplinary discourses [medical, philosophical, dramatic, linguistic, aesthetic, poetic, etc.]. What I seek to do here, using vocal disability and communication disorder as a framework, is to locate the terms beyond ‘disability’ to discover where they reside, in what context and genres they appear, how they function in those instantiations, and how they may point to modern understandings of what we now call ‘disability.’”
HARNESSING THE POWER OF TEXT & DATA MINING

Richman began his research on this topic a few years before he was awarded the Gale-ASECS fellowship. During the fellowship, his access to relevant materials and digital humanities tools allowed him to pursue more-fulfilling research pathways.

“I realized my ongoing project had reached a point where it would benefit from quantitative data,” said Richman. “My primary research path [traveling to archives] ceased as of March 2020 with the advent of the global pandemic. I had a great deal of data acquired from previous research trips and from searching digital archives offered by some libraries, and I recognized I needed to expand my content sets to primary materials. While there has been significant work on eighteenth-century rhetoric and elocution, there was no way to cross-reference those studies with my own work on disability. The Gale fellowship opened a possible avenue for bringing those strains of research together.”

Richman elaborated, “The ability to access ECCO’s huge collection of eighteenth-century printed documents in such a way that allows one to search and delineate among document types by year, genre, topic, and other markers was remarkable. Though I used ECCO in the past to gain access to period-specific documents (primarily historical, political, medical, and literary), I had not been able to group and separate documents based on specific search terms (and certainly not with such speed!). Moreover, being able to quickly build [shape] document content sets allowed me to process a large amount of information with greater ease and in a fraction of the time I would normally require.”
DISCOVERING NEW RESEARCH PATHWAYS

When asked how the Lab influenced his research in new ways, Richman said, "I was surprised mostly that it created new research questions."

"Having been a relative novice with regard to digital humanities research (save for basic stylometrics), I came to see how algorithmic approaches to research might yield not just different sets of data but also shape new questions... The sheer volume of content made available for quick analysis also opened new windows into existing projects," noted Richman.

The scholar elaborated, "For example, while I was trying to locate trends and clusters of terms related to disability and speech over time, I realized that there were fascinating questions to be asked regarding the genre and form of the documents related to the general search terms I was using. It has become clear to me that my project needs to address not just discrete instances of these terms and concepts but also to consider how parallel and related public discourses (political thought, literature, medicine) diverge or overlap in their use of concepts related to disability and nonnormative speech. I am still in the process of forming new search inquiries around literary form and print genre that will shape the next stage of this project."

"I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to access the Lab. As I noted, I am relatively new to digital humanist research and methodology, but I have been so pleased with discovering new approaches to research questions that have become central to aspects of my scholarship."

FINDING SURPRISINGLY RELEVANT NARRATIVES

So what types of content did the Lab allow Richman to find?

"One fascinating set of documents I discovered in ECCO with the Lab were those grouping notions of disability within a military context," said Richman. "An example: Poems, Chiefly on Religious Subjects. Including An Elegy on the Death of the Late John Thornton' by John Forster (1797). This text emblematises the unexpected nature of the search capability of the Lab—had I simply located this text in a library catalog, it is unlikely I would have paused to read the full document. However, because I was able to cross-reference specific terms, I discovered a poem written by a military veteran that highlights his disability (his identity as a disabled veteran). One sample from the text itself... highlights the connection between his writing career (as a poet), his military service, and his physical impairment."
USING DIGITAL HUMANITIES TOOLS TO FIND NEW INSIGHTS

Considering his experience analyzing datasets in the Lab, Richman noted, “What has been most fascinating for me is tracking the appearance and use of particular terms related to my research project over the century (1700–1800). I suspected that terms related to speech impediments [e.g., stutter, stammer, lisp, hesitate, mumble, mutter, etc.] would increase along with the advent of the British elocution movement . . . I did not have quantifiable data to support my hypothesis. The Lab allowed me to gather data related to those search terms alongside ‘voice,’ ‘speech,’ ‘tongue,’ and ‘elocution’ to generate a historical map of these terms.”

Richman elaborated, “For example, printed works that feature the term ‘elocution’ more than doubled after 1750 [as do works that feature the term ‘voice’]. Moreover, with an increase in works dedicated or featuring ‘voice’ and ‘elocution,’ so, too, appears a rise in works invoking the terms ‘defect,’ ‘stammer,’ ‘stutter,’ and ‘lisp’ at around the same historical frequency.

“I’m still working through ways to interpret this print phenomenon, but it seems likely that increased cultural attention to vocal correctness coincides with concerns over incorrect or ‘defective’ speech i.e., disability in the second half of the century,” the scholar concluded.

PREPARING FOR FUTURE RESEARCH & INSTRUCTION

When considering the potential of the data he collected during the Gale-ASECS fellowship, Richman said, “I will be working with the data I collected for some time, continuing to analyze and refine the data collected and thinking through how best to render the results accurately and in a way that makes it legible to the various audiences I seek to reach.

“I plan to experiment more with digital humanities methods on other aspects of this research project and on future projects,” said Richman.

As an associate professor of English, Richman also noted, “I am excited to bring the Lab into the classroom to use with my students. I have used ECCO for many years to give my students access to early British texts without modern editions, teach basic archival methods for studying early modern poetics, and the like. I can already see potential teaching exercises using the Lab and its available tools to help students analyze and process texts available in ECCO.”

“’To be able to have the time and space and tools to really dig into these new digital mechanisms has been a real help to my work. It has also instilled a new sense of excitement about the possibilities of digital humanities in both my research and teaching.’”
Get an Inside Look at Powerful Research Tools

Want to learn more about the resources Richman used to enhance his research and develop his digital humanities skill set?

Discover the possibilities of Gale Digital Scholar Lab at gale.com/digital-scholar-lab

Find more information about ECCO at gale.com/ECCO

Interested in learning more about ASECS?

Find more details about ASECS, including the society’s initiatives and events, at asecs.org