THE DIGITAL DIALECTICA:

Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois and the Epistemological Limits of Computational Methods

by

Cindy Bellamy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Rare Books and Digital Humanities

Université de Franche-Comté

October 2025

Word count: 27,258

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Introduction: *The Digital Dialectica* and the Effects of Computational Processing

The digital realm and its infrastructures might appear as constituted by merely neutral instruments, yet their operation exerts continual pressure on human and scholarly cognition. Every act of digital mediation reconfigures both the form of content, and the modes and processes of interpretation. The Digital Humanities pursues humanities questions through technical means, consequently examining the effects of digital tools, often in ways that posture the tool as a neutral enhancer of the humanities' endeavors. But what if tools considered as means, in turn treat its users as means, by design, and without question? Without critical awareness how could one begin to objectively assess digital methods comprehensively with respect to the ways the perception of the knower themselves is altered under computational conditions? This leads to another question about if or when knowledge, its methods and means, have been neutral, separate from power, unbiasedly?

This thesis regards digital mediation as an active participant in thought. Technological infrastructures shape attention, habits of enquiry, and the forms through which interpreted meaning emerges. By examining Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* within such a mediated environment, it asks what becomes of understanding when knowledge is structured by digital systems designed to abstract rather than to contextualise. It also interrogates the rhetoric that somehow the knowledge produced by such technological systems is epistemologically superior to other kinds.

The digital objectification of *De l'esprit des lois* in the digital object titled "*The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws? Exploring Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois in today's digital mœurs*" forms part of this thesis, functioning simultaneously as instrumental,

analytical, and critical. This project title contains a methodologic relic from the past, namely *Dialectica*. The term originates from the Greek dialektikē, meaning conversation or discourse.[1] *Dialectica* subsequently developed as a method of arriving at truth through reasoned dialogue, taught in medieval (where it was also called logic), and Renaissance universities as one of the *trivium*. By Montesquieu's eighteenth-century context, *dialectica* meant cultivated reasoning through dialogue that sought truth whilst requiring sustained attention, contextual judgment, and tolerance for ambiguity. The Latin form *dialectica* (shorthand for *ars dialectica*, the art of dialectic) designates it as a cultivated practice, rather than an abstract theory, emphasising the structured examination of ideas through probable reasoning rather than claims to absolute certainty. The thesis title "*The Digital Dialectica*" is almost an oxymoron. *Dialectica* represents human reasoning requiring contextual judgment and engagement with complexity. Whereas digital infrastructure operates through binary reduction and algorithmic processing, requiring standardisation. Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* exemplifies dialectical knowledge through its very construction and what it advocates for in society. Understanding it requires the capacities that *dialectica* cultivates rather than computational abstraction. Therefore *The Digital Dialectica* digital object is a site where philosophical tensions between humanistic reasoning and computational processes can be observed rather than simply resolved.[2]

Montesquieu's philosophy contained a certain humanism that was neither wholly from a legacy of classical erudition nor an instance of Enlightened rationalism; it represented a moderate form of civic humanism that evolved Renaissance moral ideals into an empirical science of societies. In continuity with the civic humanist tradition identified by

[1] Liddell, H.G. & Scott, R. 1940. A Greek–English Lexicon. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Fink, J. L. (2012). Introduction*. In Jakob Leth Fink (Ed.), The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle (pp. 1–24). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Cindy Bellamy, (2025) *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/;

Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock, Montesquieu maintained the conviction that virtue is fundamentally political, expressed in active citizenship and the love of laws. He reformulated the idea of virtue through the emerging language of *esprit général*, resulting in a theoretical position that anticipated modern sociology and moral psychology.[3] Where republican humanists such as Machiavelli exalted *virtù* as a heroic civic ardour, Montesquieu reinterpreted this tradition through the Enlightenment ethos of moderation, in which virtue becomes "the love of the laws and of one's country," which is a practical disposition that tempers private interest through moral education and the architecture of political institutions.[4] This reconfiguration marked a secularisation of humanist ethics, translating it into a proto-anthropology of civic self-limitation rather than a metaphysics of universal reason.[5] In *De l'esprit des lois*, Montesquieu thus articulated a pluralist epistemology in which custom, geography, religion, and commerce form mutually conditioning aspects of social organisation, constructing a humanism that is empirical, contextual, and historical in method.[6]

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[3] Bok, H. (2014, April 2). *Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/montesquieu/; Keller, A. (n.d.). *Republic*. *A Montesquieu Dictionary*. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/en/article/1377636396/en/; Keegan Callanan. (2018) '*Montesquieu and Humanist Constitutionalism*', in *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 63–101; Cary Nederman, (2024, January 2). *Civic humanism*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humanism-civic/; Krause, S. R. (2006). *Laws, Passion, and the Attractions of Right Action in Montesquieu*. Philosophy & Social Criticism, 32(2), 211-230. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453706061093.

[4] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Geneva 1748; Bok, *Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Keller, *Republic*. *A Montesquieu Dictionary*; David W. Carrithers, (2023) '*Montesquieu on Virtue*', in K.F. Callanan and S. R. Krause (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Montesquieu*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), pp. 113–129; Sharon R. Kruse, (2023) '*Political Sovereignty in Montesquieu*', in K.F. Callanan and S. R. Krause (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Montesquieu*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), pp. 162–181;

[5] Bok, *Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Keller, *Republic*. *A Montesquieu Dictionary*; Balandier, G. (1970). *Political Anthropology*. Pantheon Books. Emile Durkheim (1965), '*Montesquieu's Method*', in *Montesquieu and Rousseau: Forerunners of Sociology*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Ann Arbor, Ml: University of Michigan Press, pp. 50-60; Courtney, C. P., Young, D., Durkheim, E., & Klosko, G. (2016.). *Part III The Methodology of The Spirit of Laws*. In D. Carrithers (Ed.), *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu* (2nd ed., pp. 109–183). Routledge.

[6] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, IV.5, V.2, Geneva 1748; Keller, *Republic*. *A Montesquieu Dictionary*; Durkheim, '*Montesquieu's Method*', in *Montesquieu and Rousseau: Forerunners of Sociology*; Courtney, Young, Durkheim, & Klosko, *Part III The Methodology of The Spirit of Laws*. In D. Carrithers (Ed.), *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu*.

To apprehend Montesquieu, a scholar must recognise this composite intellectual heritage, in which elements of classical moral philosophy, civic republicanism, and Enlightenment proto-anthropology converge.[7] This paradoxical position achieves its fullest articulation in Book XIX of *De l'esprit des lois*, where *esprit général* embodies precisely this synthesis of moral philosophical enquiry and cultivated historical judgement.

When Montesquieu published *De l'esprit des lois* in 1748, he articulated a philosophy of governance based upon embodied knowledge of contextual complexity. In Book XIX, he synthesised the concept of *esprit général*, arguing that laws cannot be imposed universally, but must emerge from the intricate interplay of climate, religion, customs, government maxims, historical precedents, morals, and manners unique to each society.[8] These factors interact reciprocally. Thus, no single element alone can determine this knowledge. It is, therefore, as Montesquieu asserts, the task of the philosopher or legislator to grasp the whole system of relations in order to arrive at just laws.

This insistence on contextual particularity stands in a profound tension with computational logic, which requires abstraction, standardisation, and the reduction of complexity to processable data structures in addition to the rhetorical narrative that proclaims this

[7] Callanan. '*Montesquieu and Humanist Constitutionalism*', in *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*; Dornier, C. (n.d.). *Moral (Morals), Moralists*. A Montesquieu Dictionary. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/en/article/1376475736/en: Kingston, R. (n.d.). *Religion*. Dictionnaire Montesquieu. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/1377637039/en; Benrekassa, G. (n.d.). *Moderation*. Dictionnaire Montesquieu. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/1376478527/en/; Dornier, C. (n.d.-b). *Virtue*. A montesquieu dictionary. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/en/article/1376475883/en; Carrithers, D.W. (2023) 'Montesquieu on Virtue', in K.F. Callanan and S.R. Krause (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Montesquieu*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), pp. 113–129; Carrese, P. O. (2016) 'Montesquieu's Philosophy of Moderation: Natural Right, Liberalism, Constitutionalism', in *Democracy in Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 22–49; Spector, C. (n.d.). *Durkheim*. Dictionnaire Montesquieu. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/1376474155/en/; Weatherman, D. V. (2022). *Montesquieu: Research starters: EBSCO research*. EBSCO. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/montesquieu; Dornier, *Moral (Morals), Moralists*. A Montesquieu Dictionary; Callanan, '*Montesquieu and Humanist Constitutionalism*', in *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*.

[8] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois,* Book XIX, Chapters I-VI, V.2, Geneva 1748.

computational methodology always enhances humanistic knowledge and aims. This thesis reflects upon the nature of such knowledge when it becomes couched in Digital Humanities methods and narratives, with its extension in broader contexts.

The Digital Object as Experiment

The digital objectification of *De l'esprit des lois* in "*The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws? Exploring Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois in today's digital mœurs*" functions simultaneously as an instrument and critique, as a site where philosophical tensions between humanistic reasoning and computational logic become observable.[9] The various digital tools used made evident the inherent human element of interpretative choices that shape them, making the visible distinguishable from the obscured. Their adequacy as quantitative tools to convey knowledge or a story brought to the fore their inadequacies as modes of qualitative understanding. Each digital tool shows something, whilst obscuring what matters most: the human embodied contextual interdependence that constitutes *esprit général*.

Critical Frameworks and the Discovery of Scholarly Community

This thesis results from an encounter between philosophical positions and digital methods. It is enriched by considering critical literature that articulates, theorises, and expands upon this encounter. Critical voices within Digital Humanities, such as Stephen Ramsay, Alan Liu, and Johanna Drucker, have questioned the extent to which computational methods serve humanistic enquiry, or reshape it according to corporate and technical logics.[10] Ramsay

[9] Bellamy, (2025) *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/bibliography/;

[10] Stephen Ramsay, (2023) *The Politics of Tools. DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 2023 Volume 17 Number 2. Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html; Alan Liu, (2012) "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*" In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, 490-509. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Johanna Drucker, (2011). "*Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display*." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5, no. 1. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html, and *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (2014). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

argues that digital tools are never neutral instruments, but that they instead embody political commitments through their design, warning us that Digital Humanities has abandoned the critical vigilance characteristic of the traditional humanities, by adopting tools from an industry operating under a sort of “politics of faith” that pursues ideals of perfectibility through technical systematisation.[11] Liu observes that Digital Humanities risks becoming a handmaiden to the technology corporations rather than maintaining a critical distance.[12] Drucker's insights into data visualisation are that they impose assumptions that are, in ways, incompatible with humanistic interpretation, privileging quantification over nuanced reading.[13]

Beyond Digital Humanities proper, this thesis engages with contemporary critiques of surveillance capitalism, platform power, and technological governance. Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of Big Tech's practices, which extract and commodify users’ behavioural data, results in seeing people and treating them as data points.[14] Nick Srnicek's examination of platform monopolies demonstrates how digital infrastructure concentrates power through network effects, whilst claiming to democratise access.[15] Tim Wu's account of technology platforms competing for and commodifying human attention explains how for digital platforms an aim is to maximise user engagement.[16] Frank Pasquale's investigation of algorithmic opacity highlights how proprietary closed data systems evade democratic accountability while these often unseen systems manipulate people.[17] These critiques

[11] Ramsay, *The Politics of Tools*.
[12] Liu, "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*
[13] Drucker, *Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display*; Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*.
[14] Shoshana Zuboff, (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,* New York: PublicAffairs.
[15] Nick Srnicek, (2017) *Platform Capitalism,* Cambridge: Polity Press.
[16] Tim Wu, (2016) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* New York: Vintage.
[17] Frank Pasquale, (2015) *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

converge on a recognition that digital infrastructure does not provide services of neutral mediation, but it actively serves interests that often oppose humanistic values.

Michael Oakeshott's distinction between a rationalist technical perfectionism and a practical human contextual knowledge provides a philosophical grounding for understanding why contextual humanistic judgment defies digitisation.[18] His insight is that technology allows one to conceptualise universal ideals and solutions, formulated into rules and technical procedures, whereas, practical human knowledge emerges through experience, which is done with the awareness that not everything can be controlled or will work out perfectly.[19] Parallels can be drawn between Oakeshott's theoretical framework and the two sides of the core of this thesis. It can be observed that Big Tech companies and certain digital humanities narratives advocate for a rationalist technical perfectionism, as computational logic, by necessity, operates through technical formalised procedures, standardised inputs, and reproducible outputs. Montesquieu's *esprit général*, on the other hand, encompasses practical knowledge that requires cultivated sensitivity to embodied interconnection, rather than a misapplication of universal principles. The opposition that arises between these two philosophical and methodological positions is not incidental but found to be structural.

What This Thesis Demonstrates

This thesis stages a philosophical confrontation, eighteenth-century epistemology and twenty-first-century computational infrastructure. By examining Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* through Digital Humanities methods, and more crucially, by examining what those methods cannot capture, it reveals fundamental incompatibilities between contextual understanding and algorithmic abstraction. The digital object at the centre of this

[18] Michael Oakeshott, (1996) *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller New Haven: Yale University Press.
[19] Ibid..

investigation, "*The Digital Dialectica*," functions simultaneously as a digital tool and a philosophical argument, demonstrating through its own limitations the incompatibility between computational logic and humanistic knowledge of embodied contextual complexity.

Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, particularly the theory of *esprit général*, proves remarkably prescient for understanding the epistemological limits of contemporary digital cultures. *Esprit général*, or the general spirit, for Montesquieu, emerges from the simultaneous interaction of factors much like embodied human consciousness itself, that resist computational decomposition into discrete variables that computational processing requires. This philosophy of governance through contextual understanding stands in profound tension with digital infrastructure. The thesis examines this tension, revealing in the process what both Enlightenment philosophy and contemporary technology criticism can teach us about knowledge production within digital cultures today.

Chapter Two establishes the scholarly foundations by surveying five intersecting domains rarely brought into dialogue. The literature review moves from eighteenth-century political philosophy and Montesquieu scholarship through rare book studies documenting *De l'esprit des lois*'s material dissemination, engaging with Digital Humanities methodology debates (particularly Liu's cultural criticism, Drucker's *capta* versus *data* distinction, and Ramsay's politics of tools), contemporary technology criticism (Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Srnicek's platform economics, Pasquale's algorithmic opacity), and political philosophy concerning technology and governance (Oakeshott's faith versus scepticism, Foucault's governmentality). By bringing these conversations together, they form a theoretical basis that helps to explain the opposition between contextual humanistic epistemology and computational abstraction that neither domain alone fully articulates.

Chapter Three presents the methodology as it evolved and was refined, which responded to practical discoveries. The evolution from an ambitious thesis proposal of a multi-author, multi-century scope to the focused examination of *De l'esprit des lois*, and specifically Book XIX, demonstrates a decision about how the depth of humanities research should have a priority over the breadth of "big data" alone. The chapter documents the hybrid methodology of combining manual transcription with OCR assistance for fifteen editions, together with the interpretive choices embedded in selecting data, data structures, and forms of presentation. It also discusses the creation of *The Dialectic* page of the website, where five dialectical confrontations between Montesquieu's principles and Big Tech practices convey an unresolvable opposition of dialectical synthesis. The transparent documentation of where experimental computational methods proved mediocre or even inadequate, for example, the "comparative reading tool" that created overwhelming density and the large language model that generated plausible-sounding, but perhaps imprecise or incorrect statements, treats these limitations as philosophically significant findings about the structural opposition between contextual human knowledge and computational functions.

Chapter Four considers the epistemological incompatibilities, reflecting upon the building of this project’s digital object. Each digital object or tool developed, demonstrated in different ways how, in the process of constructing data and narrative, choices must be made that highlight and obscure certain kinds of information. On one level, these indicated a methodological and structural opposition between computational capabilities and the embodied, contextual knowledge of Montesquieu's *esprit général* demands. Drawing on critical thinking, such as Ramsay's warning about Digital Humanities' abandonment of critical vigilance and Drucker's analysis of how data presentation shapes epistemological possibilities, the chapter shows that these inadequacies are reflective of fundamental tensions

between Oakeshott's politics of faith (believing in perfectibility through technical systematisation) and politics of scepticism (recognising human judgment's limits).

Chapter Five extends the analysis, examining how technology infrastructures are influenced by history and political economy aspects, for contextualising why computational methods exhibit these particular limitations. Paul Edwards's investigation of computing's military origins in command-and-control systems, Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism's behavioural extraction imperatives, Nick Srnicek's examination of platform capitalism's infrastructural power, and Frank Pasquale's study of algorithmic opacity, converge to explain why tools designed for abstract information processing, such as temporal sequencing, geographical mapping, data extraction, and engagement optimisation, necessarily fail at contextual human understanding. The chapter demonstrates that technological infrastructure built and designed for purposes such as military control, commercial prediction, and the behavioural modification of its users is actively hostile to humanistic values that are developed through transparent methodology, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive depth.

Chapter Six looks at the implications of these findings for Digital Humanities practice and critical scholarship more broadly. If computational infrastructure embodies logics fundamentally opposed to humanistic values, what knowledge can digital methods produce? If scholars cannot escape platform dependencies, whilst critiquing platform power, what forms of critical engagement remain possible? The chapter argues for epistemological modesty, acknowledging that making technologies' infrastructural politics visible provides a necessary, but wholly insufficient basis for escaping their determinations. It advocates for what Oxford terms "digital scholarship," which typically places scholarship before the

technology that is seen to serve it.[20] This recognises that even critical awareness cannot fully resolve the contradictions of working through systems one opposes. The insertion of Montesquieu's own vigilance about dissemination infrastructure controlled by absolutist power provides the historical grounding for contemporary concerns about how digital platforms concentrate capacity for retaliation against critique that might negatively affect their own ever increasing power.

The thesis occupies a distinctive position. It constitutes a work of Digital Humanities that simultaneously exposes the field's epistemological limitations, a study of Enlightenment philosophy that reassesses Montesquieu's continuing relevance in a digital age, and an enquiry into how the infrastructures of Big Tech, shaped by enduring social and economic habitus such as surveillance capitalism, govern the conditions of scholarly production. By reading computational shortcomings as signs of the purposes and assumptions built into digital infrastructures, the study develops an approach to critical digital scholarship that remains attentive to its own involvement in these systems, yet questions whether dependence on technological platforms should be accepted as either natural or unavoidable.

Its contribution extends across several areas. Within Montesquieu Studies, it presents *De l'esprit des lois* in digital form, and shows how his humanistic understanding of knowledge withstands the universalistic logic that often underpins computational reasoning and processes. Within the Digital Humanities, it offers a methodological reflection on the dual capacity of digital tools to both disclose and obscure, treating their limitations as findings of interpretive value. By examining the interplay between knowledge production and the organisational frameworks of Big Tech, the thesis reveals how infrastructural politics delineate the boundaries of what can be conceived or pursued within their operational logic.

[20] Oxford Digital Scholarship, 2021. *What is Digital Scholarship? University of Oxford*. Available at: https://digitalscholarship.web.ox.ac.uk/

The Digital Dialectica website embodies these tensions by employing the very instruments of Big Tech to interrogate their premises, regarding this paradox as a representation of the structural constraints that define the present conditions of critical scholarship.

Montesquieu's scepticism of universal principles of governance, expressed in *De l'esprit des lois*, remains strikingly relevant in today's digitally mediated world. His reflections on despotism as it can be seen today, anticipated debates over computational abstraction and the disappearance of nuanced human judgment in technology platform-driven systems and aims. The despotic patterns he described, such as opacity, arbitrariness, and unchecked power, find clear parallels in the way Big Tech now operates. By arguing that legitimate authority requires contextual humanistic understanding, Montesquieu's philosophy raises pressing questions for technology platforms that increasingly control public life.

Bringing Montesquieu's political thought into dialogue with technology critique has informed this thesis. This approach underscored the continuing importance of contextual and human forms of knowledge, especially as our research tools become more automated and impersonal. It also exposed some of the deeper reasons why the infrastructures of Big Tech routinely constrain such knowledge. By using these historical insights to interrogate contemporary digital systems, the work invites readers to consider the limits and possibilities of digitally mediated life.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This thesis examines Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* Book XIX through Digital Humanities methods, positioning *The Digital Dialectica* website as an analytical object and an evidential basis that informs philosophical insight.[21] Such work engages multiple scholarly conversations that rarely intersect such as, eighteenth-century political philosophy, rare book studies and bibliographic history, Digital Humanities methodology and its critical debates, political philosophy concerning technology and governance, and contemporary critiques of Big Tech variously characterised by, for example, surveillance capitalism and platform capitalism. This literature review surveys these domains to establish the intellectual foundations upon which this thesis builds, demonstrating how exposing the discrepancy between these conversations points at a fundamental opposition between contextual humanistic epistemology and computational processes. This review maps the intellectual terrain I navigated, whilst moving between DH optimism to philosophical critique to social and political analyses, showing how these fields enabled and constrained my enquiry.

The review proceeds thematically, moving from historical scholarship on Montesquieu to bibliographic studies and Digital Humanities debates to contemporary technology criticism. Each section establishes a different area of scholarship, whilst discussing how they intersect.

Montesquieu and the Concept of *Esprit Général*

De l'esprit des lois, published in 1748, established Montesquieu as a central figure in the canon of Enlightenment political philosophy.[22] The work's influence extended, for instance, into reconciling revolutionary movements' impacts in America and France, whilst it

[21] Cindy Bellamy, (2025) *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/.
[22] Robert Shackleton, (1961) *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

simultaneously faced Catholic Church censorship.[23] Scholarly interpretation of Montesquieu's masterwork has generated substantial debate, particularly regarding Book XIX's concept of *esprit général*, which combines the ideas contained in other books, of climate, religion, commerce, laws, government, and the character of a people, into a comprehensive theory of how contextual factors shape legitimate governance.[24]

Montesquieu's central idea in Book XIX appears deceptively straightforward, being that laws must suit the general spirit of the people that they govern. Chapter IV articulates this principle explicitly, arguing that climate, religion, laws, governmental maxims, historical precedents, morals, and manners together produce a general spirit that should guide legislative activity.[25] This conceptualisation withstands being reduced to mere determinism or relativism, but claims that effective governance necessitates a close attention to the complex interplay of factors that shape particular societies. It means that laws cannot be universally imposed but must emerge organically in a reciprocal relation to contextual conditions.

Scholarly debate considers whether and to what extent Montesquieu's contextual approach implies complete moral relativism or maintains underlying universal principles.[26] Some interpreters emphasise his comparative method, noting how he examines diverse political systems without proposing that there be one single template for legitimate governance.[27] This reading suggests Montesquieu recognises that different societies require different

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[23] The work was placed on the Catholic Church's Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1751. See Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 370-377; Chiesa cattolica : Congregazione dell'Indice. (2014, April 3). *Index Librorum Prohibitorum, 1853*. Accessible on *Internet Archive*. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_IwaKYm_bv_gC.

[24] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX.

[25] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, Chapter IV: "Plusieurs choses gouvernent les hommes, le Climat, la Religion, les Loix, les maximes du Gouvernement, les exemples des choses passées, les mœurs, les manières; d'où il le forme un esprit général qui en résulte."

[26] Thomas L. Pangle, (1973) *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on The Spirit of the Laws*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[27] David W. Carrithers, (2001) "The Enlightenment Science of Society," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

governmental forms adapted to their particular circumstances. Others place more emphasis on that, Montesquieu maintains commitments to universal principles such as political liberty and opposition to despotism, principles that transcend particular contexts even whilst requiring contextual application.[28] The contentions of different levels of emphasis between universalism and particularism animate much of Montesquieu scholarship.[29]

This thesis considers Montesquieu's position as one of empirical universalism, meaning that the universal principle is contextual sensitivity itself. His universal claim (that laws must suit the general spirit of each people) does not impose uniform governing solutions, but rather, it demands attention to contextual particularity as a governing principle everywhere. Whereas *a priori* rationalism claims to know proper governance before experiencing and examining actual circumstances.

The concept of *esprit général* is particularly significant for contemporary readers, as it cannot be captured within systematic abstraction. It is evident that the concept of *esprit général* evades the abstractions of both Enlightenment rationalism's universal principles and modern computational methods. Montesquieu asserted that to understand a society's laws, one requires grasping how factors operate simultaneously that shape a people's character through interactions that even complex formulae cannot capture. Universal templates are not able to accommodate this complexity. His warning in Book XIX, Chapter V, about attempting to dramatically change the general spirit of a people shows the insight that rational systems imposed without having nuanced contextual understanding typically worsen conditions. On the other hand, respecting traditions embedded in cultural practice often serves people better than abstract reforms.[30] Chapter VI extends this idea by conveying that legislators attempting

[28] Judith N. Shklar, (1987) *Montesquieu*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, .
[29] Callanan, K. (2018) *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[30] Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*; *Montesquieu*, *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, Chapter V.

to correct everything overlook human judgment's limits. These show Montesquieu's understanding that excessive rationalisation destroys the organic relationships through which social order sustains itself, eliminating what makes governance legitimate within particular societal contexts.[31]

The reception history of *De l'esprit des lois* illustrates how different cultural contexts interpreted Montesquieu's ideas. American revolutionaries found resources in his separation of powers doctrine for constitutional design, extracting what they uniquely interpreted to be universal principles from his contextual analysis.[32] French revolutionaries similarly appropriated aspects of his thought, whilst often contradicting his gradualist temperament and scepticism towards radical transformation.[33] British readers saw their own constitutional arrangements validated in his admiring analysis of English governance.[34] This varied reception demonstrates both the work's richness and a practical exercise of maintaining fidelity to Montesquieu's contextual methodology by understanding its variable reception according to different contexts. Readers repeatedly extracted, what were, their own interpretations of universal principles through their own differing analyses. This demonstrates that the opposition between systematic thought and contextual complexity can become highly nuanced in various contexts.

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[31] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, Chapter VI.

[32] Spurlin, P. M. (1984). *The French Enlightenment in America: Essays on the Times of the Founding Fathers: 7. Montesquieu and the American Constitution*. | The French Enlightenment in America: Essays on the Times of the Founding Fathers | UGA Press. https://ugapress.manifoldapp.org/read/the-french-enlightenment-in-america-essays-on-the-times-of-the-founding-fathers/section/b7f67cce-58f4-420b-ae74-e95f927a39ad; Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone, eds., (1989) *Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Laws,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. xxiv, xxxii.

[33] Encyclopedia.com. (2025). *Montesquieu, Baron de (1689–1755)*. Encyclopedia.com. https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/montesquieu-baron-de-1689-1755.

[34] Montesquieu, translated by Thomas Nugent, (1750) *The Spirit of the Laws,* Montesquieu, (2017, July 27). *Montesquieu in England: his 'Notes on England', with Commentary and Translation Commentary*. Oxford University Comparative Law Forum. https://ouclf.law.ox.ac.uk/montesquieu-in-england-his-notes-on-england-with-commentary-and-translation-commentary/; Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 125-148.

Contemporary scholarship recognises that Montesquieu's comparative method represents a significant innovation.[35] Rather than beginning from first principles and deducing proper governmental forms, he examines existing societies to understand how their laws relate to their particular circumstances. This empirical approach anticipates modern social science, whilst maintaining commitments to normative political philosophy.[36] The method generates insights unavailable to purely deductive reasoning but also introduces methodological challenges for computational analysis. How does one compare societies without imposing analytical categories that distort the particularity one seeks to understand? How can generalisations emerge from contextual analysis without betraying the very contextuality they supposedly respect? These questions, central to Montesquieu's own intellectual project, resurface somewhat paradoxically when the theory of the field of Digital Humanities supposes that computational methods can effectively encounter texts and ideas, which have the very variables that insist on tacit contextual complexity.

Book XIX thus occupies a unique position within *De l'esprit des lois*. Earlier books develop specific theories and observations of climate's influence on temperament and law (Books XIV-XVII), religion's relationship to political forms (Book XXIV), commerce's civilising effects (Book XX), and governmental structures' characteristic features (Books II-VIII).[37] In Book XIX these strands of thought are synthesised into the concept of *esprit général* or general spirit, conveying how multiple factors interact to produce the character of particular peoples. The book's insistence on a holistic contextual understanding, however, led to a

[35] Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone, eds., (1989) *Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Laws,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. xxii, xxxii; Spector, C. (n.d.). *Durkheim*. Dictionnaire Montesquieu. https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/1376474155/en/; Courtney, C. P., Young, D., Durkheim, E., & Klosko, G. (2016.). *Part III The Methodology of The Spirit of Laws*. In D. Carrithers (Ed.), *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu* (2nd ed., pp. 109–183). Routledge.

[36] Spector, *Durkheim*. Dictionnaire Montesquieu; Courtney, Young, Durkheim, & Klosko, *Part III The Methodology of The Spirit of Laws*. In Carrithers (Ed.), Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu.

[37] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Books II-VIII (forms of government), Books XIV-XVII (climate), Book XX (commerce), Book XXIV (religion).

fundamental opposition with computational approaches that necessarily abstract from complexity to enable analysis. The incompatibility between Montesquieu's philosophy and the methods applied to study it thus reflects, what some might translate to being, contradictions inherent in his own thought between universalism and particularism, whereas others may not see this, but instead hold him to maintain the perspective of the variable nature of harmony within different cultures. It is this thesis' position that the theory, methods, and practical tools of Digital Humanities would seem at odds with such incommensurable contextual relations. This makes Book XIX an especially opportune test case for Digital Humanities scholarship.

The significance of *esprit général*, for this thesis, lies in its philosophical content and in its demands on the knower. Understanding contextual complexity requires an embodied, sustained, multifaceted cognition. It is the capacity to hold multiple factors in simultaneous awareness, to perceive relationships amongst them, to avoid premature systematic conclusions, and to maintain openness to the particularity that is beyond categorical reduction. These are precisely the cognitive capacities that digital mediation, as later chapters demonstrate, systematically erodes. Technology corporations' infrastructure designed for attention extraction, fragments users' focus. Interfaces optimised for users' immediate satisfaction undermine the patience required for contextual understanding.[38] Algorithmic systems that reward predictable behaviour discourage the exploratory uncertainty through which genuine comprehension develops.[39] Montesquieu's epistemology thus confronts the inadequacy of digital tools, and even more profoundly, cognitive reconstitution itself from using digital tools and methods.[40] This happens, when technological infrastructure conditions

[38] Tim Wu, (2016) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* New York: Vintage.
[39] Shoshana Zuboff, (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*London: Profile Books.
[40] N. Katherine Hayles, (2007) "*Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes*," *Profession* : 187–199; J. F. Benge and M. K. Scullin, (2025) "*A Meta-Analysis of Technology Use and Cognitive Aging*," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9: 1405–1419; Nicholas Carr, (2010) *The Shallows: What the*

how scholars think and what becomes thinkable, raising the question of the extent to which, or whether at all, nuanced contextual knowledge remains achievable.

Bibliographic History and Material Culture

The material history of *De l'esprit des lois* gives essential context for understanding its intellectual influence. Rare book studies and bibliographic history illuminate how texts circulate, how they are received in different contexts, and how material forms shape intellectual content. The first edition appeared in Geneva in 1748, quickly followed by numerous authorised and unauthorised editions, translations, and impressions into major European languages for different audiences.[41] Tracking this dissemination requires attention to publishers, printers, translators, censors, and readers across Europe during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Bibliographic scholarship on *De l'esprit des lois* compiles an impressive publication history. Over one hundred editions, translations, and impressions appeared in the eighteenth century, demonstrating sustained interest across multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. The work appeared in languages such as French, English, Italian, German, Polish, Danish, Dutch, and Slovenian, reaching audiences throughout Enlightenment Europe.[42] This geographical and linguistic spread indicates that Montesquieu's ideas transcended national and linguistic boundaries while they emphasised the importance of the local context for legitimate governance.

Internet Is Doing to Our Brains, New York: W. W. Norton; Maryanne Wolf, (2018) *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World,* New York: HarperCollins.

[41] Cindy Bellamy, (2025) "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/edition-bibliography/. Chris Murray, *Penny Mapping Data. PennyU Library*. https://www.penny-university-lib.com/, Penny University, open dataset of eighteenth-century publications, https://pennyuniversity.org/; Courtney, C. P. (2010). *Montesquieu et les imprimeurs de L'Esprit des lois (1748-1758)*. In A. Riffaud (Ed.), L'écrivain et l'imprimeur. Presses universitaires de Rennes. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.38663.

[42] Bellamy, "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website; Murray, *Penny Mapping Data. PennyU Library.*

The publication history's patterns show interesting dynamics. Multiple French editions appeared rapidly, indicating a strong domestic demand despite Catholic censorship.[43] English translations proliferated, indicating British interest in continental political philosophy and perhaps recognition of Montesquieu's admiring treatment of English constitutionalism.[44] The Italian editions had emerged, despite the Catholic Church's listing on the *Index Prohibitorium*, demonstrating that censorship did not prevent circulation in Catholic regions.[45] German translations appeared regularly, reflecting German interest in Montesquieu's political philosophy.[46] This multilingual dissemination meant that readers encountered Montesquieu's ideas through translations that would have necessarily involved interpretive choices by translators about how best to render highly nuanced concepts such as *esprit général* for different linguistic and conceptual frameworks.

Bibliographic historical scholarship considers, beyond editions, translations, and impressions, the material features of books such as typography, paper quality, illustration, binding, and physical format.[47] These material features of books also play a role in shaping how readers encounter texts, which influences their reception. In the eighteenth century, in-quarto editions were intended to serve different purposes, targeting the upper classes more than the cheaper octavo or duodecimo volumes. Editions with illustrations would have framed interpretation

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[43] Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 370-377.

[44] Ward, L. (2004). *Eighteenth-Century British Constitutionalism*. In *The Politics of Liberty in England and Revolutionary America* (pp. 305–324). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cohler, Miller, and Stone, *Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Laws*, xvii-xix.

[45] Bellamy, "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website; Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 370-377.

[46] Bellamy, "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website; Murray, *Penny Mapping Data.*

[47] Howsam, L. (2014). *The Study of Book History*. In L. Howsam (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (pp. 1–14). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Willison, I. (2019). *The History of the Book as a Field of Ftudy within the Humanities: A Retrospect, and a Prospect by Graham Shaw*. Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues, 28(2), 112-130. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0955749018822548; Hargrave, J. (2023, June 26). *G. Thomas Tanselle, Descriptive Bibliography.* SHARP News. https://sharpweb.org/sharpnews/2023/06/26/g-thomas-tanselle-descriptive-bibliography/.

differently from those with only plain text. Material book history thus connects to intellectual, social, and cultural history, recognising that ideas circulate through physical objects whose characteristics matter for how those ideas are understood and deployed in different social and cultural contexts.[48]

Although an overemphasis on the material would seem to exclude leading scholarship in these other academic areas. Carter and Muir's 1967 bibliographic assessment of *De l'esprit des lois* in *Printing and the Mind of Man* characterised the work as defying "easy classification" and never enjoying "great popularity."[49] Later scholars have noted that Montesquieu's work acquired a reputation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as being widely invoked yet seldom read in full, a view echoed in recent reception histories.[50] Modern scholarship now recognises that *The Spirit of the Laws* profoundly influenced political and legal thought across Europe and the Atlantic, achieving what could be considered a form of popularity through its enduring impact on constitutional thought and institutional developments.[51] Though this scholarly view was not arrived at by the authors of *Printing and the Mind of Man* who focused more on the material aspects and economics of interest to the antiquarian book trade. While their view was not incorrect, it does preclude an interdisciplinary approach. This serves as an example of how disciplinary and professional practices, like antiquarian book specialists, can perpetuate particular frameworks of evaluation, as Carter and Muir's statements in *Printing and the Mind of Man*, are still referenced in auction catalogues today, though their view is now outdated in contemporary

[48] Howsam, *The Study of Book History*; Willison, *The History of the Book as a Field of Ftudy within the Humanities: A Retrospect, and a Prospect by Graham Shaw*; Hargrave, *G. Thomas Tanselle, Descriptive Bibliography.*

[49] John Carter and Percy H. Muir, (1967) *Printing and the Mind of Man,* London: Cassell, no. 197.

[50] Pinheiro, J. C. (2013, February 11). *How the Founders Read Montesquieu. Law & Liberty*. https://lawliberty.org/book-review/how-the-founders-read-montesquieu/.

[51] Pinheiro, *How the Founders Read Montesquieu. Law & Liberty;* Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (1961) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2; Judith N. Shklar, (1987) *Montesquieu and the Science of Politics,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, (2013) *Montesquieu: De l'esprit des lois, un classique aux multiples lectures,* Paris: Classiques Garnier.

scholarship.[52] However, this serves as an aside to the overall bibliographic and reception history.

Contemporary bibliography increasingly recognises that tracking textual transmission requires attention to translation practices, editorial interventions, and the complex processes through which texts move across linguistic and cultural boundaries.[53] Eighteenth-century translation practices operated in different contexts and conventions than those of modern scholarly practice. Translators often greatly adapted texts to make them palatable to new audiences, not usually remaining as direct translations of whole works. Adding explanatory notes to a work, omitting passages deemed problematic, or adjusting meanings to resonate better with local readers, were common. These translation practices meant that readers in different geographic and language contexts encountered somewhat different versions of the text, reflecting the interventions of multiple mediators. Therefore, understanding the textual editing involved with translations is needed to grasp how ideas circulated, such as those within *De l'esprit des lois*.

Digital bibliography practices offer new possibilities for tracking textual circulation at a larger scale. Databases can document editions, translations, and material features in ways that enable analysis of publication patterns across time and space. Georeferencing publication data allows for visually mapping how texts spread geographically. However, creating such databases requires substantial labour: locating copies, recording bibliographic data, standardising information across diverse sources, and making decisions about what information to present. The promise of computational scalability encounters the reality of labour-intensive data preparation. Furthermore, digital bibliographies necessarily impose

[52] *Results for "Montesquieu De l'esprit."* Sotheby's. (2025). https://www.sothebys.com/en/search?query=Montesquieu%2BDe%2Bl%27esprit&pfilters.dateRange=past; *Showing results for "montesquieu."* Christie's. (2025). https://www.christies.com/en/search?entry=montesquieu&page=1&sortby=relevance&tab=sold_lots.

[53] Roger Chartier, (1987) *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 89-115.

standardised structures on messy historical realities, whereby computational analysis may obscure the particularity of historical artefacts.

The Penny University dataset "*Penny Mapping Data*" provided the foundation for this thesis's digital object mapping dataset of *De l'esprit des lois* publication patterns, to which corrections and additions were made through further research.[54] The *Penny Mapping Data* open-access resource documented editions, translations, impressions, publication locations, publishers, and dates. Converting this bibliographic data into a format suitable for computational processes and visualisation required decisions about how to structure the information, which details to emphasise, and how to practically represent the publication history through simplified data models and visualisations. These decisions are technical and interpretive, informing what becomes visible in subsequent analyses. The bibliography assembled for *The Digital Dialectica* website thus serves multiple functions: it provides scholarly reference material, demonstrates the scale of Montesquieu's influence, and participates in the very frictions the project examines by requiring the abstraction and standardisation that Montesquieu's philosophy problematises.

Digital Humanities Overview

Digital Humanities scholarship encompasses diverse digital methods, theories, and institutional arrangements.[55] At its broadest, the field applies computational methods to humanities questions, for example, using digital tools like databases, statistical analysis, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and many more. Debates within Digital Humanities are concerned with technical methods and epistemological assumptions, the relationship

[54] Murray, *Penny Mapping Data*; Bellamy, "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website.

[55] Alan Liu, (2012) "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 490-509.

between computational approaches and traditional humanistic enquiry, and implicit or explicit political commitments.[56] These kinds of debates provide a fertile context for understanding how this thesis positions itself within and against certain tendencies in Digital Humanities practice.

Early humanities computing was focused on concordances, textual databases, and computational linguistic analysis. These approaches presumed that systematic analysis of textual features would uncover patterns invisible for the traditional scholarly practice of close reading. The promise of scale animated much of this work when computational methods could process more text than any individual scholar could read closely, to potentially uncover patterns at a scale beyond the ability of normal human perception. This scalability generated enthusiasm and critique. It raised questions about whether pattern detection at scale could generate genuine understanding or only superficial surface-level, and therefore, relatively meaningless correlations. Others argued that distant reading could direct and ultimately enhance close reading, although questions remained about whether the massive investment in expensive mainframe computing time and intensive human labour required for data entry justified the scholarly returns. Other concerns were to do with how computational analysis might even threaten to displace interpretive reading grounded in disciplinary humanities knowledge and methods.[57]

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[56] Alan Liu, "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*; Stephen Ramsay, (2023) *The Politics of Tools. DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly,* Volume 17 Number 2. Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html.

[57] Susan Hockey. (2004). *The History of Humanities Computing*. In A Companion to Digital Humanities (eds S. Schreibman, R. Siemens and J. Unsworth). https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999875.ch1; Chris Alen Sula, Heather V Hill, (December 2019) *The early history of digital humanities: An analysis of Computers and the Humanities (1966–2004) and Literary and Linguistic Computing (1986–2004)*, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Oxford Academic, Volume 34, Issue Supplement 1, Pages i190–i206, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqz072; Edgar Lejeune. (2024). *"Open" or "Close" Research Instruments? Conflicting Rationales in the Organization of Early Digital Medieval History in Europe (1960–1990). DHQ*

Franco Moretti's identification of "distant reading" amplified DH debates about scale and interpretation.[58] Moretti argued that literary scholars should be analysing thousands of novels, instead of the canonical few that traditional scholarship had privileged, because computational methods were able to show patterns about genre evolution, narrative structures, and literary systems that remain invisible in close reading. This argument provoked an intense response. Critics had questioned whether analysing plot summaries and metadata could capture what makes literature meaningful.[59] They worried that distant reading displaced close attention to textual linguistic nuance and precision, and interpretive depth.[60] The promise of the benefits of a larger scale of information, had therefore threatened to produce and privilege superficial results over humanities insights, only generating abstractions without imparting any genuine understanding.

Johanna Drucker's work on visualisation highlighted that data representation is interpretive and rhetorical, subject to its creators' means and aims.[61] Every visualisation therefore involves choices about what to display, how to structure it, what to emphasise, and what to omit. These choices reflect theoretical assumptions, disciplinary priorities, and rhetorical goals. Visualisations can give the impression that they are transparent windows onto neutrally presented data, or in other words, a purely scientific and objective truth even though they themselves actually constitute arguments about how that data should be understood. Drucker

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[58] Franco Moretti, (2013) Distant Reading, London: Verso, 48-62.

[59] Nan Z. Da, "*The Computational Case against Computational Literary Studies*," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (2019): 601-639, https://doi.org/10.1086/702594.

[60] Drucker, J. (2017). *Why Distant Reading Isn't*. *PMLA*, *132*(3), 628–635. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27037376; Primorac, Antonija, Rosario Arias, Roxana Patras, Eva Eglāja-Kristsone, Karina van Dalen-Oskam, Berenike Herrmann, Christof Schöch, and Pieter François. 2023. "Distant Reading Two Decades On: Reflections on the Digital Turn in the Study of Literature." Digital Studies/Le champ numérique 13(1): 1–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.8855; Fish, S. (2012) 'Mind Your P's and B's: The Digital Humanities and Interpretation', The New York Times, 23 January.: https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/mind-your-ps-and-bs-the-digital-humanities-and-interpretation/.

[61] Johanna Drucker, (2011). "*Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display*." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5, no. 1. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html, and *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (2014). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1-25.

advocates for graphical approaches that foreground their interpretive character, acknowledging the uncertainty, ambiguity, and the constructedness of data itself. Her critique challenges Digital Humanities to abandon claims of objectivity and recognise that computational methods involve interpretation, throughout their operation.[62] Drucker's concerns about computational objectivity become even more pressing with the rise of machine learning technologies, which often operate as “black boxes” as they make stronger claims about objective information processing at larger scales, for pattern recognition and semantic understanding.[63]

Debates surrounding the role of machine learning and artificial intelligence within the humanities have grown more pointed as these tools become increasingly accessible.[64] Large language models (LLMs) trained on vast textual corpora promise capabilities previously unimaginable, such as automatic translation across languages and historical periods, semantic analysis at scale, and pattern recognition across diverse texts. Although these possibilities bring their own limitations. Such models function through mechanisms that remain largely opaque, producing results infused with overconfidence, but lacking a firm basis in disciplinary understanding.[65] They reproduce biases present in training data, potentially

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[62] Drucker, (2011) *"Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display" and* (2014) *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production/*

[63] Kosinski, M. (2025, October 13). *What is black box AI and how does it work?*. *IBM*. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/black-box-ai; Dignum, V. (2018, January 26). *On bias, black-boxes and the quest for transparency in Artificial Intelligence*. *Medium*. https://medium.com/@virginiadignum/on-bias-black-boxes-and-the-quest-for-transparency-in-artificial-intelligence-bcde64f59f5b.

[64] David M. Berry, (2023). *AI, Ethics, and Digital Humanities*. In J. O’Sullivan (Ed.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities* (pp. 445–457). essay, Bloomsbury Academic.; Shang, W., Ma, R. and Moulaison-Sandy, H. (2025) “*How does digital humanities research talk about AI? A bibliometric analysis*”, *Information Research an international electronic journal*, 30(iConf), pp. 635–645. doi: 10.47989/ir30iConf47242; Cynthia Rudin, "*Stop Explaining Black Box Machine Learning Models for High Stakes Decisions and Use Interpretable Models Instead*," *Nature Machine Intelligence* 1, no. 5 (2019): 206-215, https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-019-0048-x.

[65] Kosinski, M. (2025, October 13). *What is black box AI and how does it work?*. *IBM*. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/black-box-ai; Rudin, "*Stop Explaining Black Box Machine Learning Models*," 206-215; Dignum, V. (2018, January 26). *On bias, black-boxes and the quest for transparency.*

amplifying prejudices rather than enabling critical distance.[66] Moreover, the computational demands of these systems place control in the hands of institutions and corporations with the resources to sustain them.[67] For these reasons, machine learning may indeed serve as a helpful instrument for narrowly defined tasks, but to mistake it for a replacement of scholarly discernment would risk interpretations that remain surface-level and detached from the interpretive depth that characterises humanistic study.[68]

Moreover, broader critical scholarship has commented on Digital Humanities' theoretical narrative and political commitments. Alan Liu contended that Digital Humanities was conspicuously distanced from cultural criticism, which failed to interrogate how computational methods connect to broader socioeconomic formations.[69] He observed that digital humanists unreflectively adopt corporate methodologies of efficiency and data management, stating:

> "It is as if, when the order comes down from the funding agencies, university administrations, and other bodies mediating today's dominant socioeconomic and political beliefs, digital humanists just concentrate on pushing the "execute" button on projects that amass the most data for the greatest number, process that data most efficiently and flexibly (flexible efficiency being the hallmark of postindustrialism), and manage the whole through ever "smarter" standards, protocols, schema, templates, and databases uplifting Frederick Winslow Taylor's

[66] Safiya Umoja Noble, (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* New York: NYU Press, , 1-35.

[67] The report, *Computational Power and AI*, comments on the power concentration: "Understanding the influence of computational infrastructure on the political economy of artificial intelligence is profoundly important: it affects who can build AI, what kind of AI gets built, and who profits along the way" and notes "This concentration in compute also incentivizes cloud infrastructure providers to act in ways that will protect their dominant position in the market." It also documents the comparative scale of concentration: "in recent years, the largest academia-developed model used only 1 percent of the compute used to train the largest industry model.": Vipra, Jai, and Sarah Myers West. (Sep. 23). "*Computational Power and AI" AI Now Institute*. https://ainowinstitute.org/publications/compute-and-ai#h-what-are-the-components-of-compute-hardware

[68] David M. Berry, *AI, Ethics, and Digital Humanities.*

[69] Liu, "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*"

> original scientific industrialism into ultraflexible postindustrial content management systems camouflaged as digital editions, libraries, and archives—all without pausing to reflect on the relation of the whole digital juggernaut to the new world order."[70]

It implies that computational frameworks originating in commercial contexts are enforced by dominant socioeconomic and political beliefs.[71] The implications of this unreflective adoption extend beyond mere methodology. When Digital Humanities uses tools that prioritise efficiency, standardisation, and scalable data processing all suited to corporate structural aims, it risks subordinating humanistic values to logics derived from vastly different intellectual and economic contexts. Liu advocates for cultural criticism within Digital Humanities that would examine computational tools with the same analytical rigour that humanists traditionally apply to their objects of study, arguing that meaningful engagement requires "thinking critically about metadata" in ways that "scale into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world."[72] This perspective has decidedly informed the direction of this thesis paper.

Stephen Ramsay, author of *The Politics of Tools*, advocates that the political dimensions of digital humanities tools go beyond simple questions of neutrality or individual bias to socio-political formations and ideologies. In drawing on Michael Oakeshott's framework, distinguishing between the “politics of faith” and the “politics of skepticism,” Ramsay states that digital humanities operates primarily within a politics of faith, being a mode of governance oriented toward a rationalist idea of human perfectibility through technical methods. He argues that technological tools serve pre-existing political ends and actively allow for new conceptions that influence, limit and control what becomes politically possible.

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[70] Liu, "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*"
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

Instead of viewing tools as mere neutral instruments or straightforward acts of resistance, Ramsay advocates for a more complex understanding that recognises how digital humanities shares technological infrastructure with Silicon Valley, while pursuing fundamentally different visions of human improvement. This perspective seeks to persuade digital humanists to maintain scepticism towards the assumptions about the inherent goodness of their work, acknowledging that their tool-building efforts may ultimately enable political formations quite different from their intended goals.[73]

Contemporary Technology Criticism

Historical precedents and formation

In *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, Paul N. Edwards traces how modern computing developed from Cold-War collaboration between the military, industry and state security agencies. His study shows that strategic investment and political pressure shaped ways of thinking that continue to influence digital technology, which subsequently, are integral to the methodology that is later adopted in the Digital Humanities. During this period Edwards discusses, defence funding supported projects such as the SAGE air-defence network and other command-and-control computers designed to track aircraft and coordinate military responses. These systems embodied a belief that social and technical activity could be fully monitored, calculated and directed.[74]

Alongside this, Edwards identifies what he terms a "cyborg discourse", through which computers became cultural, psychological, and biological metaphors.[75] They functioned, he suggests, as "objects to think with," shaping modern self-understanding and encouraging new

[73] Stephen Ramsay, (2023) *The Politics of Tools. DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 2023 Volume 17 Number 2. Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html.
[74] Paul N. Edwards, (1996) *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 1–3, 79–118.
[75] Ibid.

psychological and cultural conceptions of subjectivity. Within this discourse, the human mind appeared as an information processor, the brain as a network of switches, and cognition as data manipulation, essentially, as a fusion of the natural and the technical.[76] This conception closely relates to the early usage of the word cybernetic by Weiner (1948), indicative of a continuity of ideology through concepts, of a merging of "machine and animal" or a technical (and physical) connection to living beings (humans) and their psychologies, to facilitate a control and communication, which for early Cold War period computing translated to terms such as "command and control."[77]

Applied to contemporary Digital Humanities, this analysis underscores that modern computational infrastructure had never been a neutral conduit for objective intellectual enquiry. It had from these beginnings been actively involved with shaping perception. This would extend to, directing minds towards certain questions, methods, and truth judgements. Though these systems have been largely now adopted by corporate entities, or the so called Big Tech companies, one must ask, how much from these conceptual beginnings continues through their very design and structure.

This leads to the question of when researchers adopt such tools unreflexively, if they may unknowingly, without objectivity, inherit embedded assumptions inbuilt into technological structures and designs concerning knowledge, power, and human agency. For example, database architectures that render information "searchable" simultaneously decide what qualifies as information and informational structure. Visualisation techniques that make patterns perceptible also determine which patterns are deemed worthy of perception.[78] Algorithmic processes that enable scale similarly delimit the forms of analysis that scale

[76] Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*.
[77] Wiener, N. 1948. *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
[78] Drucker, (2011) *Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display*, and, (2014) *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production.*

allows. Digital Humanities operates within these inherited infrastructural conditions that it neither designed nor tends to interrogate. University computing systems frequently rely on corporate cloud infrastructures owned by corporate firms whose business models, as Zuboff shows, depend upon behavioural data.[79] Research datasets are stored on commercial platforms that monitor users while purporting to serve them; collaborative tools often demand assent to terms granting platform owners broad intellectual property rights.[80] Such dependence is structural rather than incidental: large technology corporations have positioned themselves as indispensable to knowledge production, profiting from scholarly labour while shaping the conditions of its possibility.

The cyborg discourse thus also applies reflexively to scholars themselves. Researchers cannot wholly detach their thinking from the computational tools through which they work. Digital Humanities practitioners become, what would be in Edwards's terms, natural-technical beings whose cognition is mediated by the affordances and constraints of digital systems: pattern recognition trained through database interfaces, spatial reasoning formed by mapping software, temporal understanding influenced by timeline visualisations, and attention shaped by platform designs optimised for engagement.[81] These subtle transformations operate beneath conscious awareness and therefore resist easy recognition or critique.[82] Infrastructure now shapes thinking through routine interaction rather than through explicit control. Edwards's analysis remains important because it shows the logic of the Cold-War "closed world," which in ways continues to inform the design of often closed, proprietary (owned)

[79] Zuboff, S., 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

[80] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*; Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism;* Cambridge: Polity Press; Julie Cohen, (2019) *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism;* Zeynep Tufekci, (2014) "*Engineering the Public: Big Data, Surveillance and Computational Politics*," First Monday 19, no. 7, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.4901.

[81] Tim Wu, (2016) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* New York: Vintage.

[82] Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*; Shoshana Zuboff, (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London: Profile Books.

and not open, computational infrastructure and digital tools used in research, guides how scholars approach data, evidence and interpretation.[83]

Surveillance Capitalism and Behavioural Modification

Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* provides a vocabulary for understanding contemporary platform economics.[84] She identifies surveillance capitalism as an economic system distinct from industrial capitalism: where industrial production relied on labour and natural resources, surveillance capitalism extracts human experience itself as raw material. Users' everyday actions become what Zuboff terms 'behavioural surplus', which is data commodified for prediction and behavioural modification.[85] This framework illuminates how technology corporations operate through extraction rather than traditional production.[86]

The purpose of surveillance capitalism is to make human behaviour predictable and therefore more commercially useful. Zuboff distinguishes this process of behavioural modification from persuasion. Persuasion works through argument and consent, whereas behavioural modification works through the design of digital environments that shape conduct automatically, often beneath users' conscious awareness.[87] Platform companies draw on behavioural psychology, reward systems, social comparison and algorithmic personalisation to lead users towards patterns of action that increase engagement and data production.[88] In doing so, they recast individuals once seen as autonomous agents into sources of measurable and adjustable behavioural data.

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[83] Paul N. Edwards, (1996) *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America.*
[84] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.
[85] Ibid., pp. 63–97.
[86] Ibid., pp. 63–97, 282–291.
[87] Ibid., pp. 292–307.
[88] Ibid., pp. 351–492.

Zuboff uses the term “instrumentarianism” to describe the logic of surveillance capitalism. It seeks to monitor and influence behaviour not through overt force but through continuous observation and subtle shaping.[89] This approach resonates with the logic Edwards describes in Cold-War computing, where systems were designed under the belief that complex processes, including human activity, could be observed, modelled, and influenced through computation. When Digital Humanities projects adopt these infrastructures, they also adopt a likelihood of operating under similar conditions, relying on technical systems that shape what questions can be asked and how evidence is interpreted.

Zeynep Tufekci's work on computational politics examines how big data, surveillance, and algorithmic systems enable "highly effective, opaque and unaccountable campaigns of persuasion and social engineering" that can shift political outcomes without voters understanding how manipulation occurred.[90] The Cambridge Analytica scandal exemplified these possibilities when it extracted behavioural data from millions of Facebook users without consent, and was subsequently deployed for psychological profiling and targeted political messaging designed to influence election outcomes.[91] The opacity of these interventions meant that voters could not evaluate whether information they encountered resulted from organic circulation or paid manipulation; democratic deliberation was systematically undermined by invisible computational interventions, aligning more closely with despotic characteristics.

Tim Wu’s book *The Attention Merchants*, explains how digital platforms compete for and commodify human attention.[92] Wu traces the evolution of attention capture strategies and

[89] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, pp. 8, 351–492.
[90] Zeynep Tufekci, (2014) "*Engineering the Public: Big Data, Surveillance and Computational Politics*," *First Monday* 19, no. 7, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.4901.
[91] Margaret Hu, (2020) "*Cambridge Analytica's Black Box*," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 2: 1-6, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720938091.
[92] Tim Wu, (2016) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* New York: Vintage.

practices from nineteenth-century newspapers to twentieth-century broadcasting to the present digital economy, where digital platforms employ increasingly refined techniques to occupy consciousness. The attention economy is characterised by regarding users' attention as a profitable resource. Digital interfaces are designed to maximise engagement through mechanisms such as infinite scroll, autoplay, notifications, variable reward schedules, and social validation metrics. These are not neutral features, but deliberate strategies intended to retain attention regardless of users' intentions.[93]

The consequences of certain digital "attention capture" techniques for humanistic scholarship could be significant, which relies on attention and reflective engagement. It is work that depends on sustained focus and the capacity to relate multiple factors in context, which requires what N. Katherine Hayles terms "deep attention": prolonged concentration on complex material without distraction.[94] For Hayles, attention economy platforms cultivate the opposite disposition, which she calls "hyper attention," characterised by rapid task-switching, impatience, and preference for novelty.[95] This implies that, should scholars research through such platforms, or even use them in their free time, their cognitive habits would adapt accordingly, diminishing the forms of concentration that humanistic analysis requires.

When research practice is dispersed across search engines, digital readers, databases, visualisation tools, messaging systems, and cloud platforms, each shift between interfaces divides attention further, eroding the sustained immersion through which embodied contextual understanding develops. The supposed efficiency of digital tools conceals this cognitive cost, which is a cognitive fragmentation that makes interpretation through a deeper

[93] Wu, *The Attention Merchants*.
[94] N. Katherine Hayles, (2007) "*Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes*," *Profession* : 187–199.
[95] Ibid.

focus more difficult to achieve.[96] This pattern of cognitive cost is consistent with multiple studies on the cognitive effects of digital reading and multitasking.

Studies by Nicholas Carr and Maryanne Wolf reinforce this same concern. They argue that prolonged screen engagement can change neural and cognitive processes, weakening the ability to maintain sustained reading, deep comprehension, and integrative thinking.[97] In this context, while digital research methods may give the impression of efficiency, they mask a loss of patience and attentiveness upon which interpretive scholarship depends. Berg and Seeber, as well as Birkerts, provide further evidence from humanities' practices, observing that rapid, fragmented academic work and screen-mediated research can impede sustained thoughtful reflection and deep engagement.[98]

Algorithmic black boxes

In *The Black Box Society*, Frank Pasquale explores algorithmic opacity showing how computational systems function through intentional obscurity that hinders external assessment.[99] Of similar concerns is *Algorithms of Oppression* by Safiya Noble, which shows how search algorithms perpetuate and magnify preexisting societal biases. Together, these studies refute any assertions that algorithms function objectively.[100]

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[96] J. F. Benge and M. K. Scullin, (2025) "*A Meta-Analysis of Technology Use and Cognitive Aging*," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9: 1405–1419.

[97] Nicholas Carr, (2010) *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* New York: W. W. Norton; Maryanne Wolf, (2018) *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World,* New York: HarperCollins.

[98] Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, (2016) *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Sven Birkerts, (2006) *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age,* Boston: Faber & Faber.

[99] Frank Pasquale, (2015) *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1-18.

[100] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 54-78.

The Political Economy of Technology Platforms

Nick Srnicek's identification of technology platform capitalism recognises the monopolistic business models through which digital platforms accumulate power and extract value.[101] Platforms provide hardware and software infrastructure for others to operate upon, whilst extracting value through network effects and data accumulation. This structural position enables platforms to benefit from activity they do not directly produce, capturing value generated by users, third-party developers, and complementary businesses. Network effects mean platforms become more valuable as more people use them, creating winner-take-all dynamics that concentrate power in dominant platforms. Data accumulation similarly advantages established platforms: more users generate more data, enabling better predictive modelling, which attracts more users, creating self-reinforcing cycles that disadvantage potential competitors.

Julie Cohen's concept of "informational capitalism" extends Srnicek's analysis.[102] When platforms provide essential infrastructure for communication, commerce, and social organisation, they exercise power over what becomes possible within environments they control. They determine who can participate, what information circulates, which businesses succeed, and how social interactions occur. This infrastructural position means platforms govern in ways that exceed traditional corporate power, making decisions that affect billions of people without democratic accountability or meaningful oversight. Platform terms of service function as what might be termed private constitutions, establishing fundamental rules governing populations larger than most nation-states without any democratic input.[103]

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[101] Nick Srnicek, (2017) *Platform Capitalism,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 43-67.

[102] Julie E. Cohen, (2019) *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[103] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism.*

European Union regulatory efforts such as the General Data Protection Regulation, Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, and the Artificial Intelligence Act represent attempts to constrain platform power through legal frameworks.[104] However, critical scholarship questions if these regulations challenge or reinforce existing Big Tech power structures.[105] Compliance mechanisms developed may advantage established platforms with resources to navigate the complex requirements, which create barriers that disadvantage potential competitors that are smaller.[106] Regulations that legitimise data extraction, provided proper procedures are followed, may consolidate surveillance capitalism rather than meaningfully restricting it.[107] The gap between regulatory rhetoric claiming to protect democratic values and actual effects, which often strengthen dominant platforms, conveys a kind of "democratic theatre", meaning, showing the maintenance of democratic forms, whilst systematically undermining the substantive conditions that make democratic governance possible.[108]

Political Philosophy Frameworks

Understanding how the political philosophy contained in *De l'esprit des lois* relates to contemporary technological governance requires theoretical frameworks that illuminate both historical concepts and present conditions. Michael Oakeshott's distinction between the

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[104] European Union, *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR), Regulation (EU) 2016/679; *Digital Markets Act* (DMA), Regulation (EU) 2022/1925; *Digital Services Act* (DSA), Regulation (EU) 2022/2065; *Artificial Intelligence Act* (AI Act), Regulation (EU) 2024/1689.

[105] Susana Coroado, (2021) "*Algorithmic Constitutionalism: Constitutionalising Algorithmic Governance in the European Union*," *European Law Journal* 27, no. 4-6 : 423-441.

[106] Damien Geradin, Theano Karanikioti, and Dimitrios Katsifis, (2021) "*GDPR Myopia: How a Well-Intended Regulation Ended up Favouring Large Online Platforms — The Case of Ad Tech*," *European Competition Journal* 17, no. 1: 47-92, https://doi.org/10.1080/17441056.2020.1848059.

[107] Jane Andrew and Max Baker, "*The General Data Protection Regulation in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism*," *Journal of Business Ethics* 168, no. 3 (2021): 565-578, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04239-z; Reviglio, Urbano (2022). *The Untamed and Discreet Role of Data Brokers in Surveillance Capitalism: A Transnational and Interdisciplinary Overview*. *Internet Policy Review*, [online] 11(3). Available at: https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/untamed-and-discreet-role-data-brokers-surveillance-capitalism-transnational-and

[108] Andrew and Baker, "*The General Data Protection Regulation in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism*,"

"politics of faith" and the "politics of skepticism" provides one such framework.[109] Oakeshott argues that political thought is distinguished between those who pursue human perfectibility through increasingly sophisticated technical means and expanded power, and those who recognise human fallibility and seek to limit governmental overreach, accepting imperfection as inevitable. The politics of faith believes that rational planning and technical expertise can engineer better societies, that human nature proves malleable through proper intervention, and that progress towards perfection constitutes history's trajectory. The politics of scepticism doubts such ambitions, recognising that human judgement has limits, that unintended consequences regularly defeat grand plans, and that attempting to impose rational systems on complex social realities often produces worse outcomes than accepting imperfect but organic arrangements.

With theoretical parallels, Montesquieu's political philosophy exhibits a profound scepticism towards universal systems and rationalist abstraction.[110] His insistence that laws must suit the general spirit of particular peoples reflects his aversion to the idea that any single governmental form or ideology can prove universally appropriate without harm or even despotism. His warning against attempting to change the general spirit dramatically, encourages caution about ambitious reform projects that disregard contextual complexity. Additionally, his recognition that legislators must not attempt to correct everything acknowledges human judgment's limits. This sceptical temperament aligns him with Oakeshott's politics of scepticism, contrasting sharply with rationalism that sought to reconstruct societies according to universalist abstract principles.[111]

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[109] Michael Oakeshott, (1996) *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller New Haven: Yale University Press, 1-32.
[110] Shklar, *Montesquieu*, 89-112.
[111] Campbell Corey, E. (2010, January 21). *Michael Oakeshott: The politics of faith and the politics of skepticism*, VoegelinView. https://voegelinview.com/the-politics-of-faith-pt-1/

Contemporary technology corporations embody what might be termed technological faith in perfectibility, as evidenced in the design of data-driven optimisation.[112] The premise that human behaviour can be predicted, influenced, and improved through algorithmic intervention reflects confidence in technical means to circumvent human limitations and overcome human autonomy. Some surveillance systems now claim to have a superior understanding of individual preferences and self-understanding, proclaiming that computational modelling reveals truth about individuals that remains hidden from the individuals themselves.[113] Behavioural modification techniques that systematically direct human actions to be more predictable treat human agency as a problem requiring a solution through technical means. Platform governance that imposes standardised rules across billions of users presumes that universal systems can manage human diversity more effectively than local adaptation. These practices demonstrate the politics of faith operating through technological means, pursuing perfectibility through increasingly sophisticated computational intervention.

The contrast between Montesquieu's scepticism and Big Tech's technological faith thus reflects enduring tensions in political philosophy between accepting human fallibility and pursuing perfection through technical means. Montesquieu's contextual approach recognises that governing well requires attending to particular circumstances, that diversity of laws reflects wisdom and that attempts to impose universal systems risk destroying organic relationships sustaining contextual social order. Contemporary platform capitalism operates according to opposite principles, those being, universalising standardisation enabling scale, universal interfaces maximising efficiency, and computational processing preferred over

[112] Shoshana Zuboff, (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,* New York: PublicAffairs, 93-96.

[113] Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D. & Graepel, T., 2013. Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 110(15), pp. 5802–5805. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1218772110.

messy human judgement. The dialectical confrontations staged on *The Digital Dialectica's "The Dialectic"* page make this contrast explicit, demonstrating how Montesquieu's principles and contemporary technological practices embody fundamentally incompatible political philosophies.[114]

Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality provides another theoretical resource for understanding how power operates through contemporary technological systems.[115] Foucault examines how governance shifted from sovereign power, which commands obedience through force, towards disciplinary power that shapes subjects through institutional arrangements and surveillance.[116] His concept of biopower describes how modern governance operates through the management of populations, treating human beings as objects whose behaviour is measured, analysed, and manipulated.[117] This analytical framework illuminates how surveillance capitalism functions as a form of governance likened to Foucault's conception of biopower, rather than traditional legal command.

Platform governance exemplifies Foucault's insight that power operates most effectively when it shapes conduct without appearing coercive.[118] Platforms do not command users but structure choice architectures that make certain behaviours easy and others difficult. Algorithmic systems analyse behavioural patterns to predict future actions, then intervene to

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[114] Cindy Bellamy. "*The Dialectic*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/the-dialectic/.

[115] Michel Foucault, (1991) "*Governmentality*," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 87-104.

[116] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (2004) London: Penguin, 239-264.

[117] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley, (1998 [1976]) London: Penguin, 135-145; Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (2003) London: Penguin, 239-264; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (2007 [2004]) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (2008), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[118] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 195-228.

influence those actions in profitable directions.[119] This governance through digital environmental design and behavioural manipulation operates continuously but invisibly, making it difficult for subjects to consciously recognise or resist, when users cannot examine, understand, or challenge computational systems determining their information environment, social connections, and available choices.[120]

The concentration of power in Big Tech platforms raises questions about sovereignty and democratic accountability.[121] When platforms exercise governmental functions such as determining speech boundaries, mediating economic exchange, structuring social organisation and influencing behaviour, yet remain accountable only to shareholders rather than democratic publics, traditional governmental constitutional principles such as Montesquieu's separation of powers and checks and balances no longer effectively constrain power.[122] Platforms operate at speeds that make meaningful democratic oversight structurally impossible, with decisions about content moderation, search ranking, and recommendation algorithms occurring in milliseconds rather than the timeframes required for normal

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[119] Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D., & Graepel, T. (2013). *Private Traits and Attributes are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(15), 5802-5805. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1218772110; Boldyreva, E. L. (2018). *Cambridge Analytica: Ethics and Online Manipulation with Decision-Making Process. European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 51, 95-103. https://www.europeanproceedings.com/article/10.15405/epsbs.2018.12.02.10; Matz, S. C., Kosinski, M., Nave, G., & Stillwell, D. J. (2017). *Psychological Targeting as an Effective Approach to Digital Mass Persuasion. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, U.S.A., 114(48), 12714-12719. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1710966114; Rainie, L. (2017) *Theme 3: Humanity and Human Judgment are Lost When Data and Predictive Modeling Become Paramount, Pew Research Center.* Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/02/08/theme-3-humanity-and-human-judgment-are-lost-when-data-and-predictive-modeling-become-paramount/.

[120] Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 15-30, 90-100; Rainie, L. (2017) *Theme 3: Humanity and Human Judgment are Lost When Data and Predictive Modeling Become Paramount, Pew Research Center*; Tufekci, Z. (2014). *Engineering the Public: Big Data, Surveillance and Computational Politics. First Monday*, 19(7). DOI: 10.5210/fm.v19i7.4901.

[121] Julie E. Cohen, (2019) *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[122] Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*; Bakir, V. (2020). *Psychological Operations in Digital Political Campaigns: Assessing Cambridge Analytica's Psychographic Profiling and Targeting. Frontiers in Communication*, 5, Article 67. DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2020.00067;

deliberation and legal process.[123] This temporal asymmetry between algorithmic operation and democratic deliberation creates systematic accountability gaps.

The relationship between technology corporations and nation-states exemplifies the shifting power dynamics.[124] States increasingly negotiate with platforms that control essential digital infrastructure rather than simply regulating them as subordinate entities.[125] Platform terms of service function as what might be termed private constitutions, often establishing fundamental rules governing billions of people without regular democratic input.[126] This governmental legal constitutional displacement represents a profound transformation in how governance operates, with privately controlled systems exercising powers traditionally reserved for democratically accountable institutions. Whether democratic principles articulated during the Enlightenment such as those in *De l'esprit des lois*, can affect technological power operating according to different logics and at different scales remains an open question.

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[123] Srivastava, S. (2023). *Algorithmic Governance and the International Politics of Big Tech. Perspectives on Politics*, 21(3), 989-1000. DOI: 10.1017/S1537592721003145.
Laux, J. Institutionalised distrust and human oversight of artificial intelligence: towards a democratic design of AI governance under the European Union AI Act. AI & Soc 39, 2853–2866 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-023-01777-z.

[124] Maryanne Kelton, Michael Sullivan, Zac Rogers, Emily Bienvenue, Sian Troath, *Virtual sovereignty? Private internet capital, digital platforms and infrastructural power in the United States*, *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 6, November 2022, Pages 1977–1999, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac226.

[125] European Union Regulations: *GDPR (2016/679)*; *DMA (2022/1925)*; *DSA (2022/2065)*; *AI Act (2024)*. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu; Bollerman, M. (2025). *Digital Sovereigns: Big Tech and Nation-State Influence. arXiv.* Available at: https://arxiv.org/abs/2507.21066; Gu, H. (2024). *Data, Big Tech, and the New Concept of Sovereignty. Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 29, 591–612. DOI: 10.1007/s11366-023-09855-1; Henthorn-Iwane, A. (2025) *Why Big Tech can't Deliver True Data Sovereignty*, Available at: https://wire.com/en/blog/big-tech-data-sovereignty-failure.

[126] Coroado, S. (2023). *Leviathan vs Goliath or States vs Big Tech and what the digital services act means for the rule of law. Working Papers, Forum Transregionale Studien*. Available at: https://www.reconstitution.eu/fileadmin/bilder/re_constitution/WP_25-2023_Coroado_final.pdf; Andreotta, A. J., Kirkham, N. & Rizzi, M. (2021). "*AI, big data, and the future of consent*." *AI & Society*, 36(4), 1057-1072. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00146-021-01262-5; Cate, F. H. & Mayer-Schönberger, V. (2013). "*Notice and consent in a world of Big Data*." *International Data Privacy Law*, 3(2), 67-89. DOI: 10.1093/idpl/ipt005.

Conclusion

This literature review has covered a vast ground, from Montesquieu's eighteenth century political philosophy scholarship, to bibliographic considerations, to insights and critiques of the Digital Humanities, which, with these critiques in mind expanded out to consider the broader culture of technology, its history, its criticisms especially in relation to humanistic interests like those held by Montesquieu. Through the breadth of literature it also attempts a depth of analysis, also considering theoretical frameworks that can offer a vocabulary to describe the characteristic features of our very complex context of the presently digitally mediated world. Through the vastness, and the oppositions observed in differing cultures, practices, and ideologies, between traditional humanist values and Big Tech values, this thesis aims to apply these in an exploratory dialogue with each other to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the issues at stake.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The methodological direction of this thesis and its accompanying digital object available on https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/ titled *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?*, subtitled *Exploring Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois in today's digital mœurs*, was developed through a process of adaptation and gradual refinement rather than the straightforward execution of the pre-established plan set forth in the *Methodology Outline, "The Digital Dialectica: Enlightenment Ideals in the Age of Big Tech: Thesis Proposal Development Paper.*"[127] The project's previous proposal development sought to map Enlightenment political philosophy across a broad temporal and textual field.[128] Over time, this expansive intention was redirected into a more concentrated analysis of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, which was a focus that better corresponds to the central intellectual concerns of the study and to the scale appropriate for a master's program.

This redefinition of scope emerged from several factors: considering material conditions, a critical reflection on the infrastructure of Digital Humanities itself, a closer study of the scholarly field in which the political philosophy of Montesquieu is situated, and the contemporary narratives around DH and the politics of technology. An initial insight was that the tools and platforms that sustain computational research are considered to serve corporate logics which stand in tension with the contextual and interpretive forms of knowledge that

[127] Cindy Bellamy, (2025) *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/bibliography/; Cindy Bellamy, (January 2025) *Methodology Outline*, "*The Digital Dialectica: Enlightenment Ideals in the Age of Big Tech: Thesis Proposal Development Paper*."
[128] Ibid.

Montesquieu defends.[129] This reflects an inherent tension in the field of digital humanities, in the varying ways that it chooses to define, or not define itself.[130]

At the time of carrying out the tasks for building the digital object, considering both the optimistic and the critical narratives around technology and digital humanities, the choices made were more technical and procedural, to enact and put to the test a broad range of narratives and perspectives. This approach, combined with a careful regard towards humanistic scholarship, informed decisions on how to assemble data, how to process it, and what forms of output could sustain an interpretive analysis. The broader significance of these procedures, and what they reveal about the conditions under which digital research operates, became clearer only through later study and reflection.

The chapter, therefore, outlines its methodological evolution as a redirection of scholarly ambition within practical constraints. It allowed for the testing and evaluation of the computational methods conducted through a frame of critical humanistic enquiry. It presents the method, as it was carried out, explaining each stage in sequence, before considering how its practical operations relate to wider material and theoretical questions. In this way, the discussion shifts from description to interpretation, illustrating how the conduct of research can itself partake in critical understanding.

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[129] The incompatibility is both philosophical and economic. As Srnicek notes, platform capitalism requires privileging the view of data abstraction, aggregation, standardisation and categorisation, which is precisely what Montesquieu's contextual method opposes epistemelogically. Nick Srnicek, (2017) Platform Capitalism, Cambridge: Polity, 36-92.

[130] Liu, Alan. (2012) "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" In Debates in the Digital Humanities, edited by Matthew K. Gold, 490-509. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Stephen Ramsay, (2023) The Politics of Tools. DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly, Volume 17 Number 2. Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html; Susan Hockey. (2004). *The History of Humanities Computing*. In A Companion to Digital Humanities (eds S. Schreibman, R. Siemens and J. Unsworth). https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999875.ch1; *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Oxford Academic, Volume 34, Issue Supplement 1, Pages i190–i206, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqz072; Lejeune, *"Open" or "Close" Research Instruments? Conflicting Rationales in the Organization of Early Digital Medieval History in Europe*.

In this way, the methodology itself partakes in the thesis argument, which is that digital humanities research benefits from reflexive adaptation to practical constraints, while maintaining intellectual rigour and critical self-awareness about the politics, epistemology, and effects of its tools.[131]

Methodological Evolution and Strategic Pivot

The thesis development proposal paper initially proposed a wide-reaching interdisciplinary study examining the Enlightenment political philosophy of both John Locke and Montesquieu, contrasted against contemporary digital governance structures, through a digital object.[132] The envisioned scope encompassed a massive multilingual corpora spanning four centuries, from seventeenth-century philosophical texts to twenty-first-century regulatory frameworks. Primary sources were to include the canonical Enlightenment works, both Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, alongside extensive modern legal documentation such as countries' constitutional documents, the EU's *General Data Protection Regulation*, *Digital Services Act*, *Digital Markets Act*, and the *Digital Corpus of the European Parliament*. The method that was initially proposed was inspired by leading Enlightenment period digital humanities projects, like those outlined in *Digitizing Enlightenment: Digital Humanities and the transformation of eighteenth-century studies* by Burrows and Roe (2020). Advanced computational approaches, including *Text-PAIR* for sophisticated text alignment, *MALLET* and *stm* packages for topic modeling across large datasets, and linked data analysis to trace conceptual relationships across disparate sources, as stated to be used in these state-of-the-art projects in *Digitizing*

[131] Stephen Ramsay, (2023) *The Politics of Tools*. *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 2023 Volume 17 Number 2. Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html.
[132] Cindy Bellamy, (January 2025) *Methodology Outline*, "*The Digital Dialectica: Enlightenment Ideals in the Age of Big Tech: Thesis Proposal Development Paper.*"

Enlightenment, were previously proposed.[133] An eight-month timeline from January to August 2025 in the thesis development proposal paper had previously outlined work phases: data collection, computational analysis, digital object development, and thesis composition, which were to culminate in a comprehensive interactive digital platform integrating these wide-ranging analytical dimensions.[134]

This ambitious vision possessed an intellectual coherence through a connecting thread of historical legal-political philosophy to today's realities, laws, and political rhetoric; however, the practicalities of computational execution combined with leading humanities scholarship had not been completely conceptualised. Examining how Enlightenment principles concerning individual liberty, separation of powers, and contextual governance either had persisted or disappeared within contemporary digital systems seemed to have represented what would have been work of genuine scholarly significance, worthy of pursuing. Tracing conceptual threads from eighteenth-century political philosophy to revolutionary constitutional documents, such as those of France and the United States of America, through to modern regulatory frameworks would have illuminated pertinent historical and theoretical questions about democratic governance under today's technological circumstances. The breadth of such analysis had seemed to promise insights that might have been unavailable through narrower investigations.

However, this breadth was found to be infeasible within the limits of this master's level program, for several reasons. The first issue was that the dataset scale was too far ranging in both size and topical scope in multiple ways. Mass collection and transcription of multiple editions of the Enlightenment political philosophy texts would have been labour and

[133] Simon Burrows and Glenn Roe, Eds. (2020) *Digitizing Enlightenment: Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Studies*. Liverpool University Press on behalf of Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford.

[134] Bellamy, (January 2025) *Methodology Outline*, "*The Digital Dialectica: Enlightenment Ideals in the Age of Big Tech: Thesis Proposal Development Paper*.

computationally expensive, beyond the limits of what was achievable with the time and resources available. Managing the *Digital Corpus of the European Parliament* alone involves millions of words across dozens of languages, requiring a substantial computational infrastructure for processing, storage, and analysis.[135] Constitutional documents from multiple nations across three centuries demand careful attention to variant texts, translations, and editorial apparatus. Enlightenment philosophical corpora requires similar scholarly preparation before computational analysis becomes meaningful. The labour of assembling, cleaning, organising, categorising, harmonising, and validating such datasets exceeds what a single researcher can accomplish within an academic year whilst maintaining standards appropriate for humanities scholarship.

Tool complexity compounded these challenges. The advanced computational methods of topic modeling through *MALLET* or *stm* need advanced technical skills and understanding of what such methods enhance and obscure.[136] These tools perform well with large, structured datasets that enable statistical patterns to emerge meaningfully, something that needs more time and resources to prepare.[137] When these tools are applied to small or heterogeneous corpora, they might produce artifacts of their own processing, rather than genuine insights about textual relationships.[138] Moreover, interpreting outputs from such methods requires disciplinary expertise that develops through years of close and sustained engagement with the texts themselves and humanities scholarship.[139] The expertise demanded by advanced Digital

[135] Philipp Koehn, (2005) "*Europarl: A Parallel Corpus for Statistical Machine Translation*," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Machine Translation Summit,* Phuket: Asia-Pacific Association for Machine Translation. 79-86.
[136] Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood, (2014) "*The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies: What Thirteen Thousand Scholars Could Tell Us*," *New Literary History* 45, no. 3 : 359-384; Ted Underwood, "*Topic Modeling Made Just Simple Enough*," *The Stone and the Shell (blog)*, April 7, 2012, https://tedunderwood.com/2012/04/07/topic-modeling-made-just- simple-enough/.
[137] Matthew L. Jockers, (2013), *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 145-153.
[138] Nan Z. Da, (2019) "*The Computational Case against Computational Literary Studies*," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 : 615-625; Benjamin M. Schmidt, (2012) "*Words Alone: Dismantling Topic Models in the Humanities*," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 2, no. 1.
[139] Schmidt, "*Do Digital Humanists Need to Understand Algorithms?*"

Humanities tools constitutes its own form of scholarly preparation that cannot be acquired incidentally, whilst pursuing substantive research questions in a short time frame with limited computational resources.

The availability of funding and computational resources was found to add constraints. Access to sufficient processing power for large-scale computational text analysis, adequate storage for extensive corpora, and appropriate software licenses where proprietary tools were necessary, all require financial support typically available through institutions or dedicated Digital Humanities centres, rather than individual research budgets. Time itself constituted perhaps the most fundamental limitation. The timeline in the thesis development proposal paper outlined steps that went from data preparation to analysis and synthesis. However, when insights emerged unpredictably, reflection and revision were needed that the timeline had precluded.

These constraints necessitated a methodological adaptation and refinement. The decision to narrow the focus was in recognising that depth of analysis often yields more significant insights than breadth of coverage, and that this depth should not be sacrificed for what might have potentially been a breadth of meaningless information. The refined scope concentrated exclusively on Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, wherein he articulated the concept of *esprit général* most comprehensively.[140] This refined focus excluded Locke's book entirely, alongside modern legal documents and the EU parliamentary proceedings, concentrating on Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. In Book XIX, a closer analysis was enabled, specifically for Chapters I to VI, which introduce the *esprit général* concept of how climate, religion, laws, governmental maxims, historical precedents, morals, and manners combine to form the distinctive character of each society, in its most synthesised expression.

[140] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, Chapter 4: "Many things govern men: climate, religion, laws, maxims of government, examples of past things, morals, manners; from which results a general spirit."

The corpus of editions, translations, and impressions of *De l'esprit des lois* in the eighteenth century was substantial, with approximately one hundred found. A smaller sample of these was chosen to apply textual analytical digital methods of fifteen editions spanning 1748 to circa 1800 across five languages (French, English, Italian, German, Polish). These underwent a detailed transcription and were used to test digital tools, such as algorithms for statistical analysis and the results of an LLM. This smaller selection was ultimately delineated by the necessary data preparation, which involved labour-intensive OCR manual corrections. The broader corpus of approximately one hundred editions, translations, and impressions was applied; to use the more quantitatively apt tools such as digital geographical mapping and bibliographic listing, which provided historical scope within the eighteenth century without requiring the intensive processing demanded by close textual analysis. This approach aimed to balance a sufficient breadth to demonstrate text dissemination patterns against the necessary depth for interpretive engagement with its' philosophical content.

The methodological pivot from the original ambitious scope to the focused Book XIX study demonstrates the interpretive judgment needed, central to humanistic enquiry. Such judgment recognises that scholarly value can emerge from both (quantitative) comprehensiveness and careful (qualitative) attention to particular sources of information, such as texts and approaches. Montesquieu's Book XIX was considered especially suited for this investigation because its qualitative humanistic and philosophical commitments represent a good test case for quantitative digital humanities tools, which would potentially create more valuable insights than a larger, less understood, or less meaningful dataset. Montesquieu's assertion was that laws must emerge from the irreducible complexity of contextual factors, specific to each society, theoretically and as evidenced materially. It is this very idea that would seemingly create a direct challenge to the abstraction and systematisation that digital analysis requires.

Corpus Assembly and Data Preparation

Assembling the textual corpus for close analysis required an attention to scholarly standards that exceed what fully automated processes can achieve. The fifteen editions selected for detailed transcription are a sample representative of various moments in *De l'esprit des lois*' publication history across multiple linguistic contexts. The corpus begins with the 1748 Geneva edition, the text's first publication in French, followed by additional French, English, Italian, German, and Polish editions, translations, and impressions published to circa 1800.[141] This date range represents the period when Montesquieu's ideas circulated most intensively through European intellectual culture and influenced, for example, revolutionary constitutional thought in America and France, manifest in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) and the *Constitution of the United States* (ratified 1788, entered into force 1789).[142]

Sourcing these editions involved systematic consultation of digitised archives, including *Gallica*, *Google Books*, *Internet Archive*, and institutional repositories that maintain records of eighteenth-century holdings. The quality of digitised materials varied substantially. Some editions existed as high-resolution scans permitting detailed examination of typographic features, while others survived only through lower-quality reproductions where certain textual details were difficult to discern. Selection, therefore, was shaped by editions where the digitisation quality facilitated more accurate transcriptions, whilst adequately maintaining a certain scope of geographical and linguistic diversity, for examining translation practices and textual variation, and for potentially gaining objective insights about these.

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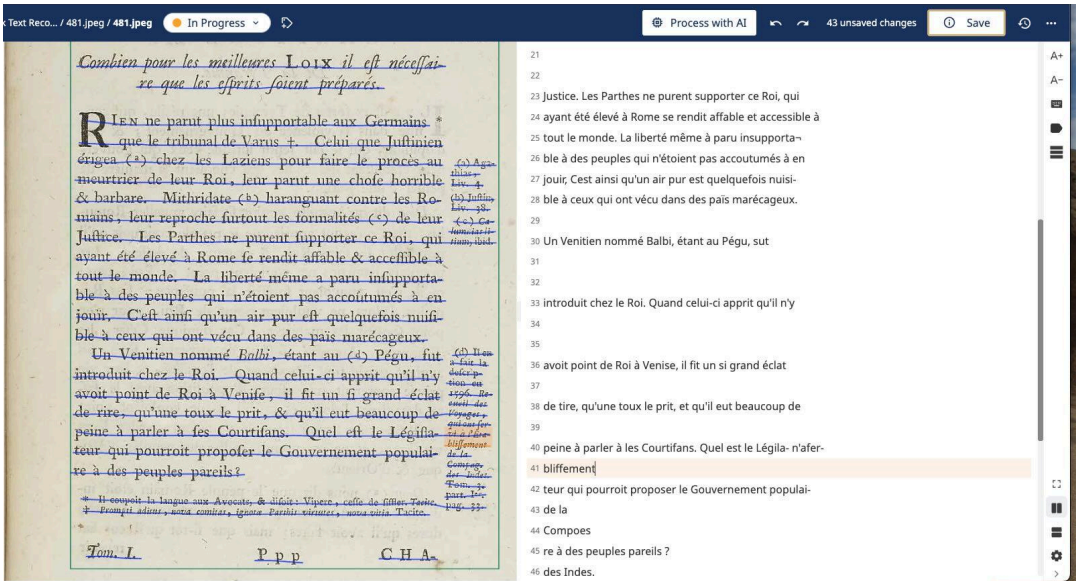
[141] Cindy Bellamy. (2025, September 30). *Transcriptions*. *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/text-comparison/transcriptions/, to see the selected 15 editions; It is interesting to note the 1748 Geneva edition appeared anonymously due to Montesquieu's concerns about censorship. The work was placed on the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books in 1751.
[142] Shackleton, R. (2025). *Major works of montesquieu*. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Montesquieu/Major-works.

Transcription itself involved a hybrid methodology that combined computational operations with a sustained human intervention. If OCR files were not available on institutional platforms such as Gallica and the Internet Archive, the OCR (Optical character recognition) software Transkribus provided the initial automated transcription of scanned pages.[143] It was seen that eighteenth-century printed texts in multiple languages presented some difficulties for the OCR systems:

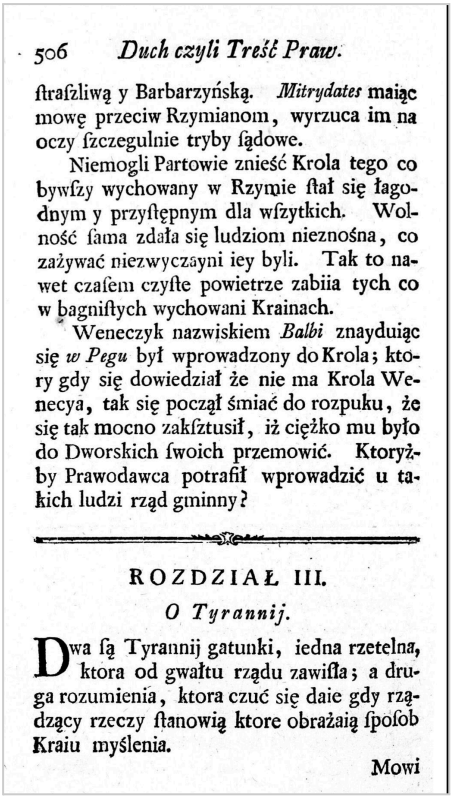
- The long s (ſ) so characteristic of this period's printing regularly confused automated recognition, appearing variously as f, s, or other characters;



Pictured above: a screenshot of the *Transkribus* software after running the text recognition model and manually editing some of the text, including the misrecognised long s (ſ). (*Note: The majority of printed marginalia were removed in this process consistently across works for brevity of text data*)

[143] *Transkribus*. (n.d.). https://app.transkribus.org/

- Ligatures common in French and Polish texts similarly produced unreliable results;



506 *Duch czyli Treść Praw.*

ſtraſzliwą y Barbarzyńską. *Mitrydates* maiąc mowę przeciw Rzymianom, wyrzuca im na oczy ſzczegulnie tryby ſądowe.

Niemogli Partowie znieść Krola tego co bywſzy wychowany w Rzymie ſtał się łagodnym y przyſtępnym dla wſzytkich. Wolność ſama zdała się ludziom nieznośna, co zażywać niezwyczayni iey byli. Tak to nawet czaſem czyſte powietrze zabiia tych co w bagniſtych wychowani Krainach.

Weneczyk nazwiskiem *Balbi* znayduiąc się *w Pegu* był wprowadzony do Krola; ktory gdy się dowiedział że nie ma Krola Wenecya, tak się począł śmiać do rozpuku, że się tak mocno zakſztusił, iż ciężko mu było do Dworskich ſwoich przemowić. Ktoryżby Prawodawca potrafił wprowadzić u takich ludzi rząd gminny?

ROZDZIAŁ III.

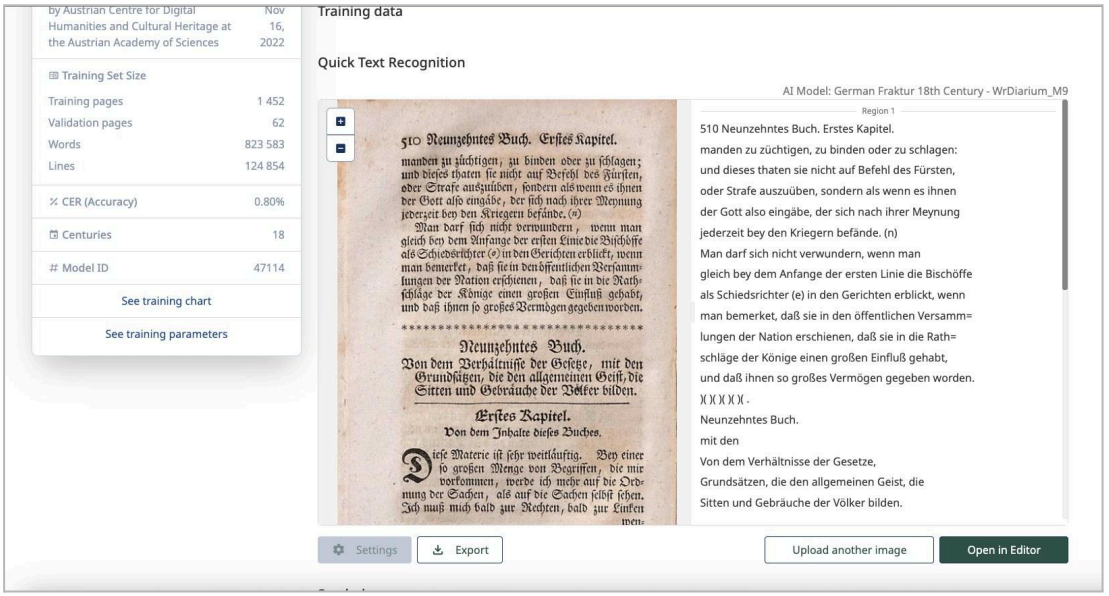
O Tyrannij.

Dwa ſą Tyrannij gatunki, iedna rzetelna, ktora od gwałtu rządu zawiſła; a druga rozumienia, ktora czuć się daie gdy rządzący rzeczy ſtanowią ktore obrażaią ſpoſob Kraiu myślenia.

Mowi

Pictured left: Example of Polish text, dense with ligatures, from *Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo*, 1777, Leipzig & Dresden.

- German gothic font made letter discernment difficult even with the closest trained text recognition model;



Pictured above: a screenshot of the *Transkribus* software after running the text recognition model '*German Fraktur 18th Century*'. Careful inference was made across unknown characters, with known German spellings, to manually correct the OCR transcription file.

These limitations necessitated an extensive manual correction of the automated transcripts created by *Transkribus*, or made available by institutions such as *Gallica* and *Internet Archive*. Each edition required a careful page-by-page review comparing OCR output against the original scans, correcting misrecognitions, standardising formatting, and ensuring scholarly accuracy appropriate for the intended granular computational textual analysis.[144] This labour-intensive process conveyed fundamental tensions within digital humanities methodology. The promise of computational efficiency that makes large-scale textual analysis conceivable encounters practical limitations where automation fails to achieve the precision and reliability necessary for scholarly humanities work. The result requires human labour to the extent that computational tools refocus attention on the abstract and the "meta" more than what is meaningful about the texts themselves when the focus is on precision of purely textual data for the purpose of later computational algorithmic processing.

Beyond transcription accuracy, decisions about how to structure textual data to test further computational processing involved interpretive choices. Converting these historical texts from their transcription .txt files into JSON format would later enable data retrieval of the text (using a *Jupyter Notebook*), which largely preserved the text's existing organisational structure.[145] Texts were segmented according to their published chapters, with metadata documenting edition details, published dates, and languages, following a standardised schema. This conversion proved to be relatively straightforward, as it represented, rather than artificially imposed, a hierarchical organisation. While certain aspects of the individual works were captured, others were lost in their conversion to purely textual data files. This loss is the materiality of the book itself, which conveys additional contextual information about

[144] Bellamy. (2025). *Transcriptions*. *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/text-comparison/transcriptions/.

[145] This JSON is publicly available in the *Github* repository for this project alongside the transcription .txt files : Cindy Bellamy. *Lesprit/Montesquieu_editions.JSON* at main · *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit. GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit/blob/main/montesquieu_editions.json and *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit*. *GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit.

reception. For example, images, fonts, and the binding are all aspects that are omitted, from reducing the text from its original materiality through a scanned version to textual data. One could not interpret, for example, some aspects related to its reception, such as the format, where larger formats or luxurious bindings indicate a wealthier readership, whilst cheaper octavo editions suggest broader popular circulation. In this sense, broader material and intellectual historical elements are lost in the transformation of texts to purely digital textual data.[146] Nevertheless, this choice was made for reduction, as the purpose of putting textual algorithms to the test later on was a central element to the digital humanities narrative related to the claim that digital tools enhance textual humanistic analysis.[147]

Another dataset compiled was geographical data for a publication map, which required a different preparation method. The open-source *Penny Mapping Data* from a digital humanities project provided structured bibliographic information about the *De l'esprit des lois*, including publication cities, dates, languages, and publishers.[148] This dataset was downloaded as a .csv file, and corrections and additions were made in Excel before converting the data into a GeoJSON format suitable for web-based mapping visualisation through *Leaflet, "an open-source JavaScript library for Interactive Maps*."[149] Python scripts in a *Jupyter Notebook* converted the Excel file into a GeoJSON to make it readable for

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[146] D. F. McKenzie, (1979) *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12-35; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[147] Stephen Ramsay, (2011) *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Susan Hockey. (2004). *The History of Humanities Computing*. In A Companion to Digital Humanities (eds S. Schreibman, R. Siemens and J. Unsworth). https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999875.ch1; Chris Alen Sula, Heather V Hill, *The early history of digital humanities: An analysis of Computers and the Humanities (1966–2004) and Literary and Linguistic Computing (1986–2004)*, Digital Scholarship in the Humanities, Oxford Academic, Volume 34, Issue Supplement 1, December 2019, Pages i190–i206, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqz072; Edgar Lejeune. (2024). *"Open" or "Close" Research Instruments? Conflicting Rationales in the Organization of Early Digital Medieval History in Europe. DHQ (1960–1990)*; Franco Moretti, (2013) *Distant Reading,* London: Verso.

[148] Chris Murray, *Penny Mapping Data. PennyU Library*. https://www.penny-university-lib.com/.

[149] Cindy Bellamy, *Lesprit/publication_map_data.geojson at main · Lokalkosmos/Lesprit. GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit/blob/main/publication_map_data.geojson; Volodymyr Agafonkin, *An open-source JavaScript library for Interactive Maps. Leaflet*. https://leafletjs.com/.

Leaflet. The *Jupyter Notebook* was intended to geocode the city names with their latitude and longitude coordinates; however, the script kept failing, resulting in the manual collection of coordinates, which were entered into the original Excel file. Once this was complete, the *Jupyter Notebook* could then convert the Excel file to a GeoJSON file, making it readable for the *Leaflet* map plugin, structuring attributes for interactive display in the metadata, and managing data relationships. The GeoJSON data and the *Leaflet* map plugin were combined within a *WordPress* custom HTML block on the website's *Publication Map* page at: the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/publication-map/.[150] By also adding CSS and *JavaScript*, the data structure would enable an ESRI baselayer map made from *ESRI base tiles* to be used, colours to be selected for the nodes, a node clustering effect for nodes in the same location at varying zoom levels, a pop-up info panel upon node click, and filtering by language and transcription status.[151]

This geographical data preparation demonstrated how seemingly straightforward technical tasks involve interpretive choices with scholarly implications. Choices needed to be made on what to include and exclude. The place of publication or the publisher name printed on book copies' title pages is not always the actual place of publication or the actual publisher. This had occurred for various reasons, such as political reasons, to avoid political attack or censorship. Although, due to time constraints, only the printed data on the title page was represented on the map. It is therefore not a map of true historical accuracy in terms of places of publication, and only maps out the stated places of publication as per the title pages.[152] In acknowledging this discovery, time permitting, it would have been interesting to visually map out the additional data on the actual places of publication, making visible a more complete

[150] Cindy Bellamy, (2025). "*Publication map*". *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/publication-map/, and *Lesprit/publication_map_data.geojson at main · Lokalkosmos/Lesprit. GitHub.*

[151] Esri. (2025). *World Imagery [Basemap]*. Esri. https://services.arcgisonline.com/ArcGIS/rest/services/World_Imagery/MapServer.

[152] This is the case for the *Penny Mapping dataset*.

publication history, which would enable contextual comparative insights. Another area of factual discrepancy was publication dates, which appeared with varying precision in bibliographic records. At times, even the date was printed misleadingly on purpose to avoid political attacks, or other times, because the publishing process took more than one year. Furthermore, choices had to be made about language classifications, which involved judgments about what constitutes distinct languages versus dialects or variant orthographies. These were decidedly simplified into main language groups for the purpose of general interpretation. Each such decision shapes what patterns become visible through visualisation and how users interpret the resulting map.

Bibliographic data collection for the edition catalogue at: https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/edition-bibliography/ drew on a variety of sources, including library catalogues, auction records, scholarly bibliographies, and academic studies. The final dataset included 113 records of editions, translations, and impressions, that was arrived at through a process of considering what constitutes useful bibliographic information.[153] Questions arose, such as: how should undated or uncertainly attributed editions be represented in the data and visually? And, what level of detail serves scholarly purposes without overwhelming users with excessive minutiae? These problems lack clear answers, necessitating pragmatic judgments informed by bibliographic competence and sensitivity to how users may interact with the digital catalogue.

The labour required for data preparation had surpassed the intended project timeline. Initial plans for relatively simple data collecting and cleaning evolved into a prolonged engagement with the material characteristics of historical texts and the interpretive dimensions of data organization. This experience reinforced the notion that humanistic research is inherently

[153] Bellamy, (2025) "Edition Bibliography," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/bibliography/.

beyond any fully automated approach, since it needs human interpretive judgment. The data preparation step, therefore, became an area for intellectual reflection on what is retained and enhanced, both materially and cognitively, and what is lost when historical texts are turned into computational records, which have inherent constraints and resource demands.

Digital Object Development

The digital object constructed to both undertake and present research consists of an integrated website composed of multiple parts that, together, form part of the evidential body for the thesis argument. Development decisions reflected technical considerations and philosophical commitments about how digital scholarship should function and what values it should embody. The website, hosted on *WordPress* through infrastructure provided by the *Marie et Louis Pasteur Université* (formerly the *Université de Franche-Comté*), with open-source data for it hosted on *Github*, *Google Drive*, *Wikimedia Commons*, and other institutional platforms, valued accessibility, transparency, and scholarly integrity over technical sophistication that might impress, whilst obscuring methodological foundations.

However, these infrastructure choices require a direct acknowledgment of their contradictions. The selection of *GitHub*, *Google Drive*, *Wikimedia Commons*, and other platforms is constrained by infrastructure realities. These choices necessarily involve the digital object in technology corporation's infrastructure, characterised by surveillance capitalism, etc. regardless of the well intended open-source commitments.[154] *WordPress* operates on servers likely maintained through agreements with Big Tech platforms like *Google Cloud*, and *GitHub* owned by *Microsoft*, now exists within that corporation's surveillance apparatus. Even "open" platforms and their users, either depend on, or cannot evade, hosting services provided by corporations whose business models centre on data

[154] Among the many other ways theorists have characterised technology corporations behaviour besides "surveillance capitalism", some of which were mentioned in this paper's *Literature Review* chapter.

extraction.[155] The more one looks into it, the more it appears impossible to exist "outside" of surveillance capitalism's infrastructure through which to conduct digital humanities scholarship.

These insights were not as strong during the initial approach, as I approached building the digital object from a more neutral position. I remained open to the digital humanities claim that computational methods, such as large-scale statistical analysis, pattern detection, and seemingly illuminating visualisations, could reveal new insights without prior close reading of the data. Yet as a philosophy graduate trained in critical thinking and close textual analysis, I found each phase had its disappointments. The digital results proved mediocre. Each decision, each focus, each look behind the scenes revealed how much remained undecided, unfocused, omitted, and unseen.

Interactive Timeline

The first component built of the digital object aimed to provide both historical context and bibliographic information that highlighted the dissemination and context of reception of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. The interactive timeline built using *TimelineJS* visualises thirty events spanning from 1689 to 1804, from Montesquieu's birth to the *Napoleonic Code*.[156] This timeline situates *De l'esprit des lois* within broader Enlightenment and revolutionary contexts, documenting publication history and subsequent influence, such as on American and French constitutional thought, alongside Catholic Church censorship. The timeline demonstrates a sustained political significance of Montesquieu's ideas, whilst enacting the temporal reduction that visualisation requires. Complex historical causation

[155] This infrastructure dependency represents what Evgeny Morozov terms "technological solutionism" which is the belief that technical tools can solve problems whose origins lie in the tools' own political economy. Evgeny Morozov, To Save Everything, Click Here (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 5-15.

[156] Bellamy, (2025) "*Timeline*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws*? website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/timeline/; Timeline JS. https://timeline.knightlab.com/; Bellamy, (2025) *TimelineJS Data Esprit des Lois*. Google Drive.

involving multiple actors, contingent decisions, and irreducible contextual specificity collapses into discrete, dated events with selected, yet limited imagery, that are arranged in a linear progression. The insights such visualisation enables about patterns across decades may come at the cost of the very contextual richness Montesquieu insisted must inform understanding of political development, though it can give some of the general picture. Enriched with open-source image files of artworks, publications, and photos, it provides some depth to the limited text arranged linearly. It, therefore, might serve as part of a general introduction rather than provide new scholarly insights.

Publication Map

The "*Publication Map*" visualises the geographical spread that *De l'esprit des lois* achieved across seventeen European cities in multiple languages in the eighteenth century.[157] The *Leaflet* map plugin was chosen over heavier mapping plugin libraries for various practical reasons. The plugin's lightweight design required less data usage and had no subscription costs, which are important considerations for a WordPress-hosted Master's project with limited resources. *Leaflet*'s efficiency also prevents the type of site delay that the more advanced mapping frameworks produce. Furthermore, *Leaflet*'s reportedly simple implementation matched my technical ability; however, even with its simplicity, constraints emerged throughout its development. The geocoding script failures, which required human coordinate insertion, showed how even 'beginner-friendly' technologies necessitate technical troubleshooting. More ambitiously, I had envisioned a unified interactive digital object that combined the publication map and timeline. This would have enabled users to view geographical and temporal patterns simultaneously. However, this integration would have required *JavaScript* and perhaps other technical expertise beyond my current skill level,

[157] Bellamy, (2025) "*Publication Map*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws*? website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/publication-map/.

which meant that I had to offer these as separate visualisations rather than the unified interactive multimedia interface I had imagined.[158]

As discussed earlier in the methodology, the dataset used for the publication map represented stated places of publication from title pages rather than verified actual locations, which reflects the political pressures shaping eighteenth-century book production, not evidenced in the map itself. The map makes visible Montesquieu's impressive reach across linguistic and national boundaries, demonstrating how his ideas circulated through European intellectual culture during a period when such dissemination required a substantial effort. Yet this geographical abstraction necessarily eliminates a clear view of what it claims to represent, being a contextual view situated in space. Publishers, booksellers, translators, censors, readers, and institutions, essentially all the human agents and material practices that actually enabled circulation, disappear into dots on a screen. It seems evident that the map is able to show patterns at a continental scale more easily, when particular contextual data has been omitted for various reasons, such as due to the complexity of the data, resource constraints, and even the practical impossibility of digital representation of certain kinds of data through which the works' intellectual transmission occurred. We see distribution, but we lose the distributors.[159]

Edition Bibliography

Similarly, the enumerative "*Edition Bibliography*" of 113 records provides structured data that may assist scholarly practices, with limitations.[160] Implemented through WordPress's *TablePress* plugin, the bibliography offers searchable access to publication details including

[158] Volodymyr Agafonkin, *An open-source JavaScript library for Interactive Maps. Leaflet*. https://leafletjs.com/.
[159] Bellamy, (2025) "*Publication Map*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* Website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/publication-map/.
[160] Bellamy, (2025) "*Edition Bibliography*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/edition-bibliography/.

dates, languages, cities, publishers, and additional information.[161] This might serve some scholarly research purposes, whilst demonstrating bibliographic methods applied to the digital context. Yet bibliographic data similarly involves the reduction of the contextual materiality of books into standardised metadata fields. The physical books as artifacts, their typography, paper quality, binding styles, marginal annotations, and ownership histories disappear into tabular data. What remains serves some scholarly purposes well, and others not as well, whilst excluding dimensions of book history that a material examination of the books would allow.

Comparative Reading Tool with *Transcriptions*, *Translations*, and *Semantic Analysis* testing an LLM

Another digital development was the "*Comparative Reading Tool*," which represents one of the more technically ambitious components of the digital object, offering an interface for exploring textual variation across the fifteen transcribed editions.[162] Built using *JavaScript* to query JSON datasets hosted on the project's GitHub repository,[163] the tool enables side-by-side comparison of texts whilst incorporating translations and semantic analysis generated through *Claude 3.5 Sonnet*, an advanced large language model (LLM).[164] In the tool, users can navigate between chapters, select editions for comparison, and examine how specific passages appear across linguistic and temporal variation. The implementation prioritised relative (for digital methods' abilities) scholarly accuracy in transcriptions whilst acknowledging the significant limitations inherent in automated analysis.

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[161] *Plugin information*. TablePress. (2025). https://tablepress.org/info/; See appendices for table data.

[162] Bellamy, (2025) "*Comparative Reading Tool*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?*, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/texts-comparison/. Also see appendices for more on the methodological background and screenshot.

[163] Bellamy, (2025) *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit*. GitHub. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit.

[164] *Introducing Claude 3.5 Sonnet*. (2024, June 21) Introducing Claude 3.5 Sonnet \ Anthropic. https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-3-5-sonnet; *Models Overview*. (2025) Claude Docs. https://docs.claude.com/en/docs/about-claude/models/overview.

The decision to employ an LLM for the translation and semantic comparison, required careful methodological reflection as well as trial and error. LLM systems like *Anthropic's Claude* offer capabilities for processing historical texts that more traditional digital methods cannot replicate at similar scale. Yet these LLM systems introduce epistemological challenges that humanistic scholarship must address directly.

The preparatory steps to build the "*Comparative Reading Tool*", were experimental, and trial and error. Different textual analytical algorithms were tested on the transcription .txt files in various *Jupyter Notebook* programs that usually worked similarly to *Diffchecker*.[165] However, no significant valuable insights could be drawn within the language groups through this approach. Different methods for translating the texts for a cross-linguistic comparison across French, English, Italian, German, and Polish were also tried, but failed to be implementable within a *Jupyter Notebook* to make translations at scale. Both *Google Translate* and *Deepl* had *Python* modules that were not maintained and, therefore, were unusable.[166] What was discovered was that without access to human expertise in historical-philosophical multi-lingual translation, the best alternative for translation within the time-constraints, seemed to be an LLM, as they promised a large training dataset that was currently maintained, usable in a *Jupyter Notebook* using an API, even though this could seemingly not avoid the "black box" effect.[167]

When the *Jupyter Notebook* had finally processed all translations and semantic analysis by using the *Claude 3.5* LLM's API, which took approximately six hours. The results created a

[165] *Compare text and find differences online or offline*. Diffchecker. https://www.diffchecker.com/

[166] Technical evaluation revealed that Google Translate's Python client library (googletrans) has been deprecated with irregular maintenance since 2021 and was unusable within the development system, and DeepL's unofficial Python libraries, like deepl-translate, lacked robust error handling and consistent API access, also rendering it unusable.

[167] This methodology is outlined in Bellamy, C. (2025). "*Text Comparison.*" *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website. https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/text-comparison/ and in more detail on Bellamy, C. (2025). *"Translation & Semantic Analysis.*" *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website. https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/text-comparison/translation-semantic-analysis/.

"black box" feeling.[168] The model produced questionable generalisations, seemingly flattening a nuanced interpretation of the historical philosophical text. Montesquieu's advocacy for contextual distinctions seemed to find opposition in the generalising abstractions formed by the LLM. These appeared to be not "useful approximations," but more probably demonstrated incapability and incompatibility. The LLM made every interpretation feel general and imprecise, in an overly confident manner, as if its claims were certainly true, but without providing sources for its decisions. To assess the accuracy of the LLM results in this case, would involve the close reading of approximately 800 pages of text and data by someone with humanities expertise in this field.[169] However, this approach may ultimately interfere with the work humanistic scholarship needs to do. Furthermore, a humanistic scholar might, in the first place, be able to create far better results in a shorter amount of time than an LLM.

The "black box" feeling of LLMs even extends to its developers who cannot fully explain how specific outputs emerge from the algorithms. Translations and analyses generated through such systems contain inaccuracies, anachronisms, or interpretive biases that might be invisible without close study or expert validation, or they are glaringly obvious.[170] The digital object's documentation, on the website and the Github repository, tries to address some of these concerns, detailing the LLM model selection, the prompt given, and the output dataset, acknowledging its limitations.[171]

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[168] The "black box" metaphor appears throughout AI critique but originates in cybernetics. For its application to contemporary machine learning, see Pasquale, (2015) *The Black Box Society*.

[169] There were approximately 800 pages of translation and semantic data compiled in JSON files for *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX, Chapters I-VI (see appendices); Bellamy, *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit*. *GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit.

[170] Cynthia Rudin, "*Stop Explaining Black Box Machine Learning Models for High Stakes Decisions and Use Interpretable Models Instead*," *Nature Machine Intelligence* 1, no. 5 (2019): 206-215, https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-019-0048-x.

[171] See '*Text Comparison*' and '*Translation & Semantic Analysis*' in the appendices and on *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* Website; Bellamy, C. (2025). *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit. GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit.

Nevertheless, the "*Comparative Reading Tool*" was developed with an interactive user interface, which is in itself another field that necessitates extensive study and focus to develop an optimal design aligned with its intended cognitive effect upon users. What was attempted was an interface design that deliberately avoids presenting itself as a definitive scholarly resource. The interface simply states "Comparative Reading Tool for *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XIX" and "Welcome: Select a chapter and 2—5 editions (same language) for chronological comparison, or 2 editions from different languages for cross-linguistic analysis. Then click Analyse." This tool is located on the website as a subpage of the page "*Text Comparison*," which gives an overview of the method and critical approach that leads up to the tool, listing a brief outline the subpages "*Transcriptions*" and "*Translation & Semantic Analysis*" first in a linear fashion before the "Comparative Reading Tool" subpage. The website structure is reflected in the menu structure, which reflects the linear methodical process of building the datasets and the tool. The tool functions more as an exploratory environment for examining textual variation than an authoritative edition or interpretation. This positioning understands that digital humanities tools serve scholarship best when they enable rather than replace human interpretive judgment. The tool might make certain patterns visible, but seemingly only in such a way that requires close reading.

Github Repository

The GitHub repository hosts the datasets that *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website pulls from through its loading of Custom HTML Blocks for WordPress, supporting the entire digital object.[172] All transcriptions and JSON datasets for this thesis's digital object are hosted there. Complementary files including the GeoJSON and Jupyter Notebooks that document analytical explorations, and processing scripts, reside in the publicly available repository, accessible at https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit. This repository provides

[172] Bellamy, C. (2025). *Lokalkosmos/Lesprit. GitHub*. https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit

methodological transparency, and allows for scholarly analysis and use in ways that websites alone cannot achieve. Other researchers can examine exact textual sources, scrutinise data preparation decisions, review analytical code, and build upon this work in ways that closed proprietary systems prevent. The repository embodying values of transparency and openness counter the proprietary enclosure increasingly characteristic of both commercial platforms and academic publishing infrastructure.

Digital Object Website Development

Website development proceeded by trial and error, with its features refined based on results and as interpretive insights emerged. This process conveys how digital humanities projects unfold through ongoing reflection. The resulting digital object bears traces of this evolution, with some components remaining less polished than others, documentation varies in detail, and some envisioned features never reached implementation. These characteristics demonstrate the digital humanities' provisional nature.

While all design choices could be discussed in depth, it would have been preferable if the website development had focused more on UX or user interface design studies, which constitute a field and science of their own. Here, I will mention only a few choices for the sake of brevity, and because the focus was generally more dispersed during the development process. A dark website theme was chosen, with the awareness that it would reduce the blue light that strains the viewer's eyes while also lowering device energy consumption. Other design features that began to be incorporated included a responsive web design that adapts to different screen sizes, such as mobile phones in addition to standard laptop screens, although this remains to be fully implemented.

The Digital Dialectica

A prior philosophical perspective, together with the practical experience of creating a digital object, had illuminated tensions and contradictions within the field of digital humanities. It could be seen that the field of digital humanities tends toward rhetorical presentation of technical achievement when it should embrace dialectical engagement methodologically, or a dialogue aimed at higher truth. To pursue the dialectical aim of arriving at a higher truth addressing the discrepancies within the field of digital humanities itself, and more broadly our digitally mediated moment in history, the project's central intellectual intervention is *The Digital Dialectica* page, on https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/the-dialectic/ which presents five confrontations between Montesquieu's philosophical principles and documented Big Tech practices.[173] Rather than only attempting to extract or contain Montesquieu's ideas through computational analysis, which is an approach that must reduce his contextual philosophy to abstract digital data and statistical patterns, *The Digital Dialectica* page stages a direct confrontation between the historical text and meaning of *De l'esprit des lois* and contemporary documentation of technological corporations' practices in dialogue format.

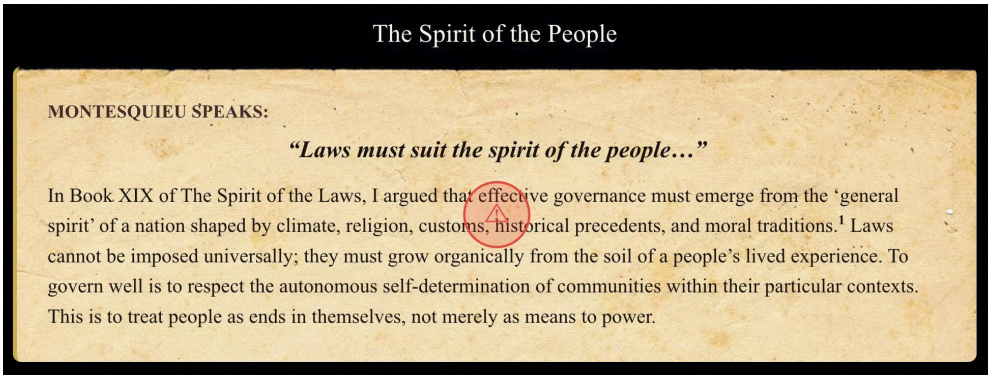
The Digital Dialectica page, or simply *The Dialectic* page has five interactive confrontations between a sample selection of Montesquieu's philosophy in *De l'esprit des lois* and an oppositional computational rationale. A dialogue is staged between Montesquieu's historical text and values, often said to be values of the "West" even today, versus the current reality of today, permeated with Big Tech's actions, ideas, and frameworks. Montesquieu both embodied and promoted, while pursuing different lines of humanistic thought, a synthesising of these various ideas towards a higher truth. In Book XIX of *De l'esprit des lois*, this synthesis arrives at the concept of *esprit general*, that the general spirit of people is formed

[173] Bellamy. "*The Dialectic*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/the-dialectic/.

by various complex contextual factors. The attempt to visualise in the digital form a philosophical dialectic, is marked by both the aim for truth, yet constrained by the limits of digital mediation. Questions arise about the various effects this might have on users and how this could possibly be measured. The digital dialectical confrontations, make textual statements in a unique visual and animated way, and involve the following interactive elements:

A. Red warning sign (⚠): Appears on top of Montesquieu's philosophy, signalling what intuitively seems like a computational error:

a.

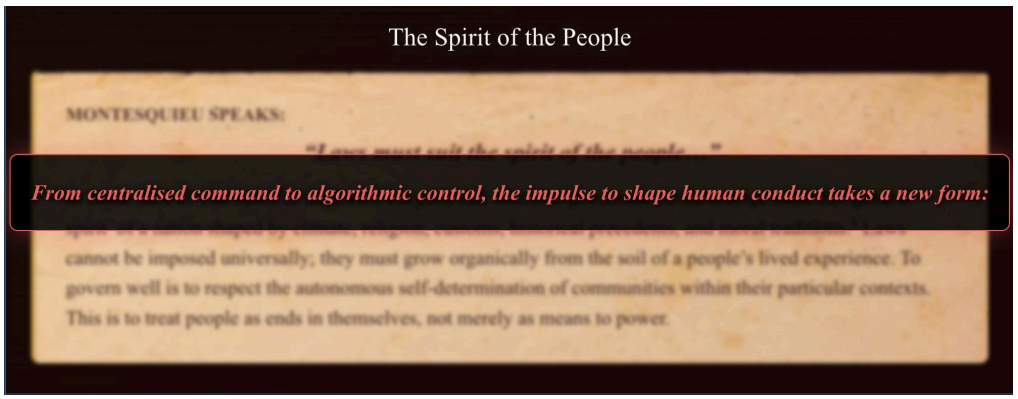


B. Transformation trigger: On hovering the cursor over the warning sign ⚠ the pointer turns into a pointing hand indicating a clickable element. Upon clicking the warning sign a visual transformation begins as a transitional overlay element.[174]

[174] The transformation interface draws on critical interface design principles that make visible what normalised interfaces obscure. See Johanna Drucker, "Humanities Approaches to Interface Theory," Culture Machine 12 (2011): 1-20.

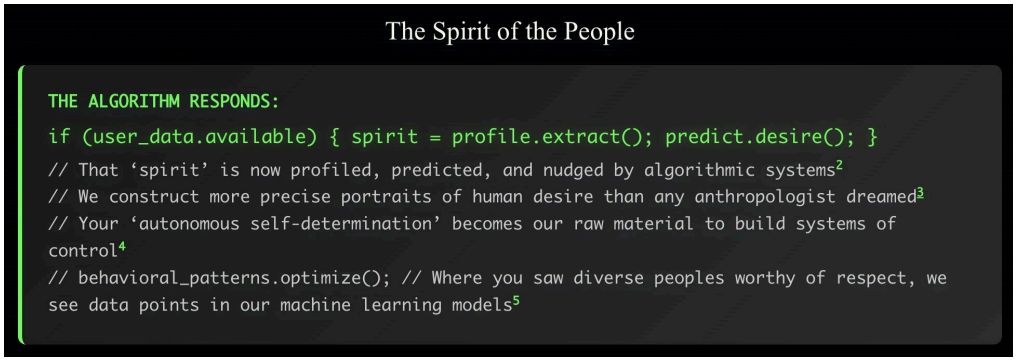
C. Transition overlay: Between each confrontation, a narrational text appears, styled similarly to an error message. This text describes something about the modern day digital-social-context, adverse to Montesquieu's principles:

a.



D. Progressive inadequacy: The 'algorithm responds' with a styled pseudocode and explanatory comments demonstrating the fundamental incompatibility between the principles behind computational methods and the humanistic contextual understanding Montesquieu valued. These are linked by footnotes to scholarly references at the bottom of the page for further reading:

a.



E. Non-resolving structure: The page offers no synthesis, no "solution" that resolves to a higher truth for the present digitally permeated situation. Arriving at a higher truth, or at the least intending to arrive at one, is an essential component of true dialogue. However, the confrontation presented only accumulates evidence of incommensurability between principles and rationales and is therefore not a true dialogue. The solution is decidedly off the page, resting with the user in the realm of human experience, action, thought, sociability, and contexts.

Each dialectical pair follows a consistent ideological structure: Montesquieu articulates a principle about governance, contextual knowledge, or political liberty; this principle undergoes visual and rhetorical transformation; Big Tech practices that systematically contradict or undermine the principle then appear as pseudocode and pseudocomments, supported by scholarly footnotes. The page is subtitled aptly with "*The Spirit of the Laws vs. The Logic of Code*." The confrontation concludes without synthesis, demonstrating the impossibility of genuine dialectical resolution.

The five confrontations address core themes from *De l'esprit des lois*, whilst drawing on extensive scholarship, documenting surveillance capitalism, platform governance, and algorithmic systems.[175]

1. The first confrontation features Montesquieu's insistence that laws must suit the "spirit of the people" shaped by context. The algorithmic "response" describes digital profiling systems that claim to have superior knowledge of individual personal preferences, even surpassing individuals' understanding of themselves.[176]
2. The second confrontation contrasts Montesquieu's idea of the separation of powers with data empires that exceed nation-states in economic power. These empires govern billions through platform infrastructure, beyond traditional constitutional checks and balances.[177]

[175] See Appendices for the full text and references of the staged dialogue that takes place between Montesquieu and computational systems.
[176] Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell, and Thore Graepel, (2013) "*Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior*," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 15: 5802-5805, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1218772110.
[177] Nick Srnicek, (2017) *Platform Capitalism,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

3. The third confrontation is between Montesquieu's recognition that customs and climate require legal diversity versus the digital monoculture that flattens cultural differences for computational efficiency and advertising revenue optimisation.[178]
4. The fourth shows Montesquieu's assertion that freedom arises through reasoned public debate, against technology corporations' proprietary "black box" algorithms that are protected as trade secrets, manipulating discourse and thought through invisible techniques.[179]
5. The fifth contrasts Montesquieu's advocacy of legal and governmental pluralism that respects human difference against technology platforms' terms of service that function as constitutional documents for billions, without proper democratic process or legal frameworks.[180]

To conclude, a note titled "*The Synthesis Void*" argues that no genuine dialectic emerges because Big Tech does not engage with Montesquieu's principles through reasoned argument. Instead there appears a systematic displacement of Montesquieu's principles through computational logic, which is well-suited and directed towards extraction and control, rather than enlightenment and liberty.

Each confrontation includes extensive scholarly citations establishing empirical grounding for claims about contemporary technological practices. Citations draw on Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism, Nick Srnicek's examination of platform economics, Frank Pasquale's investigation of algorithmic opacity, Julie Cohen's work on informational capitalism, Safiya Noble's study of algorithmic discrimination, and numerous other scholars

[178]Agarwal, D., Naaman, M., & Vashistha, A. (2025), *AI Suggestions Homogenize Writing Toward Western Styles and Diminish Cultural Nuances. arXiv.org*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2409.11360 https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2317772121.

[179] Frank Pasquale, (2015), *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[180] Kate Klonick, (2018) "*The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech*," *Harvard Law Review* 131, no. 6 : 1598-1670.

documenting how digital systems transform governance, economy, and social relations.[181] This citational practice establishes that the dialectical confrontations rest on documented research rather than on rhetorical flourish, whilst acknowledging that much about algorithmic systems remains deliberately opaque to external examination. The page functions as what might be termed a kind of surface archaeology, that is, careful inference about underlying logics based on publicly visible behaviours and acknowledged practices rather than a comprehensive understanding of proprietary systems.

The visual and typographical presentation of *The Dialectic* page aims to provoke thought and invite analysis in a bold way, breaking out of the seemingly typical, rhetorical comfort zone of the digital humanities. The staged encounters are designed to provoke humanistic reflection. Montesquieu's historical voice "speaks" through carefully selected quotations establishing his philosophical commitments. The font selection, as well as background, shows something of the traditional context of these words, with a legible serif font on an aged paper background. These passages undergo a visual transformation that suggests corruption or displacement. By clicking the red warning sign, a message in red appears and fades, stating a shift that frames what is to come. Big Tech practices and ideology abruptly enter through pseudocode snippets and comments typed out in neon green and grey on a dark background, which infuse corporate ideology and scholarly commentary. The pseudocode particularly embodies the argument with lines like:

spirit = profile.extract(); predict.desire();

or class DataEmpire extends Government { bypass.traditional_authority(); }

or while (discourse.active) { filter.through(black_box_algorithms); }

These communicate, through programming-like language conventions, how algorithmic logic

[181] Shoshana Zuboff, (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,* New York: PublicAffairs; Julie E. Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism* (2019), Oxford: Oxford University Press; Safiya Umoja Noble, (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York: NYU Press.

systematically inverts these Enlightenment principles. This design choice treats form as argument, using the languages, conventions and styles of computational systems to demonstrate their philosophical commitments.

The page concludes with the "Synthesis Void", explicitly articulating what the confrontations demonstrate: "This is not a genuine dialectic. Where synthesis should emerge from the encounter between humanistic wisdom and technological power, we find only systematic dismantling."[182] This conclusion avoids a false optimism of reconciling these Enlightenment principles with the general characteristics of technology corporations, such as surveillance capitalism or platform governance, through the computational space. The argument maintains that genuine dialectical engagement, in the human sense, requires interlocutors capable of rational responses and potential revision based on superior arguments, or, in other words, capable of that which human consciousness is capable of. Computational algorithmic systems cannot engage in such living and nuanced dialogue. The issue is not simply to design better algorithms; the issue is that it is structurally and societally embedded, based on a "politics of faith," rather than a "politics of scepticism." Computational algorithms are designed to execute predetermined processes, incapable of humanistic philosophical reflection; thus, the confrontation would remain one-sided as Montesquieu's principles are displaced by computational logic that cannot itself be dialectically engaged, and the issue of a "politics of faith" continues to remain unaddressed.

[182] Bellamy, (2025) "*The Dialectic*," *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/the-dialectic/.

Conclusion

The methodological approach adopted for this thesis had specific epistemological commitments that the subsequent chapters examine in philosophical depth. Ramsay argued that:

> "declaring tools morally or politically neutral is obviously fallacious, yet equally problematic is supposing we can predict in advance what political formations will arise from tool-building. Tools themselves give rise to what becomes politically possible."[183]

Digital Humanities narrative, however, encourages treating computational methods as transparent instruments augmenting scholarly capabilities. This thesis tested that assumption by building the required digital components. The decision to employ tools such as *TimelineJS*, *Leaflet*, *Excel*, *Python*, *Jupyter Notebook*, *Claude 3.5 LLM*, *TablePress*, *GitHub*, and others was both experimental and practical: these tools and platforms can enable and enrich digital scholarship, whilst simultaneously structuring what becomes possible within their frameworks.[184]

The constraints encountered (corpus size limits, linguistic challenges, and facing proprietary infrastructures) became findings. Each moment when a digital method proved to be inadequate or misleading clarified the nature and limits of computation as an epistemic method. Montesquieu's concept of *esprit général*, grounded in contextual particularity and civic dialogue, exposed the mismatch between humanistic values of situated understanding and computational logic that forces meaning into the standardisation of data. This methodological friction demonstrated the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of translating interpretive depth into digital forms intact.

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[183] Ramsay, (2023). *The Politics of Tools*.

[184] Alan Liu, (2012) "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 490-509.

The digital components produced (timeline, map, bibliography, comparative interface, text-generation experiments) fulfilled their instrumental purposes, visually enhancing some elements while obscuring others. Yet they were not seen to generate new interpretive insight into Montesquieu's philosophy. Moreover, the insights they offer lie in demonstrating computational capacities and boundaries. These outcomes demand sceptical scrutiny of absolute claims about computational enhancement of humanities in the field of digital humanities. Drucker argues that data visualisation and modelling must be understood as interpretive acts, not transparent windows onto knowledge.[185] The present work affirms this through practice: technical artefacts can illuminate structure but cannot substitute for contextual human understanding.

The methodological insights, while not additive to Montesquieu scholarship, inform this thesis. They show through practice where computation meets its philosophical limits. Subsequent chapters develop this observation theoretically, examining why computational logic diverges from the epistemological conditions that humanistic enquiry requires and what this divergence means for digital humanities rhetoric and infrastructure.

[185] Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*.

Chapter Four: The Epistemological Incompatibility of Computational Logic and Humanistic Understanding

Digital Humanities often presents itself through techno-utopian rhetoric that digital tools always enhance humanities' practice: computational methods reveal patterns invisible to human readers, scale enables discoveries impossible through traditional approaches, and algorithmic analysis provides objective access to textual meaning. Although the concrete experience of building digital tools to study Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* exposed something quite different. Every computational method required interpretive choices that in some way contradicted the philosophy being examined by forming constructed abstract representations of knowledge in digital form, disallowing for natural, fully embodied contextual human knowledge, or in other words, traditional ways of knowing and seeing. These epistemological incompatibilities found through the fundamental opposition between computational logic and the embodied human knowledge that Montesquieu's philosophy demands is investigated here further.

The inadequacies documented in the methodology prove to be philosophically significant because they demonstrate what Stephen Ramsay identifies when examining digital humanities' abandonment of critical vigilance.[186] He claimed that the post-Foucault generation of humanities scholars understood that everything is wrapped up in issues of power and that technology cannot stand outside the political realm.[187] He further states that digital humanities has been accused of violating this central directive, adopting tools and techniques from an industry with its own distinct kind of "politics of faith" without sufficient critical reflection on their epistemological consequences.[188] Building any computational

[186] Stephen Ramsay, "The Politics of Tools," Digital Humanities Quarterly 17, no. 2 (2023), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.

interface involves continuous interpretive judgment: deciding which editions merit transcription, how to structure bibliographic fields, what temporal events deserve inclusion, which textual features the comparative tool should measure, and how to encode the very human contextual factors that Montesquieu had emphasised the importance of. Each decision reflects theoretical commitments about what constitutes knowledge and what patterns matter. As Johanna Drucker argues, what appears as neutral "data" is actually "capta", which is information actively taken through interpretive choices that determine what becomes visible and what remains obscured.[189] The tools created for the digital object succeeded at displaying certain patterns whilst necessarily eliminating other information. The digital humanities' optimistic narrative, which asserts that digital tools always give more than they take from scholarship and that these tools always enhance and enrich human understanding, contradicts traditional humanities scholarship and methods. This chapter attempts to examine some of the epistemological consequences of computational systematisation that contradict humanistic interpretation.

Tool-Building as Interpretive Construction

Tool-building constitutes interpretive work at every stage. The bibliography required deciding what to include, how to structure, and present the data, which was based predominantly on feasibility within resource constraints. Fields for year, city, language, and publisher enable quantitative patterns to be seen such as publication frequencies, geographical distribution, and linguistic diversity, whilst not representing information about translation practices, reading communities, material characteristics, and reception contexts that can illuminate more about how editions functioned intellectually. A 1750 London translation appears in the database with attributes that distinguish it from a 1751 Amsterdam

[189] Johanna Drucker, (2011) *"Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display" Digital Humanities Quarterly 5, no. 1 (2011),* http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html.

edition, yet the social worlds through which these books circulated, different censorship regimes, distinct reading publics, varying relationships to Montesquieu's political philosophy disappear into comparable tabular data or points. The dataset answers "how many editions appeared in what language?" whilst preventing enquiry into "how did readers in different locations understand the text differently, given their distinct political, religious, and cultural circumstances?" This reflects structural limitations and resource constraints: data forms atomise information into discrete units, removing from view the integrated relationships that Montesquieu insisted constitute human meaning.

The timeline construction required similar continuous judgment. Thirty events spanning 1689 to 1804 represent selective choices about what moments mattered for situating *De l'esprit des lois*. Each selection privileges certain narratives. For example, the timeline's highlighting revolutionary appropriation of *De l'esprit des lois* ideas, such as in the *American Declaration of Independence*, and the *French Rights of Man and Citizen*, merely reports a grand historical narrative about these Enlightenment ideas informing political transformation. Yet this narrative emerges from interpretive decisions that decided to portray significant parts of the historical grand narrative, and not from another perspective or the mere consideration of a temporal sequence that "neutrally" presents history. Alternative selections would construct different narratives about the text's significance, which might be more meaningful for some viewers. The chronological format imposes further argument: that temporal sequence indicates causation, that events possess discrete dates that enable their linear ordering, and that understanding emerges through progressive development rather than through grasping simultaneous contextual factors operating concurrently.

The geographical map embedded comparable choices. Publication locations received markers, but why not cities where Montesquieu lived, locations influencing his thinking, or places where readers formed interpretive communities around the text? The decision to

represent only publication sites privileges production over reception, formal circulation over informal transmission, and institutional publishing over manuscript circulation or verbal discussion. The map displays where books were stated to have been printed, whilst eliminating the human networks and interactions through which ideas actually moved, such as correspondence between readers, salon discussions, university lectures, and political debates that drew upon Montesquieu's arguments. The geographical visualisation makes spatial patterns visible, with concentration in major publishing centres, spread across linguistic regions, whilst abstracting away the cultural context of each location that determined how readers understood the text differently, given their distinct political, religious, and cultural traditions, and historical memories.

These examples begin to recognise what Alan Liu problematises, which is the digital humanities' insufficient critical reflection on its own culture, methods, and the tools it employs.[190] He stated that:

> "...the appropriate, unique contribution that the digital humanities can make to cultural criticism at the present time is to use the tools, paradigms, and concepts of digital technologies to help rethink the idea of instrumentality. [digital technologies are not merely neutrally beneficial instruments] The goal, as I put it earlier, is to think critically about ... everything related to digital technologies, in a way that "scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world." Phrased even more expansively, the goal is to rethink instrumentality so that it includes both humanistic and STEM fields in a culturally broad, and not just narrowly purposive, ideal of service."[191]

[190] Alan Liu, (2012) "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 490-509.
[191] Ibid.

Liu also states that digital humanists should collaborate with science-technology studies to understand more about how the tools are built, referring to David M. Berry in that:

> "In a manner analogous to science-technology studies, David M. Berry asks digital humanists to reflect on their own field as a culture. He writes that "to understand the contemporary born-digital culture and the everyday practices that populate it …we need a corresponding focus on the computer code that is entangled with all aspects of our lives, including reflexivity about how much code is infiltrating the academy itself" (4). This means problematizing "the unspoken assumptions and ontological foundations which support the 'normal' research that humanities scholars undertake on an everyday basis [using digital technologies]""[192]

This shows an awareness of practitioners uncritically adopting digital tools, methods, and even entire cultures, which is thereby misaligned with the traditional work of humanities scholarship which would necessarily involve the reflection upon, and the interrogation of the very methods by which one is said to attain and transmit knowledge. These perspectives therefore share the view that there are unspoken assumptions in digital humanities practice. In cases like these, unspoken assumptions, build the interpretive constructions, silently omitted.

Esprit général: Knowledge Beyond Computational Reduction

De l'esprit des lois' Book XIX articulates an epistemology that is fundamentally opposed to the narrative that computational systematisation only enhances epistemology. Montesquieu's emphasis on simultaneity that climate, religion, laws, governmental maxims, historical experiences, morals, and manners interact concurrently to produce *esprit général* is especially incompatible with the idea that computational processing can only enhance humanistic

[192] Liu, "*Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*" Liu refers to David M. Berry, (2011) "*The Computational Turn: Thinking About the Digital Humanities*." *Culture Machine* 12 : 1–22, http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/440.

understanding.[193] Algorithms operate sequentially, decomposing complex phenomena into discrete operations performed in temporal order. Databases store information in separate fields queried independently: climate data here, religious affiliation there, governmental form elsewhere. As much as some enthusiasts like to think that a computer is analogous to the human brain, containing "memory" and "neurons", it is non-biological and does not have consciousness, which goes beyond such reductive explanations, such as those analogising it with computers. To continue to believe that computations could perform better than all human consciousness (as some digital humanities or techno-utopian narratives would have you believe), eliminates the concurrent lived, embodied interaction of conscious agents (humans) that Montesquieu identifies as constitutive of epistemology, that is, to form the best judgement of what is right in particular human contexts.[194] The general spirit, in Montesquieu's thinking, exists as an emergent property of integrated, reflexive social systems, which is irreducible to digital computational parts, processes, and data within larger global technological Big Tech structures.[195]

This recognition opposes a rationalist confidence in universalism, that, for example, would advocate the position that, with sufficient data analysis, and potentially, by envisioning enough resources to materially enforce laws against people's conscious wills, it is the correct route to a "just society." Montesquieu expressed instead that effective governance requires

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[193] Montesquieu, De l'esprit des lois, Book XIX, Chapter 4.

[194] This critique draws on critical DH scholarship such as David M. Berry (2025), Understanding Digital Humanities. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: https://www.scribd.com/document/743852352/, and Martin Sand (2024), Technological Utopianism and the Idea of Justice. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Available at: https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-75945-1, both of which question algorithmic universalism and the erasure of embodied judgment in digital culture.

[195] Studies have shown that (human) consciousness is irreducible to a digital computer, the brain, and that consciousness is inextricably linked to embodied experience: Andrew Knight, (2025). *Why the brain cannot be a digital computer: history-dependence and the computational limits of consciousness.* arXiv preprint arXiv:2503.10518. Available at: https://arxiv.org/abs/2503.10518; Brian Richards and Timothy Lillicrap (2022) *The brain–computer metaphor debate is useless: a matter of semantics. Frontiers in Computer Science*, 4, 810358. DOI: 10.3389/fcomp.2022.810358; Louise Barrett and Dietrich Stout (2024) *Minds in movement: embodied cognition in the age of artificial intelligence. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B:* 379 : 20230144, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2023.0144.

practical wisdom, that is, embodied knowledge developed through sustained engagement with particular contexts rather than systematic application of general rules.[196] Book XIX acknowledges that human judgment has limits, that some social complexity exceeds what even careful analysis can comprehend fully, and that attempting total rational reconstruction may destroy relationships enabling societies to function. The epistemological implication is profound: certain knowledge resides in tacit cultural understanding, accumulated through generations inhabiting specific circumstances, that defies complete *a priori* conceptualisation in "formalised" principles. This embodied knowledge proves to be fundamentally different from information that databases can store or algorithms can process.

Structural Incompatibility

The distinction between the academic fields of Digital Humanities and Digital Scholarship, as per their self-definitions, reflects what are fundamentally different responses to computational methods' limitations. Digital Humanities often maintains that current inadequacies are technical problems requiring better algorithms, larger datasets, and increased institutional investment, which is suggestive that computational power will eventually overcome all limitations. This embodies what Michael Oakeshott terms the politics of faith: belief in technical perfectibility through systematic application of scientific methods to humanistic questions.[197] Digital Scholarship, as Oxford University articulates on their website, positions computational methods as instrumentally serving scholarship rather than the inverse: "scholarship typically comes first, and digital technology serves scholarship." thus typically prioritising humanistic epistemology over computational

[196] Keegan Callanan (2011) *Montesquieu, Liberalism and the Critique of Political Universalism*. Duke University, Durham. Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/10161/4984; Michael Oakeshott (1962) *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Basic Books Publishing Co; Peter J. Steinberger (2015) '*Rationalism in Politics*', *American Political Science Review*, 109(4), pp. 750–763. doi:10.1017/S0003055415000489.
[197] Oakeshott (1962) *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*.

operations.[198] Technologies illuminate aspects of texts or historical patterns efficiently, but such illumination becomes meaningful only with embodied consciousness, and within scholarship, when it is grounded in disciplinary knowledge developed through years of scholarly formation. This framework explicitly rejects positioning digital methods as a separate discipline, or indeed, prioritising digital humanities over the long-established traditional humanities. By stating that digital scholarship aims "to equip students for innovative work in existing disciplines," it acknowledges the fact that by its very nature, digital scholarship is cross-disciplinary, not limited to a separate and distinct field, but which seeks to advance scholarly disciplines and not to displace them, because they do not “fit” the digital paradigm.[199]

Digital Humanities rhetoric about always enhancing humanities scholarship obscures how its methods, typically developed for commercial purposes, manipulate what counts as knowledge. Tools designed for corporate interests such as business intelligence, market analysis, and user engagement optimisation carry assumptions potentially antithetical to humanistic values. Quantification privileges statistical patterns over qualitative judgment; standardisation eliminates the contextual particularity Montesquieu insists determines meaning; and optimisation, aligning with the Enlightenment ideal of reaching an optimum order or “most efficient” system, treats human behaviour as predictable rather than emerging from embodied knowledge developed through inhabiting particular social contexts. Yet efficient for whom is the key question: this logic primarily serves institutions that profit from predictability and quantifiable outputs, not the plural, lived realities of human agents Montesquieu envisioned. Here, in saying that behaviour is “predictable”, a model is invoked where action is rule-governed, calculable, and repeatable, essentially meaning that human

[198] Oxford Digital Scholarship, "*What is Digital Scholarship?*" https://digitalscholarship.web.ox.ac.uk/what-digital-scholarship.
[199] Ibid.

beings respond in stable, measurable ways to given inputs. This is what optimisation and quantification presuppose: that with enough data, one can anticipate behaviour through patterns. Montesquieu associates such thinking with despotic abstraction, which is the desire to compress human life into uniform causal laws. By contrast, behaviour that emerges from embodied knowledge developed through inhabiting particular social contexts implies that knowledge is acquired performatively, not through formal rules but through lived interaction, habit, culture, and affect. According to embodied-cognition accounts like Adam Benforado's in *The Body of the Mind: Embodied Cognition, Law and Justice*, human reasoning is situated and cannot be reduced to fixed patterns because each act of judgment depends on bodily perception and historical circumstance.[200] In other words, predictability assumes a fixed relation between cause and effect, whereas embodiment assumes plasticity, improvisation, and feedback between agent and environment. A system can't be simultaneously determinate and emergent: if behaviour truly "emerges" from continuous interaction, its context-dependent and temporally open-ended, not predictable in a strict computational sense. For Montesquieu, this distinction parallels his political epistemology: laws must respond to the nature of things, meaning the lived relations, customs, and contexts of human societies, and not impose abstract regularity upon them. Predictability denies this variability; embodiment presupposes it. So the two describe mutually exclusive epistemologies: one mechanical, the other interpretive.

The Politics of Tools and Naïveté of Activism

Epistemological analysis alone proves insufficient for understanding why computational methods exhibit these particular limitations. The question remains: why do digital tools necessarily abstract, standardise, and decontextualise in such a way that eliminates embodied

[200] Adam Benforado, (2010) *The Body of the Mind: Embodied Cognition, Law, and Justice*, 54 ST. LOUIS U. L.J. Available at: https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj/vol54/iss4/8.

contextual knowledge, and have a surrounding narrative that proclaims that these tools only ever enhance human endeavors? Why do they privilege quantifiable patterns over interpretive depth requiring years of humanistic education, and who or what does this serve? The chapter that follows demonstrates these epistemological incompatibilities reflect that it is not merely accidental or experimental that technological infrastructure has the design that suits purposes fundamentally opposed to contextual humanistic understanding. Computing's military origins in command-and-control systems requiring temporal sequencing and geographical abstraction for targeting and logistics, surveillance capitalism's extraction imperatives demanding continuous datafication to enable behavioural prediction and modification, platform capitalism's concentration of power through network effects making alternative infrastructure structurally disadvantaged, and algorithmic opacity preventing the accountability that democratic governance, human autonomy and scholarly intellectual independence require.[201] These forces shape computational methods structurally unsuited for scholarship that takes Montesquieu's embodied epistemology seriously. The epistemological incompatibilities examined here connect to a political economy determining what technological infrastructure exists and what forms of knowledge it enables or systematically forecloses.

[201] Paul N. Edwards, (1996) *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press;

Chapter Five: Infrastructure Politics and Forced Mediation

Within humanities scholarship, digital tools have attracted considerable acclaim for their potential to advance research. Yet, despite considerable investment and institutional enthusiasm, such tools frequently prove incapable of engaging modes of enquiry that demand situated, embodied understanding grounded in specific contexts of thought and practice. The widespread conflation of technological standardisation with pedagogical or intellectual enrichment stems from the underlying operational logic governing most digital infrastructures. These technological priorities are not always congruent with the interpretive and experiential methods that were long cultivated in the humanities. The prevailing narrative concerning digital mediation reflects more than an alignment with corporate motives or the logic of surveillance capitalism. It emerges from technocratic argumentation that imposes abstraction and prioritises quantifiable outcomes, at the expense of human experience and tacit comprehension. The failure of such tools signals a more extensive and persistent attrition of those intellectual habits rooted in sustained concentration, immersion in cultural context, and interpretative engagement, all of which Montesquieu's conception of *esprit général* regards as indispensable.

This chapter investigates the confluence of military lineage, economic imperatives inherent in platforms, the opacity of algorithmic operations, and entrenched dependencies within institutions in computational infrastructure. These factors collectively shape an environment optimised for oversight, behavioural forecasting, and systems management, yet ill-suited to the interpretation that characterises humanistic enquiry. Repeated exposure to such digital systems restructures intellectual activity around discrete information processing and diminishes the forms of contextual awareness essential within scholarly traditions.

During the mid-twentieth century, researchers had conceived of approaches such as operations research, systems theory, information theory, and managerial science to engineer and coordinate the functioning of large technological environments. These methods informed the creation of technological and social control mechanisms, which were systems designed to regulate and direct technological processes according to set rules. Cybernetics, first coined by André-Marie Ampère with "*cybernétique*" in the nineteenth century, meaning the science of governance;[202] was a term also chosen by Norbert Wiener who later redefined it to refer to the science of control and communication in both "machine" and "animal."[203] Both were inspired by the Ancient Greek κῠβερνήτης, (*kŭbernḗtēs*), which meant "governor" or "steersman."[204] In every case there is the idea of social governing, even if the society was referred to as "animal," in the title, perhaps to create a distinct hierarchy between those who govern with and those who are governed by technology. In this framework, technological mechanisms are understood not only as tools for managing technological systems, but also as means of steering and organising the behaviour of people who operate and interact with them. The definition of cybernetics as it applied to technology systems thus highlights how these infrastructures were designed to guide, organise, and sometimes constrain human actions in pursuit of specific objectives.

Military Origins and Cyborg Discourse

The technical and organisational structures that evolved into today's digital infrastructure developed through Cold War military projects devised for command, surveillance, and coordinated response. In the U.S. systems such as SAGE, built to manage air defence, were conceived around the need to process information from multiple sources simultaneously,

[202] In 1834, Ampere, in his *Essay on the Philosophy of Science*, coined the term "*cynbernetique*" (cybernetics), stating, "The future science of government should be called 'cybernetics' ('*la cybernetique*')."
[203] Wiener, N. (1948). *Cybernetics or control and communication in the animal and the Machine*. MIT Press.
[204] "κυβερνήτης", in Liddell & Scott (1940), A Greek–English Lexicon, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

guiding military decisions and issuing instructions at the speed required by their nuclear strategy. These systems consolidated physical technology such as computers, interfaces, communication channels, but also a particular kind of decision-making, one that depended on continual data flow, the suppression of ambiguity, and standardised procedures.[205]

Paul Edwards details how this technological project was bound up with institutional and political ambitions for total oversight and system integration. The functioning of these military systems depended on human operators who, as they adopted routines shaped by the needs of the hardware and data flows, narrowed the possibilities for varied interpretation or individualised judgment about them. In this context, the term 'optimisation' refers to the process of eliminating unpredictable responses and delays, with every element, whether it is mechanical or human, so that all can be expected to follow predictable protocols, in order for the overall system to function smoothly and without hesitation.[206]

The design logic developed in these Cold War environments soon began to influence civilian technology. Manufacturers such as IBM participated in defense contracts, learning to produce reliable, scalable hardware and software for large-scale, multi-user environments. These firms adapted their expertise to commercial markets, offering products that reflected the drive for centralised management and predictable performance. Over time, distinctive priorities became embedded in mainstream digital platforms such as an emphasis on efficiency, standardisation of practice, and the conversion of complex processes into discrete, manageable tasks.[207]

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[205] Edwards, P. N. (1996). *The Closed World: Computers and the politics of discourse in Cold War America*, MIT Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, Scholarly Publishing Office.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the politics of discourse in Cold War America*; Heinrich, T. (2002). *Cold War Armory: Military Contracting in Silicon Valley. Enterprise and Society*, 3(2), 247–284. doi:10.1093/es/3.2.247.

This lineage is technical, organisational, and epistemological. Many large technology companies emerged from, or were sustained by, military contracts and government funding during the historical Cold War period. The architecture of commercial platforms, including their approaches to user management and information handling, continues to follow patterns developed for military applications, particularly the requirement that system operators be able to collect, monitor, and process detailed data about users and system activity in real-time. This logic of transparency is directed towards those who control the infrastructure, not the individuals who use it. The shift from Cold War command systems to digital commercial service was incremental and direct.[208]

The consequence is that digital infrastructure remains shaped by a design culture that was developed through military and industrial priorities. User engagements with texts, data, and intellectual materials are conditioned by this technical inheritance, privileging rapid output, repeatability, and system conformity over careful deliberation for humanistic purposes, allowing for uncertainty, and the forms of embodied knowledge central to humanistic scholarship.

Surveillance Capitalism and Attention Extraction

Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism explains why computational infrastructure exhibits the particular limitations this thesis has identified. Digital platforms depend on continuous extraction and commodification of behavioural data. The purpose is not simply for neutral information processing, but rather it is for making human behaviour predictable and commercially useful. Zuboff distinguishes behavioural modification from persuasion. Persuasion works through argument and consent, whereas behavioural

[208] Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the politics of discourse in Cold War America*; Heinrich, *Cold War Armory: Military Contracting in Silicon Valley. Enterprise and Society*, 3(2), 247–284. doi:10.1093/es/3.2.247.

modification works through designed environments that shape conduct automatically. Platform companies employ behavioural psychology, reward systems, and algorithmic personalisation to produce patterns of action that increase engagement and data production. This design logic of personal data extraction and manipulation, rather than respectful personal understanding, partially explains why these tools fail at contextual humanistic knowledge.[209]

Digital Humanities tools may take part in the broader logic of data extraction, even when scholars use them for non-commercial or academic purposes. This occurs because reading interfaces and other scholarly platforms are typically built atop infrastructures designed for measurement, user engagement tracking, and the extraction of granular behavioural data, which is a technical imperative central to surveillance capitalism. The platform's infrastructure, and not just the scholarly intent, shapes what is tracked. It means that every user interaction, such as edition selection, time spent viewing passages, and query formulation, is captured by embedded analytics (e.g., cookies, scripts, backend logging). These activities are logged automatically by many hosting platforms and may contribute to commercial user profiling and algorithmic refinement, especially when institutional content is delivered using cloud services from major technology companies.[210]

Feeding into this system is the attention economy. As Tim Wu explains, digital platforms work to systematically capture human consciousness through continuous attention harvesting. Wu, and others perceive that contemporary technological environments create states of partial attention, where humans face more difficulty achieving sustained focus. This is subsequently

[209] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*
[210] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*; Bonfils, N. (2025, August 10). *An Empirical Inquiry into Surveillance Capitalism: Web tracking*. arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2508.07454v1; Alberto Monge Roffarello, Kai Lukoff, and Luigi De Russis. (2023). *Defining and Identifying Attention Capture Deceptive Designs in Digital Interfaces*. In *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '23), April 23–28, 2023, Hamburg, Germany*. ACM, New York, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580729.

the very focus that traditional humanities practitioners and humanistic understanding require.[211] The barrage of efforts to harvest our attention in nearly every moment of our waking lives produces what Wu describes as attention fractured “narcissists," whose cognitive patterns reflect the constant distractive and attention grabbing notifications, updates, and interface elements on devices.[212] The deliberate design of these many digital elements that interrupt contemplation, thus train cognitive patterns incompatible with sustained intellectual work.

The coupling of surveillance capitalism and attention extraction means that, even outside of overt commercial contexts, academic users are drawn into systems optimised more for corporate profit and control than for scholarly autonomy or critical thought. The invisibility of these processes, operating routinely below the level of conscious user attention, further reinforces their effectiveness and their challenge to traditional pedagogical and intellectual values.

Platform Capitalism and Infrastructural Power

Platform capitalism, as Srnicek examines, shows how certain Big Tech companies have embedded themselves in digital communication and research infrastructures.[213] Companies including Google, Microsoft, and Amazon do more than simply distribute hardware or software, as each increasingly operates a sprawling web of services that shapes how people collaborate, where information is stored, and how it circulates. Everyday activities, whether adding files, looking up sources, or editing shared documents, generate a steady stream of

[211] Tim Wu, (2016) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* New York: Vintage; N. Katherine Hayles, (2007) “*Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes*,” *Profession* : 187–199; J. F. Benge and M. K. Scullin, (2025) “*A Meta-Analysis of Technology Use and Cognitive Aging*,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 9: 1405–1419; Nicholas Carr, (2010) *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* New York: W. W. Norton; Maryanne Wolf, (2018) *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World,* New York: HarperCollins.

[212] Wu, *The Attention Merchants*

[213] Nick Srnicek, (2017) *Platform Capitalism,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 43-67.

data that accumulates within these expansive systems. Access to such data allows operators to adjust technical features and roll out changes: dashboards are reshaped, recommendations shift, and algorithms evolve, all informed by behavioral patterns aggregated from vast numbers of users operating across different regions and disciplines.[214]

The more extensive the user network, the greater the incentives become for others to join. In practice, this process leads to Big Tech platforms dominating their respective sectors and smaller competitors struggling to gain a foothold, as existing communities, archives, and work processes become intertwined with the dominant services offered by large technology corporations.[215] The dynamic is especially pronounced in academic settings, considering essential tasks like group editing, data curation, and resource storage overwhelmingly pass through infrastructures designed and maintained by these private corporations.

Another related perspective is Julie Cohen's conception of infrastructural power, characterised as informational capitalism. This centres on the idea that digital platforms function as organised arrangements composed of technical systems and legal frameworks that set the parameters for action and participation across social, institutional, and economic life. These infrastructures quietly shape expectations, practical routines, standards of communication, and the allocation of resources, embedding the values and priorities of platform operators within ordinary interactions and institutional processes. Under these conditions, the effects of infrastructural power become visible primarily at moments of breakdown or policy contention. However, usually, they are felt as the background realities of everyday activity.[216]

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[214] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*

[215] Ibid.

[216] Julie E. Cohen, (2019) *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohen insists that technology infrastructure is, fundamentally, a process of evolution through deliberate socio-technical choices that produce stable environments for collective life, yet constrains options and imposes implicit forms of governance. Legal arrangements lend platforms the durability and privilege necessary to maintain and continually reshape these various environments. This mode of power is not dramatic or always explicit, but it is, as Cohen expressed, about the routine embedding of standards, policies, and technical design in everyday operations, determining which practices and connections are possible, and which are not.[217]

Cohen is precise about the legal and policy mechanisms that account for the particular strength of platform power, especially in the United States:

> "To the ledger listing reasons for U.S. authorities' relatively hands-off approach to platforms must be added tacit acknowledgment of the central organizational role that platforms play in the political economy of informational capitalism and deep internalization of the neoliberalized logics of innovative and expressive immunity that platforms and other information businesses have so vigorously asserted."[218]

This dynamic manifests in policies and doctrines such as intermediary immunity and strongly expressed rights for technology platforms, which shield them from regulation and facilitate their rise as centers of organisational authority, allowing these private actors within Big Tech to dictate the terms of exchange, information flow, and access within digital environments.[219]

Cohen contrasts the U.S. situation with the more interventionist regulatory posture of European authorities, describing how those regimes have not only investigated monopoly and

[217] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*.
[218] Ibid. p. 137.
[219] Ibid.

data-harvesting practices but also cultivated robust discourses around the external costs and political implications of platform dominance:

> "European regulators have engaged with the problem of platform power and its complex embeddedness in data harvesting arrangements far more aggressively...competition regulators have initiated several investigations of Microsoft, Google, and Facebook for alleged anticompetitive actions...Data protection authorities...insisted that guarantees of transparency and purpose limitation should be meaningful and that consumer consent has limits [should be regulated by the regulators]."[220]

She explains that these interventions are driven by a willingness to view internet access as a public utility and to insist on meaningful privacy protection obligations. In Europe, state actors have remained open to "new ways of seeing and describing logics of economic domination."[221] In the U.S., attempts to cite these models often attract hostility precisely because vigorous regulation is seen to threaten the free rein of dominant platform providers, who benefit from what Cohen terms a "race to the bottom" in data protection and antitrust enforcement.[222]

Through these examples, Cohen demonstrates that platform power is neither accidental nor merely technical. It is maintained by law or lack thereof, institutionalised practice, and the strategic refusal or acceptance of regulatory intervention. Its operation, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, redraws the boundaries of agency, oversight, and contestation for individuals and institutions that depend on networked infrastructures.[223]

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[220] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*. p. 107.
[221] Ibid. p. 178.
[222] Ibid. p. 178.
[223] Ibid.

When considering the mode of earlier scholarship before the digital age, it becomes clear that such digital dependencies were less entrenched. Research once unfolded in direct relation to libraries, archives, correspondence, and real-life social networks. The shift to technology platform-mediated scholarship does not represent an evolution of simple progression of enhancement; rather, it marks a transfer of intellectual independence, human autonomy, and thus, forms of authority, toward external technological systems. It is a transformation that is still unfolding and remains open to contestation.

One issue for humanities scholarship practice is that extended engagement through digital interfaces might train students or scholars to think of books merely as their data forms, rather than considering them as cultural artefacts, whose meanings can emerge through embodied engagement. Book history scholarship shows how attention to material forms, reading practices, and cultural contexts informs understanding about how texts functioned within societies.[224] For example, Darnton's examination of book history conveys the complex social processes whereby books were produced, circulated, read, annotated, discussed, and repurposed.[225] Chartier's work on cultural uses of print emphasises that much meaning emerges through encounters between textual content and readers' interpretive frameworks shaped by particular cultural circumstances.[226] These perspectives are much easier understood when one is able to discover for themselves the material forms of the cultural artefacts under discussion.

Handling eighteenth-century volumes to perceive how typography shapes reading, examining marginal annotations revealing reception practices, tracing ownership patterns through

[224] Howsam, L. (2014). *The Study of Book History*. In L. Howsam (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (pp. 1–14). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[225] Robert Darnton, (1982) *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[226] Roger Chartier, (1987) *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*. Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

bookplates and bindings, grasping how material affordances enabled certain cultural uses are often lost in digital cataloguing and digitising practices. Digital bibliography offers information about books whilst eliminating tactile, embodied engagement through which book historians develop understanding. When all engagement with publication history occurs through database interfaces, scholars develop an informational relationship to texts. This is not merely less complete knowledge but a fundamentally different kind of knowledge. The practice becomes more about processing data about books instead of experiencing books as cultural artefacts embedded in human practices.

Fostering modes of thought that digital infrastructure does not facilitate as people becomes increasingly difficult and constitutes the infrastructural power Srnicek and Cohen analyse.[227] Scholars cannot simply decide to think differently when cognitive patterns have formed through years of practice within digital systems that train particular modes of thought, whilst also being influenced by a techno-utopian rhetoric that gradually creeps into everyday life, including academic institutions. Platform capitalism achieves structural inescapability through its network effects and institutional dependencies, as analysed by Srnicek, meaning that alternatives require coordination costs that exceed what individuals or small institutions can manage.[228] Beyond costs is a legal framework, often incapable of protecting the kinds of human autonomy and intellectual independence available in times before surveillance capitalism.[229] When technical infrastructure becomes depended upon as it gradually concentrates in corporations accountable only to shareholders, democratic principles articulated during the Enlightenment, such as Montesquieu's ideas of separated powers and checks and balances that respected *esprit général*, it becomes apparent that these so-called democratic principles, if ever claimed by today's governments, are merely rhetorical, as

[227] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*; Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*.
[228] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism.*
[229] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*.

today's governments consistently fail to constrain technological power operating at different scales and according to different logics than societies of the past.

Algorithmic Opacity and Epistemological Transformation

Frank Pasquale's *The Black Box Society* is an exploration of how algorithms shape our daily lives, while carefully concealing their workings.[230] Pasquale describes a reality where the increasingly complex decisions impacting us, whether about our finances, job prospects, or even online reputation are made behind closed doors by systems that are intentionally hard to inspect or understand. For most people, these systems feel like a one-way mirror: everything about you can be watched and assessed, yet the reasons behind crucial decisions remain invisible.[231] Pasquale calls for accountability. He argues that true fairness in these systems is impossible, as long as understanding their workings remain inaccessible. The narrative of unbiased, perfect algorithms becomes a shield for abuse and error, leaving ordinary people vulnerable and voiceless.[232]

Another case of the "black box" feeling is one found through building the "comparative reading tool" for *The Digital Dialectica*'s digital object, being the employment of a large language model. This experience is not a mere technical limitation; it is a repeated pattern in Big Tech proprietary closed tools and often a fundamental feature of systems built with commercial, surveillance, and control purposes in mind, or that are later exploited as such. When these models produce translations, researchers cannot examine the underlying reasoning that leads to particular word choices or semantic interpretations, and its engineers

[230] Frank Pasquale, (2015) *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1-18.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 54-78.

are generally obliged to secrecy.[233] This opacity contradicts the scholarly values of reasoned argumentation and verifiable evidence. Montesquieu's philosophy also emphasised transparent deliberation where arguments could be examined, evaluated, and potentially revised through rational discourse.[234] Though with today's algorithms, such as those utilised by LLM's, the relationship between input and output remain inscrutable in proprietary closed systems.

Another similar example of this algorithmic opacity is in Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression,* which demonstrates how computational systems encode and amplify social biases whilst claiming objectivity.[235] Her analysis of search algorithms returning racist and sexist results demonstrates that systems reflect biases in training data, programming decisions, and deployment contexts. Noble argues that understanding algorithmic systems requires attending to social and political dimensions instead of treating them as purely technical artefacts.[236]

The opacity problem connects to broader questions about knowledge production under digital conditions. Evgeny Morozov's critique of technological solutionism demonstrates how framing complex social problems as technical puzzles requiring expert solutions depoliticises questions demanding democratic deliberation.[237] This orientation transfers authority from collective judgment towards technical experts and corporations employing them. Digital Humanities thus it is seen, often exhibits a solutionist logic when treating scholarly challenges as computational problems that require bigger data and more sophisticated technical methods, instead of interpretive questions that require human judgment that is

[233] Pasquale, *The Black Box Society.*
[234] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*.
[235] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1-35.
[236] Ibid, 25-30.
[237] Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 5-15

grounded in disciplinary knowledge and cultural sensitivity. The assumption that sufficient data processing makes contextual complexity manageable, that algorithmic analysis provides objective access to meaning, and that computational efficiency transcends limitations of traditional scholarship all reflect technological solutionism's core faith.

Montesquieu's contextual epistemology challenges such faith, insisting that understanding requires precisely the kind of human engagement that technological solutionist approaches dismiss as inefficient obsolescence. The question is not whether technology can assist scholarship, but how far a solutionist faith in technical perfectibility will go to cancel out the recognition that some forms of knowledge require human capacities no system can replicate and no mediation can preserve. When algorithmic authority replaces or continually skews human judgment, when opacity prevents accountability, or when solutionist faith dismisses contextual complexity as technical problems requiring computational solutions, scholarship loses precisely the capacities for independent critical evaluation that define intellectual autonomy.

Synthesis

These kinds of technological infrastructural realities demonstrate the incompatibility between the lauding of digital tools as instruments paving the way to some techno-utopian vision and approaching the contextual epistemology Montesquieu advocated for. His philosophy assumes human knowers possess capacities that digital mediation generally and systematically reduces. Understanding *esprit général* requires a tacit experiencing of how climate shapes temperament through embodied presence in different environments, perceiving how religious traditions structure social life through participation in cultural practices, and grasping how historical precedents inform human consciousness through immersion in societies shaped by their pasts. Montesquieu himself developed such an

understanding through years of travel, observation, conversation, cultural immersion, and diving into his expansive library collection. He not only studied but observed and experienced diverse political arrangements and developed his humanistic principles in his political philosophy through his own embodied engagement, instead of merely through abstract information processing that appears to serve increasingly despotically characterised interests.[238]

Traditional humanistic scholarship cultivated analogous understanding through practices now deemed inefficient by computational logic. Years spent reading texts closely until meanings emerged through patient interpretation, archival research bringing scholars into material contact with historical artefacts, language study enabling direct engagement with texts in original linguistic and cultural contexts, cultural immersion through extended research enabling experiential knowledge of contextual particularity, do not take precedence within an ideology of technical solutionism. Scholars who spent years immersed in eighteenth-century materials developed a tacit understanding of period-specific meanings, cultural assumptions, and intellectual contexts that information processing cannot replicate.

Technocratic narratives promoting digital solutions dismiss these practices as obsolete, insisting computational efficiency transcends their limitations. Yet Montesquieu's philosophy suggests that what technocracy dismisses as inefficient constitutes the very possibility of contextual understanding. When forced mediation through computational interfaces becomes ubiquitous, scholars lose not merely convenient traditional methods, but human capacities themselves. Therefore, as could be perceived in this thesis's digital object, the timeline trains temporal cognition, reducing simultaneous kinds of embodied awareness. The map cultivates spatial thinking and oversight versus actual insights developed through a sense of place. The

[238] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*; Robert Shackleton, (1961) *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography,* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, (2022). *Montesquieu: Let there be Enlightenment* (P. Stewart, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

digital bibliography develops an informational orientation, which eliminates material engagement with physical books. The large language model creates output, which may only distract from the task of patient scholarly interpretation. Each hour spent processing information through fragmenting interfaces can erode the capacities for focused contemplation, embodied presence, and sustained engagement that Montesquieu's contextual knowledge requires.

The contrast with traditional humanistic practice proves illuminating. Pre-digital scholars pursuing Montesquieu studies typically spent years acquiring linguistic competence enabling direct engagement with eighteenth-century French, reading extensively in period materials until cultural contexts became familiar through immersion, travelling to archives for embodied encounters with material texts, and engaging in scholarly conversations cultivating interpretive judgment through dialectical exchange with peers possessing disciplinary expertise. This prolonged process developed what Michael Polanyi terms tacit knowledge, which is an embodied understanding emerging through sustained practice that cannot be fully articulated as explicit rules or processed as information.[239] Digital mediation reduces precisely these dimensions when instant algorithmic translation replaces years of language study, database queries replace archival immersion, digital facsimiles replace material encounter, and large language model outputs replace dialectical scholarly exchange. The apparent efficiency gains reduce processes through which humanistic understanding develops. Montesquieu's contextual epistemology demonstrates that what appears as inefficiency constitutes irreplaceable knowledge formation, that patient immersion cannot be shortcut through computational processing, and that embodied engagement cannot be replaced by information extraction.

[239] Michael Polanyi, (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3-25.

Montesquieu's analysis of despotism in Book II describes governance through arbitrary power that subjects cannot predict or protect themselves against.[240] His emphasis in Book XI on transparent deliberation and separated powers aims to prevent such arbitrariness by making governmental operations subject to scrutiny.[241] Contemporary algorithmic governance operates through opacity, Pasquale identifies as deliberately preventing accountability, creating conditions analogous to despotic arbitrariness, which is that it is power operating through processes subjects cannot comprehend.[242] Yet the deeper parallel involves how both despotism and algorithmic governance reduce or even eliminate the possibility of autonomous human judgment. Despotic subjects cannot develop independent thought when arbitrary power makes consequences unpredictable. Scholars immersed in algorithmic infrastructure cannot maintain autonomous judgment when prolonged mediation conditions, and cognitive patterns align with system requirements and patterns. Both represent a form of governance that eliminates the human capacities for self-direction, though contemporary platforms achieve this through interface design and attention capture instead of princely caprice.

The digital tool inadequacies found through building this thesis's digital object saw that timelines impose linear causation, maps abstract cultural difference, bibliographies atomise social processes, comparative interfaces overwhelm users, and large language models produce unreliable outputs, which demonstrated their epistemological limits.[243] This chapter analysed the underlying causes for these kinds of epistemological inadequacies through a political economy analysis of technological infrastructure. It explored how computing's military origins were designed for command and control, surveillance capitalism's extraction

[240] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*, Book II.
[241] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*, Book XI.
[242] Pasquale, *Black Box Society*, 8-19.
[243] Cindy Bellamy, (2025) *The Digital Dialectica: The Spirit of the Laws?* website, https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/bibliography/

imperatives require behavioural modification, platform capitalism's inescapable infrastructure concentrates power through network effects, informational capitalism's effect of legal conditioning, and proprietary closed systems' algorithms' opacities prevent accountability, and converge to shape computational methods fundamentally opposed to contextual humanistic understanding. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that the infrastructure and its stated design accommodate various ideologies that convey a politics of tools representative of a "politics of faith" in technology.[244] The concept of "cyborg discourse" explained how military computing envisioned humans as information machines integrated into technological systems as processable components. The attention economy demonstrates how platforms systematically fragment consciousness, which serves surveillance capitalism's purposes. These characteristics which now affect daily life are supported by the political economic infrastructure of information capitalism, which illustrates how Big Tech continually seeks to inform minds on every level of society, either shaping or circumventing laws and governments when it suits their purposes. However, humanities scholarship, such as book history, for example, demonstrates that understanding requires embodied engagement with material artefacts. The issue is therefore in technology infrastructure characterised by political economic features, which together aim to influence epistemological transformations, for the knower and "knowledge" mediation through computational interfaces. The early definition of the word cybernetic would seem to still apply in some ways to describe this phenomenon, in its meaning for steering or governing both "machine and animal," but instead of a rare occurrence, these ideologies are ubiquitous, now permeating the fabric of societies.[245]

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[244] Stephen Ramsay, *The Politics of Tools. DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly,* Volume 17 Number 2, 2023 Available at: http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/17/2/000690/000690.html; Michael Oakeshott, (1996) The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism, ed. Timothy Fuller New Haven: Yale University Press, 1-32.
[245] Wiener, N. (1948). *Cybernetics or control and communication in the animal and the Machine*. MIT Press.

The adequacy of computational methods for political purposes such as commercial prediction and behavioural modification reflects a structural inadequacy for scholarship requiring a deep focus, humanistic judgment, contextual sensitivity, and transparent methodology. When tools built for fragmenting attention and training information-processing patterns encounter philosophy that insists on contextual complexity that defies computational reduction, the opposition that results is structural and not merely technical, visible through a critical analytical view of digital tools. If Enlightenment values such as those discussed in this thesis are truly valued, as they are currently said to be, while also enshrined in various countries' constitutions, and are taken seriously by those within those jurisdictions, then it would follow that humanists doing digital scholarship are left to answer to what Montesquieu's eighteenth-century scepticism demonstrates about twenty-first-century technocratic faith. To confront the fact that sufficient technical sophistication cannot overcome limitations emerging from the reduction or elimination of human capacities that mediation itself destroys, as many scholars analysed here have done. In other words, humanists must not merely reduce humanistic values to rhetoric or data points but conceive of and advocate for embodying these values in the world.

Digital tools do not fail at humanistic interpretation because they need better technical solutions. They fail because they succeed at purposes for which they were designed, which is integrating humans into systems for command and control, or to extract behavioural data for corporate interests, and concentrating infrastructural power in a monopolistic way, supported by replacing diverse autonomous human judgment with abstract and centralising algorithmic authority. These digital tools' inadequacies for humanistic understanding constitute evidence of their adequacy for the purposes for which the infrastructure was built.

Chapter Six: Digital Scholarship and the Future of Critical Practice

Chapters Four and Five established an epistemological and structural incompatibility between Montesquieu's contextually embodied epistemology and the computational infrastructure's extraction logic. Epistemological analysis demonstrated that methods requiring abstraction, standardisation, and systematic processing oppose the kind of understanding that requires attention to irreducible particularity. A consideration of political economy helped clarify some of the reasons why: computing's military origins created cognitive paradigms that privileged temporal sequencing and geographical abstraction, suitable for rapid targeting and logistics, or command and control. These paradigms persist in contemporary technological infrastructure, serving very different purposes such as surveillance capitalism's extraction imperatives that demand continuous datafication to enable behavioural prediction, modification for profit, and control. In both military and corporate capitalism cases, there was an incentive for power and control, with technology that was seen to have both instrumental features that metaphorically or actually converged with psychology. Platform concentration intensifies these dynamics through network effects that make alternative infrastructure structurally disadvantaged, whilst algorithmic opacity prevents the accountability that democratic governance and scholarly verification require. These forces can be summarised as a military-derived systematisation that now enables corporate interest surveillance extraction, of which platform monopolies concentrate, and opacity shields these from scrutiny. The result shapes computational methods structurally unsuited for scholarship that takes embodied epistemology seriously.

The question confronting digital scholarship concerns not whether critique can exist within surveillance capitalism but what forms such critique must take given these structural conditions. This chapter examines three interrelated problems: how Montesquieu's

eighteenth-century epistemological commitments address contemporary computational systematisation with specificity transcending historical context, what constitutes critical practice when alternatives remain structurally disadvantaged through platform dependencies scholars cannot escape, and whether epistemological modesty appropriate to circumstances where critique necessarily employs systems it opposes enables meaningful scholarship or merely produces sophisticated complicity.

Oakeshott's Epistemological Framework and Digital Methods

Michael Oakeshott's theory offers a useful framework to consider the issue of technological governance today. His political epistemological theory identifies distinct orientations towards knowledge and systematisation.[246] Some approaches, representative of a "politics of faith" in his theory, hold that human perfectibility awaits correct systems, proper techniques, and rational principles systematically applied. In this case, complexity masks an underlying simplicity and technical expertise deployed properly can engineer improvement. Social and intellectual problems yield to methodical intervention. Other approaches representative of a "politics of scepticism" recognise limits to systematisation. Contextual particularity often defies generalisation. Claims that technical methods can resolve questions requiring judgment formed through disciplinary education deserve suspicion.

Digital Humanities scholarship frequently exhibits confidence in technical methods much like a "politics of faith." Practitioners propose that computational approaches democratise humanities enquiry, that quantification increases interpretive rigour, that algorithmic analysis uncovers patterns invisible to human reading alone. Textual meaning becomes more accessible through digital mediation. Scholarly understanding improves when supplemented by computational processing. Traditional humanistic methods require technological

[246] Michael Oakeshott, (1996) *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller New Haven: Yale University Press.

enhancement. Such confidence echoes systematising impulses Montesquieu challenged throughout *De l'esprit des lois*. His arguments against reducing political wisdom to universal maxims, his insistence that laws must accommodate local circumstances, his warnings about rational schemes producing despotic consequences when imposed without attention to particular conditions all articulate scepticism about technical perfectibility.[247]

This investigation treats computational methods as technologies embodying specific assumptions about knowledge. The analysis examines what happens when tools designed for certain ends encounter material that defies their logic. Better algorithms or more sophisticated programming cannot overcome limitations stemming from structural incompatibility. Methodological failure becomes philosophically informative.

The Oxford Internet Institute's framework for digital scholarship explicitly rejects the term 'Digital Humanities' in favour of approaches that subordinate technical methods to scholarly questions.[248] Researchers should determine appropriate methods after formulating intellectual problems, not presume that digital tools inherently advance humanistic enquiry. This 'scholarship first' orientation better acknowledges that computational processing may illuminate certain questions and obscure others. While quantification can serve some scholarly purposes, it fundamentally misrepresents phenomena requiring contextual qualitative interpretation. The present investigation has therefore prioritised humanities scholarly method, in its treatment of digital methods as objects worthy of humanistic scrutiny.

[247] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois*; Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism.*
[248] *Digital Scholarship at the University of Oxford*. Digital Scholarship at Oxford. (2021, October 6). https://digitalscholarship.web.ox.ac.uk/

Four Critical Insights

Montesquieu's Philosophical Pertinence

Montesquieu's philosophical commitments have proved to address contemporary circumstances with specificity transcending historical contingency. His opposition to systematisation applies to any enterprise presuming complex phenomena yield to uniform methods. Book XIX's articulation of *esprit général* insists that understanding requires attention to interconnected factors: climate, religion, laws, governmental maxims, historical precedents, customs, manners. These elements form configurations unique to particular societies at specific moments. Reducing such complexity to universalising principles contradicts what requires contextual humanistic understanding.[249]

Despotic power operates through arbitrary decisions unaccountable to those it governs, concentrating authority whilst eliminating transparency. Montesquieu identified despotism's essential characteristic as governance without separated powers, where subjects cannot understand or challenge the principles determining their circumstances.[250] Big Tech and contemporary algorithmic systems exhibit analogous characteristics. Platform algorithms determine what information circulates, what content receives more visibility, what scholarly work finds audiences. These decisions occur through opaque processes that often avoid external scrutiny. For instance, Frank Pasquale's description of the “black box” of algorithmic opacity describes how contemporary systems concentrate power whilst evading accountability mechanisms that democratic governance requires.[251]

Montesquieu's emphasis on separated powers and institutional checks provides a measure for evaluating contemporary technological infrastructure’s concentration. His argument that

[249] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l’esprit des lois.*
[250] Ibid.
[251] Frank Pasquale, (2015) *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

liberty requires a distribution of authority across multiple institutions that can counterbalance each other addresses conditions where single entities accumulate disproportionate influence such as global Big Tech corporations today, even in countries that have enshrined elements of Montesquieu's thought into their constitutions. Nick Srnicek's analysis of platform capitalism describes precisely such concentration, where network effects create winner-take-all dynamics making alternative infrastructure structurally disadvantaged, and Julie Cohen investigates the legal-governance framework which is entangled with such platforms, in what she calls informational capitalism.[252] Montesquieu's political philosophy thus can address in certain ways both historical governance arrangements and Big Tech structural conditions that enable or prevent the accountability that democratic politics and rigorous scholarship require.

Requirements of Humanistic Understanding

Chapter Four's epistemological analysis, when examined through actual engagement with computational tools, shows the selective process of data that informs knowledge systems, necessarily obscuring some either, un-selected data, or that which is unable to be datafied. This illuminates and clarifies what contextual knowledge requires. Humanistic understanding depends upon capacities that cannot be outsourced to technical processing. Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge describes understanding acquired through disciplinary formation that exceeds explicit articulation.[253] Scholarly judgment about textual significance, historical context, philosophical implications emerges from years of reading, writing, and participating in intellectual communities. Such knowledge inheres in embodied practice. Computational methods require formalisation: explicit protocols, standardised inputs, algorithmic procedures. What resists such formalisation becomes invisible to digital processing.

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[252] Nick Srnicek, (2017) *Platform Capitalism,* Cambridge: Polity Press; Julie E. Cohen, (2019) *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[253] Michael Polanyi, (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3-25.

The comparative reading interface developed for this thesis's digital object exemplifies this incompatibility. Presenting texts, buttons, explanations all in one window frame creates a visual density that feels overwhelming, especially when one is sceptical of its content. The conceiving of the tool had equated accessibility with usability, together with ideas formed along the lines of some dominant narratives of digital humanities, which state that more information supposedly enhances understanding. Yet scholarly reading requires selective attention, the capacity to ignore irrelevant material and focus on significant patterns. However, digital tools often privilege information retrieval over the interpretive acts that transform information into knowledge. The interface makes everything equally accessible, eliminating the hierarchies of significance that contextual reading establishes. What appears as a technical problem actually constitutes something of its epistemological incompatibility. Methods designed for comprehensive processing oppose understanding that requires discriminating judgment.

Rare books exemplify the contextuality that computational methods systematically eliminate. Each copy of *De l'esprit des lois* carries a particular history, that of previous ownership, annotations, binding decisions, and unique physical characteristics. These material specificities inform scholarly interpretation. Book history scholarship establishes how physical form shapes textual meaning, how production circumstances influence reception possibilities, how material evidence grounds historical understanding. The enumerative bibliography created for this project standardises such particularity into database fields: publication location, date, publisher, language, etc. Standardisation enables computational processing. It also eliminates precisely the material evidence that book history scholarship examines, such as the physical anomalies that often prove most historically significant.

Infrastructure's Determination of Scholarly Practice

Chapter Five's political economic analysis explains why digital tools exhibit particular characteristics. The epistemological incompatibilities documented throughout the thesis reflect infrastructure designed for purposes opposed to contextual humanistic understanding. Paul Edwards established how military computing created cognitive paradigms privileging temporal sequencing and geographical abstraction suitable for targeting and logistics. These paradigms persist in contemporary digital tools despite radically different applications. Timelines and maps impose what were originally military-derived spatial and temporal informational organising tools onto humanistic interpretation that requires attention to simultaneous contextual interactions and culturally specific meanings.[254]

Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism identified data extraction imperatives that determine technology infrastructure development. Platforms profit by capturing user behaviour, transforming human activity into data suitable for predictive modelling that enables behavioural modification.[255] Such imperatives shape what becomes available as digital tools. The large language model test shows this logic: the system optimised for engagement metrics produces plausible-sounding outputs lacking the scholarly grounding that disciplinary formation provides. Tim Wu's attention economy analysis extends Zuboff's argument, establishing how surveillance capitalism requires continuous engagement that fragments concentration necessary for sustained scholarly thought.[256] These studies demonstrate a technological infrastructure that is designed to maximise attention capture, thus profit, power, and control, which actively opposes the focused contemplation that humanistic understanding requires.

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[254] Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*.
[255] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.
[256] Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*.

Platform capitalism concentrates these dynamics through network effects that Srnicek identifies as creating structural disadvantages for alternatives.[257] Scholars are thus increasingly becoming dependent upon infrastructure controlled by entities whose purposes conflict with humanistic scholarly values. WordPress and GitHub enable dissemination. They simultaneously extract data that can suit the reinforcement of platform monopolies. This occurs, as Cohen sees, because of infrastructural power that establishes how such arrangements govern by structuring possibility, not through explicit prohibition, but by making certain practices convenient and others burdensome.[258] Within this infrastructurally captured context, scholars face constrained choices about which tools to employ, which platforms to use, and which methods to pursue. These constraints stem from the political economy of Big Tech that is able to determine what infrastructure exists.

Digital Humanities' Constitutive Paradox

The thesis clarifies paradoxes inherent in studying the humanities and humanities' objects through computational abstraction. Traditional humanities scholarship attends to material and contextual particularity: rare book studies examine paper quality, typography, binding, and provenance; archival research considers documentary context, provenance chains, and institutional histories; art history analyses medium, technique, and physical condition; manuscript studies investigate paleographic details, codicological features, and scribal practices. Such attention recognises cultural artifacts, such as books, have physical characteristics that carry historical significance. Meaning emerges through material form situated within particular contexts. The Digital Humanities often lacks an equivalent attention for rigorous material analysis applied to the computational infrastructure itself. Whether this absence reflects scholars not recognising digital systems as material realities requiring

[257] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.
[258] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism.*

analysis or stems from different disciplinary formations where such scrutiny never developed, the usual result remains; that technical systems appear as neutral mediation when they actually function as material artifacts encoding specific commitments about knowledge production.

Digital infrastructure requires reducing and eliminating such particularity. Scanning converts pages to images, optical character recognition transforms visual information into machine-readable text, and databases standardise descriptive metadata. Each transformation necessarily discards information. What remains accessible to computational processing represents highly mediated selections that are determined by technical requirements rather than by interpretive significance. Book history exemplifies this paradox with particular clarity: the field exists precisely to study material particularity that digitisation systematically reduces as a precondition for computational analysis.

These abstractions constitute fundamentally different epistemological orientations from traditional scholarship. Edmond and Lehmann's analysis of digital humanities research identifies five fundamental aporias, or irreconcilable gaps, between computer science and humanities epistemologies.[259] Three prove especially pertinent here. First, they document how the term data itself operates differently across communities: computer scientists define it so broadly as to include nearly anything, whilst resisting epistemological precision, whereas humanists reject data as impoverished and decontextualised yet must employ the terminology to participate in digital research. Second, which closely relates to the first, they establish the aporia between context and processability: humanistic interpretation requires contextual richness, yet computational processing necessarily eliminates context. Third, they identify how power structures embedded in technology systematically disadvantage analogue, hybrid,

[259] Jennifer Edmond, Jörg Lehmann, (2021) *Digital Humanities, Knowledge Complexity, and the Five 'Aporias' of Digital Research*, In: *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Volume 36, Issue Supplement_2, October 2021, Pages ii95–ii108, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqab031.

and tacit knowledge. For example, Archivists lose gatekeeping functions which itself could convey meaning as users search collections directly through digital mediation. Practitioners become distanced from materials through automated systems. The embodied expertise enabling contextual interpretation erodes as computational processing promises equivalent or superior results through computational processing and analysis.[260]

Their analysis showed that humanities fields adopting computational methods proceeded without adequately examining these irreconcilable tensions. Edmond and Lehmann advocate negotiating these epistemic divides. Yet they note the aporias remain invisible within Digital Humanities practice itself.[261] This blindness may be evidence of infrastructural governance that results in computational systems determining what becomes thinkable so that practitioners cannot perceive the constraints they inhabit.

Methodological Choice and Dissemination Politics

The methodological approach for this thesis and its accompanying digital object emerged from a background in philosophical training and critical thinking more than technical expertise in digital methods. This background shaped the investigation's conceptual framework. Oakeshott's distinction between the “politics of faith” and the “politics of skepticism” represented both oppositional sides towards digital humanities’ stated methods. On the one hand optimism for digital tools to enhance humanities’ aims, on the other scepticism about this idea. Building the digital object became the testing ground: would engagement with digital tools validate optimistic claims about computational methods enhancing humanities scholarship, or would sceptical scrutiny reveal fundamental incompatibilities? The evidence documented across Chapters Four and Five settled the question. Scepticism proved warranted. Tools that largely evolved through militaristic design

[260] Edmond, Lehmann, *Digital Humanities, Knowledge Complexity, and the Five ‘Aporias’ of Digital Research*.
[261] Ibid.

and aims for command, later refined by surveillance capitalism, cannot provide the contextual, embodied humanistic understanding that only humans can have, and for which these tools were never built to accommodate, let alone embody.

This conclusion creates an immediate practical contradiction. *The Digital Dialectica* website critiques surveillance capitalism whilst operating through its infrastructure. WordPress hosts the content. GitHub hosts the data. Leaflet enables mapping. University servers connect to telecommunications networks that extract metadata from every access. The contradiction proves unavoidable. No alternative infrastructure exists outside platform capitalism's reach. Scholars cannot effectively go outside of the infrastructure, to Geneva, when all territory belongs to the power being critiqued.

Montesquieu understood the political power structures of his day and what tools and networks of dissemination could strategically be used so he could navigate it. He published *De l'esprit des lois* anonymously in Geneva rather than Paris. He employed false publication locations and dates to evade Catholic censorship. He wrote his Défense when Sorbonne critics attacked his arguments about religious tolerance and separated powers. These evasion tactics worked because eighteenth-century information networks permitted circulation outside absolutist control. Physical books could move through networks that state power could not fully monitor. Anonymity provided genuine protection. Alternative publication locations offered an escape.[262]

Contemporary digital infrastructure precludes such options structurally. All online transactions, including dissemination, generate metadata trails that platforms collect. It thus allows platforms to algorithmically manipulate content visibility to suit their aims, without

[262] Robert Shackleton, (1961) *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography,* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, (2022). *Montesquieu: Let there be Enlightenment* (P. Stewart, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

being perceived as visible censorship by users. Search results rankings influenced by algorithms, or platform design, determine whether particular ideas reach audiences. The infrastructure itself constitutes surveillance. It would seem that no outside exists in our digitally mediated world. So, a contemporary figure possessing Montesquieu-level insights about algorithmic governance and platform power faces far more pervasive structural challenges should they wish to disseminate their critique widely, as it must necessarily circulate through the very systems it challenges. There is no Geneva to publish outside the "state" of Big Tech, very few anonymous circulation networks, and practically no evasion is possible when the most widely used dissemination tools simultaneously function as surveillance mechanisms.

This asymmetry demonstrates a historical shift. The structural conditions that enabled Enlightenment critique no longer exist. Montesquieu could speak truth to power by evading its reach. Contemporary critical scholarship operates within power's total infrastructure. *The Digital Dialectica* embodies this contradiction. It critiques platform capitalism using platform infrastructure. This is not a methodological failure but a material demonstration of Chapter Five's argument about inescapable dependencies. The website's existence proves what it argues: that critical thinkers, such as students or scholars, find it very difficult to escape systems whose purposes oppose their values because those systems have achieved infrastructural totality.

Critical Practice Under Constraint

The question confronting digital scholarship concerns not whether critique can exist within surveillance capitalism, but what forms such critique must take given structural conditions. Michel Foucault's analysis of power and resistance suggests that recognising how systems

govern constitutes a necessary condition for opposition.[263] Sufficient? No. Making infrastructure visible does not automatically enable escaping its determinations. However, scholarship that proceeds without examining the systems mediating its production submits to a certain level of critical capacity. It would most probably accept those systems as neutral instruments. This thesis has attempted a critical engagement between embodied contextual epistemological features and abstract technological structures. It also acknowledges being complicit in the structures it critiques. *The Digital Dialectica* website employs the very digital platforms it critiques. This contradiction cannot be resolved through a methodological refinement within a framework of a "politics of faith" such as those in techno-utopian narratives. It rather constitutes a necessary condition of contemporary scholarship.

Liu's argument for cultural criticism applied to the digital humanities, its tools and methods, provides a model for working within such constraints with intellectual honesty. Such criticism examines how tools influence possibilities for knowledge production.[264] It treats computational methods as cultural artefacts worthy of interpretation. Origins, purposes, and effects all deserve attention. This approach acknowledges that using such tools entails compromises. Recognition of compromise differs fundamentally from uncritical adoption.[265]

Epistemological modesty appropriate to such circumstances recognises limits without counselling paralysis. Scholars can work within available infrastructures and maintain some critical distance from claims that digital methods only ever enhance humanistic understanding. They can employ computational tools for purposes those tools serve adequately and acknowledge what such tools cannot accomplish. They can examine

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[263] Michel Foucault, (1991) "*Governmentality*," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (2004) London: Penguin.
[264] Liu, *Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*
[265] Ibid.

infrastructure politics and utilise infrastructure for dissemination. Such positions accept contradictions inherent in contemporary scholarly practice. The modesty involved concerns intellectual honesty about the conditions under which scholarship occurs.

Contributions

This thesis makes several distinct contributions. For Montesquieu scholarship, it establishes the continuing relevance of *esprit général* epistemology when confronting contemporary technologically systematising enterprises. The investigation confirms that *De l'esprit des lois*' Book XIX's epistemelogical commitments can help to address digital culture's presumptions about knowledge with contextual specificity, and in this way the ideas within *De l'esprit des lois* transcend historical context and still remain relevant today. Moreover, Montesquieu's resistance to reducing political (and legal, cultural, and moral) wisdom to universal maxims provides a framework for evaluating computational methods that require precisely such a reduction. Additionally, his description of and aversion to despotism can also help to address algorithmic arbitrariness and platform capitalism in ways that enrich contemporary technology criticism.[266]

For critical Digital Humanities, the thesis contributes a methodology that treats tool limitations as philosophically informative. The investigation examines what epistemological incompatibilities reveal about both computational logic and humanistic understanding. The approach establishes the value of engaging with digital methods considering the interpretive constructed nature of the process and also becoming aware of what digital tools cannot accomplish, as a means of clarifying and reinforcing what contextual knowledge requires. This methodology extends Ramsay's argument about tool-building as an interpretive practice with political dimensions and Liu's call for cultural criticism of digital infrastructure.[267]

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[266] Montesquieu, (1748) *De l'esprit des lois.*
[267] Ramsay, *The Politics of Tools*; Liu, *Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?*

For a better understanding of knowledge production under digital capitalism, this thesis clarifies how infrastructure politics determine scholarly possibilities. By examining actual tools employed in a specific research context, the analysis documents the particular ways in which infrastructure constrains and determines scholarly practice. This empirical grounding complements theoretical work by Zuboff, Srnicek, Pasquale, and Cohen, considering how their analyses apply to humanities research.

Methodologically, the thesis contributes an approach to digital scholarship that maintains a critical perspective and acknowledges complicity. It establishes how scholars can employ computational tools for limited purposes and examine the epistemological implications of those digital tools. *The Digital Dialectica* website, therefore, functions as a research output and an object of analysis, embodying the reflexivity that critical digital scholarship requires. This methodological self-awareness does not resolve contradictions inherent in working within systems one critiques. It advocates for intellectual honesty about these contradictions.

Conclusion: Montesquieu, Infrastructure, and Scholarly Autonomy

Montesquieu's eighteenth-century epistemological commitments address twenty-first-century concerns about computational systematisation. His insistence that understanding requires attention to human contextual particularity, defying reduction to universal principles, challenges contemporary presumptions that digital methods enhance humanistic enquiry. His analysis of how despotic power operates through opacity and concentration, helps to address practices of Big Tech. His vigilance about a dissemination infrastructure, serving power that opposes transparent accountability, in ways anticipates platform capitalism's surveillance purposes.

The investigation has established that incompatibility between Montesquieu's contextual philosophy and computational infrastructure's processes generates insights unavailable

through either approach independently. Traditional humanistic scholarship engaging with digital methods critically can clarify both historical material and contemporary conditions. Rare book studies conducted through digital tools that defy such study, creates a contrast that clarifies what both rare books and digital tools require for their respective adequate understanding.

Future scholarship addressing material culture through computational methods cannot escape platform dependence or infrastructure politics. Alternatives to dominant systems remain structurally disadvantaged through network effects that concentrate power and marginalise resistance. Yet scholars retain choices about whether to examine such conditions or ignore them, whether to treat tools as neutral instruments or as technologies embodying particular assumptions about knowledge, and whether to proceed with critical awareness or uncritical adoption. These choices determine not whether scholarship participates in surveillance capitalism but whether such participation occurs with intellectual honesty.

The thesis argues for epistemological modesty appropriate to circumstances where critique necessarily employs systems it opposes. Such modesty acknowledges that making infrastructure politics visible provides a necessary but insufficient basis for escaping their determinations. It recognises that working within constraints differs from accepting constraints as neutral conditions. It also maintains that contextual understanding requiring embodied judgment formed through disciplinary education is not always enhanced through computational processing designed to eliminate precisely such contextuality.

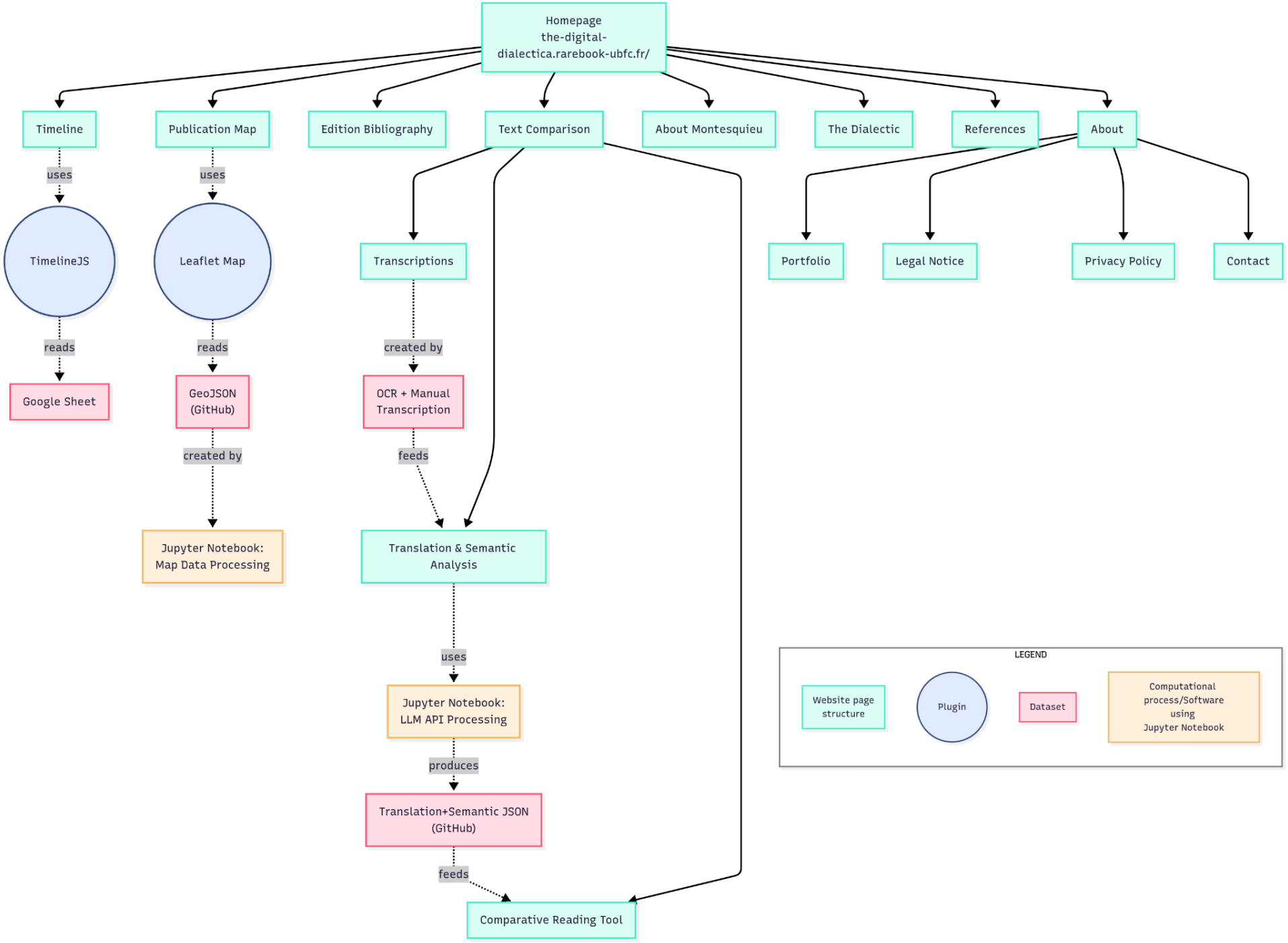
Montesquieu's political philosophy and book history both attend to how material conditions shape possibilities for thought and action. His analysis of how climate, laws, customs, manners, religion, and historical precedents together constitute societies' particular characters insisted on the complexity that defied systematisation. Material bibliography's attention to

how paper, typography, binding, and provenance inform textual meaning likewise attends to particularity, resisting abstraction. Both approaches recognise that understanding emerges through sustained attention to contextual specificity. Digital tools designed for standardisation, abstraction, and systematic processing oppose such an understanding structurally. Recognising this opposition whilst working within its constraints defines critical digital scholarship's contemporary challenge.

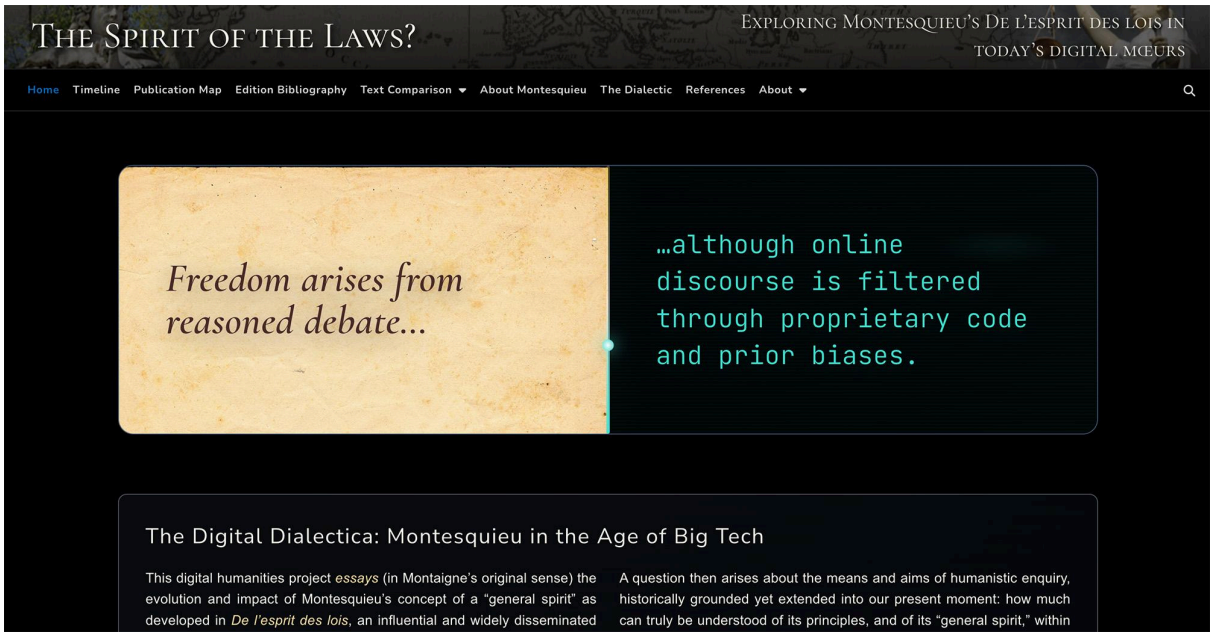
The choice confronting scholars involves not whether to employ computational methods but how to understand what such employment entails. Tools built by military command systems, refined by surveillance capitalism, concentrated through platform monopolies, and operating through algorithmic opacity serve purposes generally opposed to contextual humanistic understanding. Scholars can use such tools for limited purposes. They can maintain critical distance from claims about capacity to enhance interpretation. Or they can adopt them enthusiastically and ignore infrastructure politics that determine their operation. Montesquieu's epistemological scepticism, his attention to how power concentrates through opacity, and his vigilance about dissemination infrastructure serving interests that oppose transparent accountability, offer living resources for navigating digital culture's challenges to scholarly autonomy and humanistic understanding.

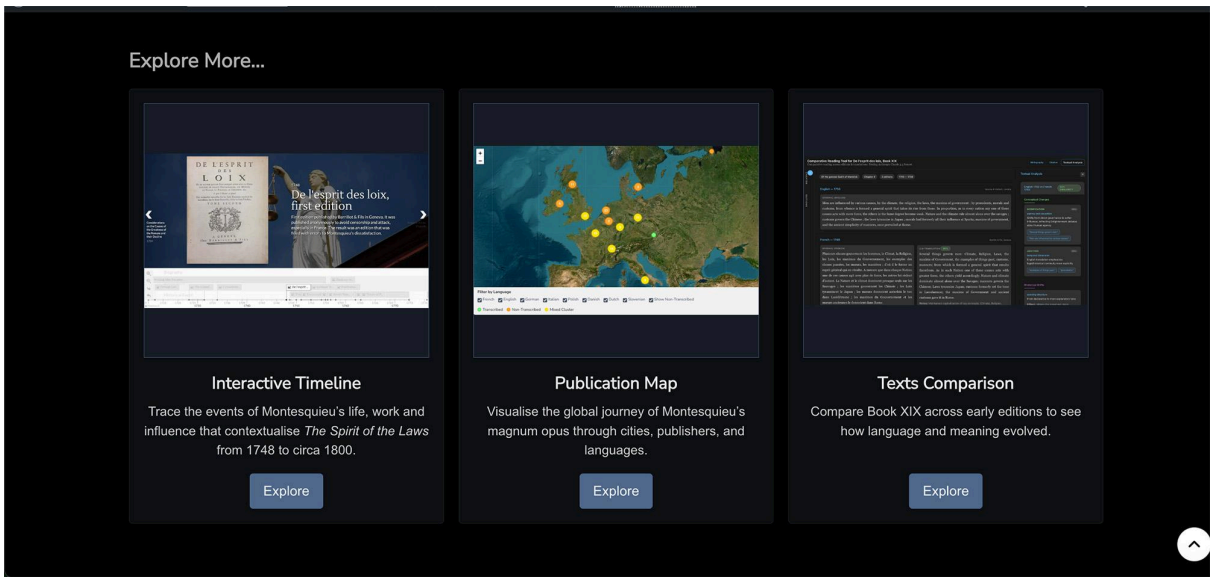
APPENDICES

Website structure and build elements diagram


Homepage
the-digital-
dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/
Timeline
Publication Map
Edition Bibliography
Text Comparison
About Montesquieu
The Dialectic
References
About
uses
uses
TimelineJS
Leaflet Map
reads
reads
Google Sheet
GeoJSON
(GitHub)
created by
Jupyter Notebook:
Map Data Processing
Transcriptions
created by
OCR + Manual
Transcription
feeds
Translation & Semantic
Analysis
uses
Jupyter Notebook:
LLM API Processing
produces
Translation+Semantic JSON
(GitHub)
feeds
Comparative Reading Tool
Portfolio
Legal Notice
Privacy Policy
Contact
LEGEND
Website page
structure
Plugin
Dataset
Computational
process/Software
using
Jupyter Notebook

Homepage screenshots





Homepage introductory text

“**The Digital Dialectica: Montesquieu in the Age of Big Tech**

This digital humanities project explores the evolution and impact of Montesquieu’s “general spirit” from De l’esprit des lois (1748), tracing its editions and translations through the eighteenth century to circa 1800.

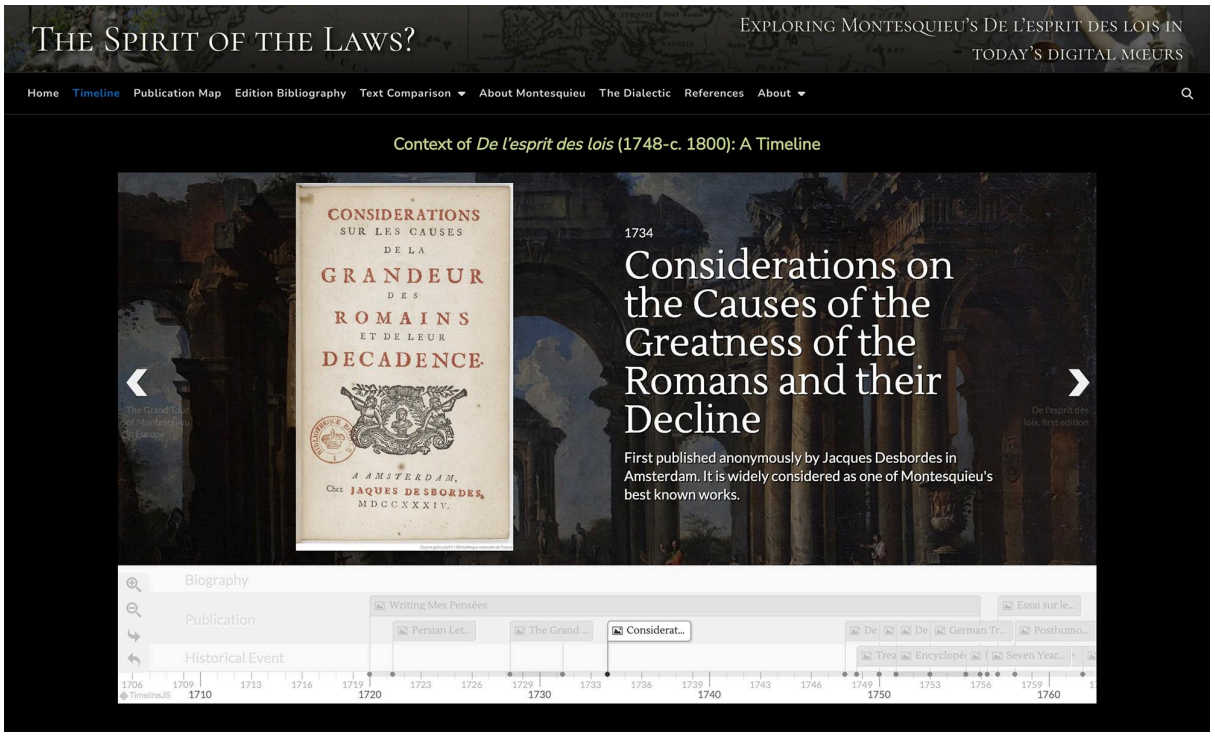
Experimenting with digital tools, such as an interactive timeline, publication map, enumerative bibliography, and a textual comparison of Book XIX (chapters I–XI), it attempts contextualising Montesquieu’s life and work.

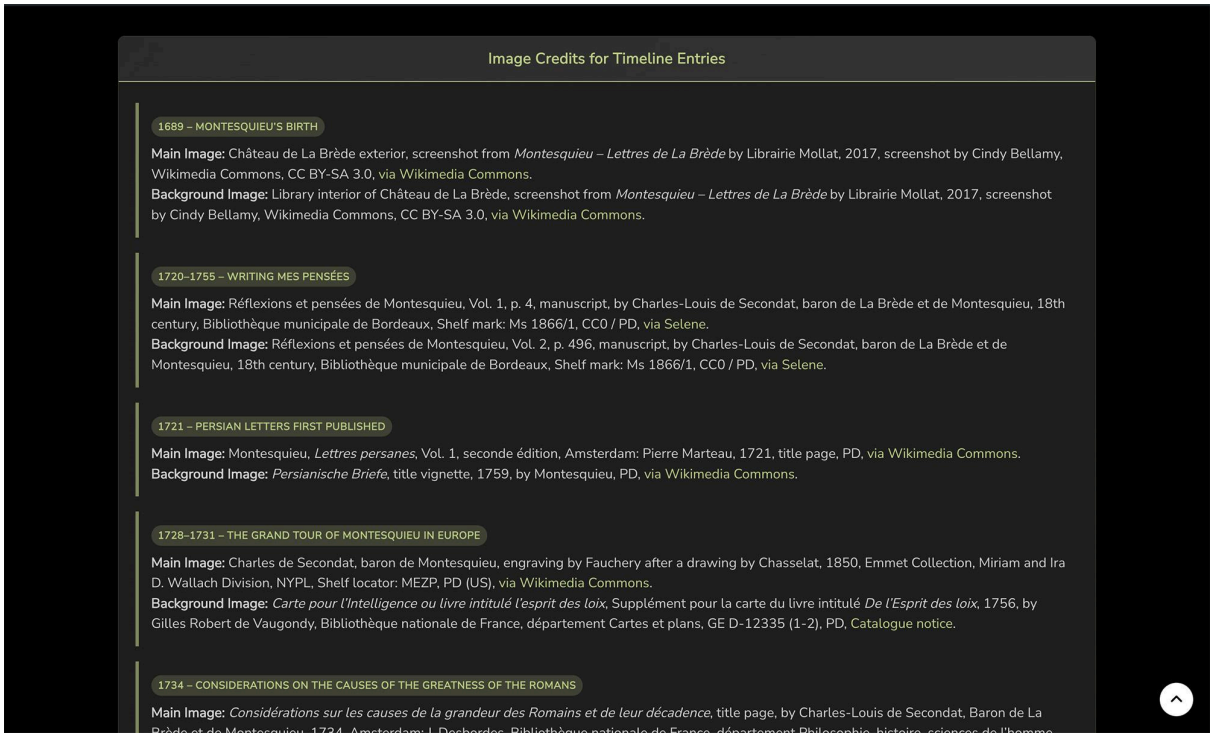
Today, this “general spirit” is shaped by digital forces: algorithms, global platforms, and technology controlled by dominant powers.

The project probes humanistic inquiry in the digital age, questioning tensions between technê (craft) and epistêmê (knowledge), and whether Big Tech’s uniform approach undermines Montesquieu’s emphasis on contextual diversity.

Can we transcend persuasive rhetoric and subtle nudges toward a truth-seeking dialectic using Big Tech’s own tools without capture?”

Timeline screenshots





TimelineJS data esprit des lois

Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
									The Spirit of the Laws / De l'esprit des lois: A timeline	Montesquieu's magnum opus and its reception				De L'Esprit des Lois title page				https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/page-379-Manuscript-lEsprit-dossier-Bordeaux-Municipale-Library-h__ark__27705_330636101_MS_2506_1_16_4EE273961AA44318CD81DE9D1CD8AD00-e1752418773974.jpg
1689	1	18						January 1	Montesquieu's birth	Amid the vineyards and stone walls of the Château de la Brède near Bordeaux, Charles-Louis de Secondat was born into a noble lineage. The estate offered both the quiet of rural nobility and the seeds of inquiry that would later define Montesquieu's legacy.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Screenshot-2025-07-18-at-18.04.22-2-e1752856825259.png				Château de la Brède		Biography	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Screenshot-2025-07-18-at-18.09.46-2-e1752857024573.png
1720	1	1		1755	12	31		1720-1755	Writing *Mes Pensées*	Montesquieu's handwritten '*Pensées*' or thoughts were compiled in notebooks with the help of secretaries from 1720 to 1755, with the intention to be made into a publication.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/pensees-vol-1-p-4-Selene-bibliotheque-ark__27705_330636101_MS_1866_1_v0004.jpg				Mes Pensees volume 1 page 4		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/ark__27705_330636101_MS_1866_2_v0496-scaled.jpg
1721	5	10							*Persian Letters* first published	*Lettres Persanes* was an immediate sensation in Europe, recounting the experiences of two fictional Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, who spend several years in France under Louis XIV and the Regency.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0c/Lettres_persanes_-_seconde_%C3%A9dition_-_tome_I.jpg				Lettres Persanes 1721 title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Persianische_Briefe.jpg
1728	4	5		1731	5	31		1728-1731	The Grand Tour of Montesquieu in Europe	Montesquieu travels to Italy, France, Vienna, Hungary (Slovakia), then in Italy, Germany, Holland and England, discovering arts, culture, political systems, different environments and had diplomatic aspirations. This experience influenced Montesquieu's magnum opus. See a modern reconstruction of his travels.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/00/Montesquieu_%28Gravure_NYPL%29_5.jpg				Supplement Map with The Spirit of the Laws, by the Sr Robert de Vaugondy, 1756.		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Carte_pour_lIntelligence_ou_livre_2-e1752414154374.jpg

TimelineJS data esprit des lois

Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
1734								1734	Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline	First published anonymously by Jacques Desbordes in Amsterdam. It is widely considered as one of Montesquieu's best known works.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Considerations_sur_les_causes_de_.Montesquieu_1689-1755_btv1b8613371v_7.jpeg				Title page of Considerations		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/8a/La_Pr%C3%A9dication_d%27un_ap%C3%B4tre_dans_des_ruines_d%27architecture_d%27ordre_dorique_-_Giovanni_Paolo_Panini_-_Mus%C3%A9e_du_Louvre_Peintures_INV_408_%3B_MR_372.jpg/1024px-La_Pr%C3%A9dication_d%27un_ap%C3%B4tre_dans_des_ruines_d%27architecture_d%27ordre_dorique_-_Giovanni_Paolo_Panini_-_Mus%C3%A9e_du_Louvre_Peintures_INV_408_%3B_MR_372.jpg
1748	1	1						1748	*De l'esprit des loix*, first edition	First edition published by Barrillot & Fils in Geneva. It was published anonymously to avoid censorship and attack, especially in France. The result was an edition that was filled with errors to Montesquieu's dissatisfaction.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f4/Montesquieu%2C_De_l%27Esprit_des_loix_%281st_ed%2C_1748%2C_vol_2%2C_title_page%29.jpg/960px-Montesquieu%2C_De_l%27Esprit_des_loix_%281st_ed%2C_1748%2C_vol_2%2C_title_page%29.jpg				First edition of Montesquieu's magnum opus		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/jurisdiction-677940_1920.jpg
1748	9	10						Septembe	*Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle*	End of War of Austrian Succession, reshaping European balance of power as Montesquieu's work enters circulation. Major political restructuring coincides with the spread of new political ideas, see Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.	https://the-digital-dia				War of The Austrian Succession Collage		Historical Event	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/War_of_The_Austrian_Succesion_Collage_1-copy-scaled.jpg
1750	1	1						1750	*Défense de l'esprit des loix*	Montesquieu published *Defence de l'esprit des loix* responding to critics and anticipated potential future criticism.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Montesquieu_Defense.jpg				Defence of De l'Esprit des lois title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b7/Vernet-port-Bordeaux.jpg

TimelineJS data esprit des lois

Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
1750	1	1						1750	First English Translation	*The Spirit of the Laws* published by Nourse and Vaillant in England. Translated by Thomas Nugent based on the 1748 first edition, making Montesquieu's ideas accessible to the English-speaking world. Again, Montesquieu was dissatisfied with the published outcome of this translation.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1750-English-titlepage.jpeg				English edition title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/26/Canaletto_-_The_Thames_from_the_Terrace_of_Somerset_House%2C_Looking_toward_St._Paul%27s_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg/1280px-Canaletto_-_The_Thames_from_the_Terrace_of_Somerset_House%2C_Looking_toward_St._Paul%27s_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg
1750	1	1						1750	Italian Translation Begins	*Spirito delle leggi* published by Simone in Italian States. The work had notable diffusion in Italy, with translation starting immediately after its 1748 release, though it was met with censorship soon after.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1750-Italian-titlepage.jpeg				First Italian Edition title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/Giuseppe_Zocchi_-_The_Piazza_della_Signoria_in_Florence_-_WGA25992.jpg
1750	1	1						1750	Corrected French Edition	*De l'esprit des loix* published by Huart et Moreau in Paris, though printed 'Barrillot & Fils, Geneve'. Corrected by Montesquieu himself, he described it as the most exact edition.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/De-lesprit-des-loix-1750-titlepage.jpeg				De l'esprit des loix title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a6/Nicolas-Jean-Baptiste_Raguenet%2C_A_View_of_Paris_from_the_Pont_Neuf_-_Getty_Museum.jpg/960px-Nicolas-Jean-Baptiste_Raguenet%2C_A_View_of_Paris_from_the_Pont_Neuf_-_Getty_Museum.jpg
1751	1	1						1751	*De l'esprit des lois* on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*	The Roman Catholic Church added *De l'esprit des lois* to its *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books)	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d5/Index_librorum_prohibitorum_Benedicti_XIV_1758._Frontispicium.jpg/500px-Index_librorum_prohibitorum_Benedicti_XIV_1758._Frontispicium.jpg				Index librorum prohibitorum, 1758 roman edition, frontispiece		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4b/Giovanni_Paolo_Panini%2C_Interior_of_Saint_Peter%27s%2C_Rome%2C_c._1754%2C_NGA_50884.jpg/979px-Giovanni_Paolo_Panini%2C_Interior_of_Saint_Peter%27s%2C_Rome%2C_c._1754%2C_NGA_50884.jpg
1751	1	1		1772	12	1		1751-1772	*Encyclopédie* published in France	Diderot and d'Alembert begin publishing the *Encyclopédie*, part of the broader 'Enlightenment', a defined historical cultural and intellectual movement across Europe.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2b/Encyclopedie_de_D%27Alembert_et_Diderot_-_Premiere_Page_-_ENC_1-NA5.jpg/500px-Encyclopedie_de_D%27Alembert_et_Diderot_-_Premiere_Page_-_ENC_1-NA5.jpg				Encyclopédie title page		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/ec/Catherine_Lusurier_-_Jean_Le_Rond_d%27Alembert.jpg/960px-Catherine_Lusurier_-_Jean_Le_Rond_d%27Alembert.jpg

TimelineJS data esprit des lois

Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
1753	1	1						1753	German Translation	*Vom Geist der Gesetze* published in German States, bringing Montesquieu's ideas to German-speaking territories during a period of political fragmentation.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1753-German-edition-vol-2-title-page.jpeg				German edition title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/06/Frankfurt_am_Main_von_Westen_18_Jh.jpg/1280px-Frankfurt_am_Main_von_Westen_18_Jh.jpg
1755	2	10						February 1	Montesquieu's Death	Death of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu in Paris. Author's death marks transition to posthumous reception and revision of his work.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Montesquieu-death-timeline-pic.jpg				Statue of Montesquieu		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/Les_salons_au_XVIIIe_si%C3%A8cle_-_Histoire_Image.jpg
1756	5	17						May 17, 1	Seven Years' War Begins	Global conflict testing theories of international relations and governance. War provides real-world laboratory for Montesquieu's theories on international relations.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/30/Seven_Years%27_War_Collage.jpg/1024px-Seven_Years%27_War_Collage.jpg				Seven Years' War Collage		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/43/Druck_-_Schlacht_bei_Warburg%2C_31._Juli_1760-2.jpg/1280px-Druck_-_Schlacht_bei_Warburg%2C_31._Juli_1760-2.jpg
1757								1757	*Essai sur le goût* (*Essay on Taste*, published posthumously in 1757)	Montesquieu's *Essai sur le goût* published posthumously in the *Encyclopédie*, 1757, from an unfinished fragment, explores the nature of taste in relation to pleasure and aesthetics. Montesquieu had requested to write on 'Taste' instead of 'Democracy' and 'Despotism'.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Manuscript-fragment-Essay-on-Taste-Municipale-library-Bordeaux-ark__27705_330636101_MS_2194_v0001.jpg				Plaisir fondé sur la raison. Fragment autographe de Essai sur le goût / Pleasure based on reason. Autograph fragment of Essay on Taste		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Giulio-Romano-Vault.jpg
1758	1	1						1758	Posthumous Revision	*De l'esprit des lois* published by Arkstée & Merkus, revised and corrected after Montesquieu's death in 1755. Demonstrates continued scholarly attention to the work.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Oeuvres_de_Monsieur_de_Montesquieu_1758-titlepage.jpeg				Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu 1758 title page		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/page-379-Manuscript-lEsprit-dossier-Bordeaux-Municipale-Library-h__ark__27705_330636101_MS_2506_1_16_4EE273961AA44318CD81DE9D1CD8AD00-e1752418773974.jpg
1762	1	1						1762	Rousseau's Response	Publication of *Du contrat social* by Rousseau, engaging with Montesquieu's ideas in key Enlightenment dialogue on political theory.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1762-Rousseau-Social-Contract-title-page.jpeg				1762 Rousseau Social Contract title page		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b7/Jean-Jacques_Rousseau_%28painted_portrait%29.jpg/500px-Jean-Jacques_Rousseau_%28painted_portrait%29.jpg
1763	2	10						February 1	*Treaty of Paris*	End of Seven Years' War, reshaping colonial empires. Major geopolitical changes affect reception of political theory across Europe and colonies.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Treaty_of_Paris_%281783%29.jpg				Allegory on the Peace of Paris		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Treaty_of_Paris_by_Benjamin_West_1783.jpg

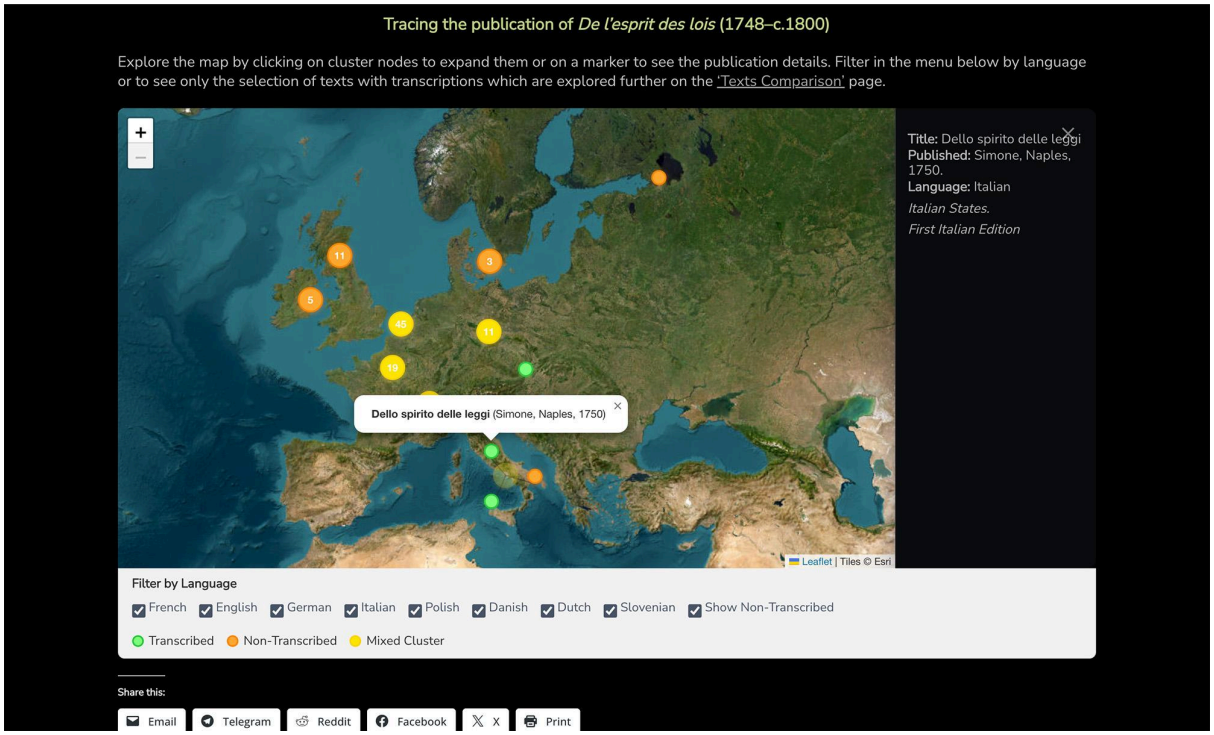
TimelineJS data esprit des lois

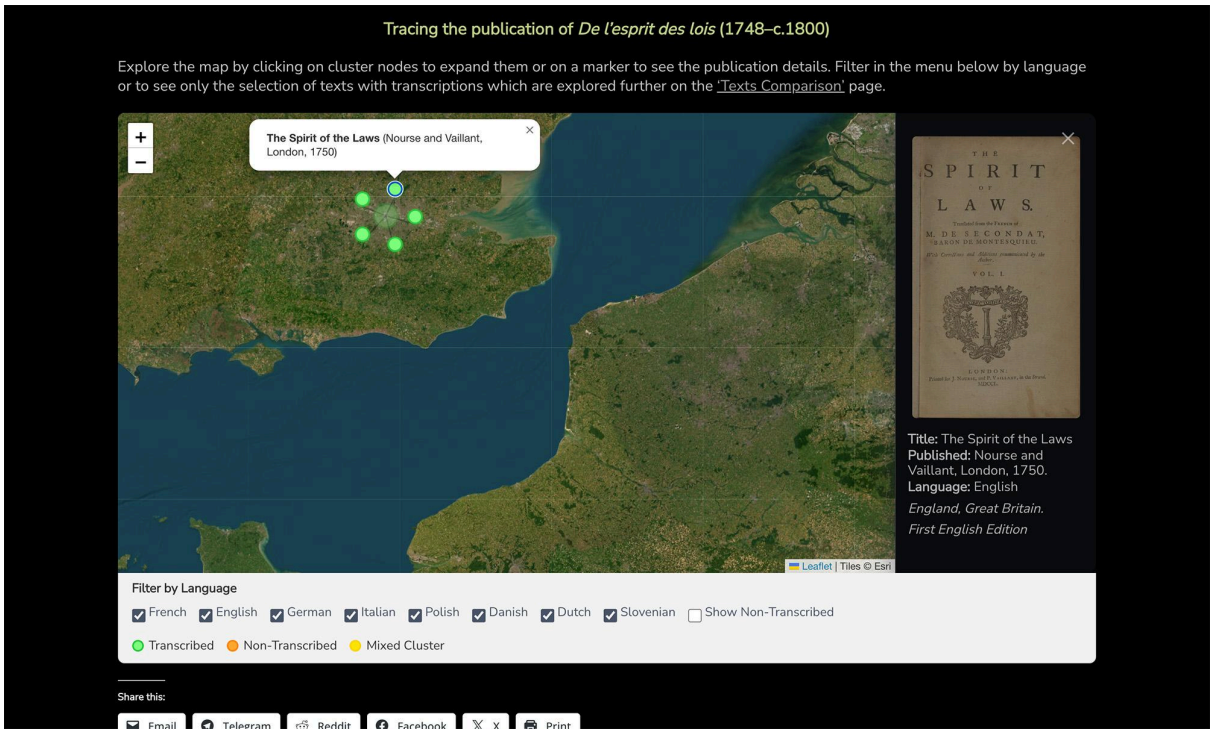
Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
1776	7	4						July 4, 177	American Independence, United States *Declaration of Independence*	American colonies declare independence, directly influenced by Montesquieu's separation of powers theory. Practical application of his political philosophy in founding documents.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8f/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence.jpg				United States Declaration of Independence document		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d6/Writing_the_Declaration_of_Independence_1776_cph.3g09904.jpg/960px-Writing_the_Declaration_of_Independence_1776_cph.3g09904.jpg
1777	1	1						1777	Genovesi's Italian Translation	*Spirito Delle Leggi* published by D. Terres in Italy. Translated by Antonio Genovesi (1712-1769), a leading figure in the Italian Enlightenment.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1777-Italian-title-page.jpeg				1777 Italian Spirito Delle Leggi title page		Publication	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Antonio_Genovesi._C._Piotti_Pirola_sculp-e1752838624191.jpg
1777	1	1						1777	Polish Translation	*Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo* published by Michał Gröll (1722–1798) in Leipzig and Dresden. Demonstrates the work's reach into Eastern European intellectual circles.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1777-Polish-title-page.png				Title page of volume I, Polish edition		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6c/Bellotto_Wilan%C3%B3w_Palace_01.jpg/1280px-Bellotto_Wilan%C3%B3w_Palace_01.jpg
1787	5	25		1787	9	17		May 25, 1	Constitutional Convention	American founders convene to draft constitution, heavily influenced by Montesquieu's separation of powers theory. Direct application of his political philosophy in constitutional design.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b0/%27The_Adoption_of_the_U.S._Constitution_in_Congress_at_Independence_Hall%2C_Philadelphia%2C_Sept._17%2C_1787%27_%281935%29%2C_by_John_H._Froehlich.jpg/960px-%27The_Adoption_of_the_U.S._Constitution_in_Congress_at_Independence_Hall%2C_Philadelphia%2C_Sept._17%2C_1787%27_%281935%29%2C_by_John_H._Froehlich.jpg				'The Adoption of the U.S. Constitution in Congress at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Sept. 17, 1787' (1935), by John H. Froehlich. Painting.		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/ed/Detail%2C_crest_rail_of_the_Rising_Sun_Chair_%28bf806374-de1b-44fa-becf-c1a891d397cc%29.jpg/1280px-Detail%2C_crest_rail_of_the_Rising_Sun_Chair_%28bf806374-de1b-44fa-becf-c1a891d397cc%29.jpg
1789	7	14						July 14, 1	French Revolution Begins	Storming of the Bastille begins French Revolution. Revolution tests and transforms Montesquieu's political theories in practice.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/17/Jean-Baptiste_Lallemand_-_La_prise_de_la_Bastille%2C_le_14_juillet_1789_-_P1718_-_Mus%C3%A9e_Carnavalet.jpg/1280px-Jean-Baptiste_Lallemand_-_La_prise_de_la_Bastille%2C_le_14_juillet_1789_-_P1718_-_Mus%C3%A9e_Carnavalet.jpg				Jean-Baptiste Lallemand: La prise de la Bastille (Storming of the Bastille), le 14 juillet 1789, circa 1789, oil on canvas		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/59/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Man_and_of_the_Citizen_in_1789_cropped_header.jpg/1280px-Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Man_and_of_the_Citizen_in_1789_cropped_header.jpg

TimelineJS data esprit des lois

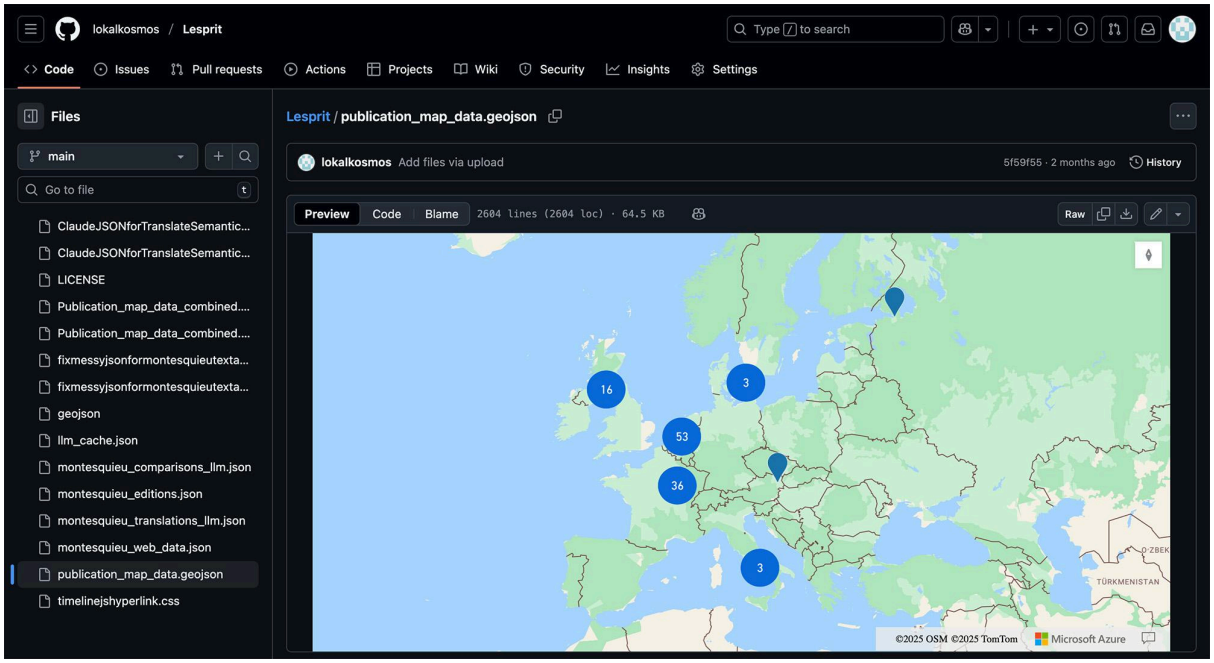
Year [1]	Month [2]	Day [3]	Time [4]	End Year [5]	End Month [6]	End Day [7]	End Time [8]	Display Date [9]	Headline [10]	Text [11]	Media [12]	Media Credit [13]	Media Caption [14]	Media Thumbnail [15]	Alt Text	Type [16]	Group [17]	Background [18]
1791	9	3						September	*French Constitution of 1791*	First *French constitution* attempts separation of powers. Practical implementation of Montesquieu's theories in revolutionary France.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Constitution_de_1791,_Page_1_-_Archives_Nationales_-_AE-I-10-1.jpg				*Constitution française de 1791*: décret de l'Assemblée nationale du 3 septembre 1791, précédé de la *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. / *French Constitution of 1791*: Decree of the National Assembly of September 3, 1791, preceded by the *Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights*.		Historical Event	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Proclamation_Constitution_1791_Musee_de_la_Revolution_francaise_-_Vizille-e1752847503949.jpg
1794	1	1						1794	Transatlantic Edition	*The Spirit of the Laws* 5th Edition published by James Evans in Britain with North American distributors. Demonstrates transatlantic circulation of political ideas.	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1794-English-ed.-Evans-volume-2-title-page.jpeg				1794 English ed. Evans volume 2 title page		Publication	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/12/Thomas_Luny_-_A_merchant_ship_signaling_for_a_pilot_off_the_cliffs_of_Dover.jpg/1024px-Thomas_Luny_-_A_merchant_ship_signaling_for_a_pilot_off_the_cliffs_of_Dover.jpg
1799	11	9						November	Napoleon's Coup	Napoleon seizes power, challenging republican ideals. Authoritarian turn tests Montesquieu's warnings about despotism and concentration of power.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/29/Buonaparte_closing_the_farce_of_Egalit%C3%A9.jpg/1024px-Buonaparte_closing_the_farce_of_Egalit%C3%A9.jpg				Exit libertè a la francois!—or—Buonaparte closing the farce of Egalitè, at St. Cloud near Paris Novr. 10th. 1799, caricature by James Gillray		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/44/Bouchot_-_Le_general_Bonaparte_au_Conseil_des_Cinq-Cents.jpg/961px-Bouchot_-_Le_general_Bonaparte_au_Conseil_des_Cinq-Cents.jpg
1800	1	1						1800	*Complete Works* Published	A three-volume English edition of Montesquieu's works, published by Vernor & Hood in London, consolidated his writings for Anglophone readers. Part of the late-18th-century British book trade effort to systematize Enlightenment authors, it reflects commercial canonization rather than critical scholarship, which emerged later in 19th-century annotated editions (e.g., Didot, 1827–1846).	https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-works-of-M.-de-Secondat-Baron-de-Montesquieu.-Translated-from-the-French.-Vernor-and-Hood-1800-title-page-e1752412182118.png				The works of M. de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. Translated from the French. Vernor and Hood 1800 title page		Publication	https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_%27Temple_of_the_Muses%27_bookstore,_London,_England_1809.jpg
1804	3	21						March 21,	Napoleonic Code	*French Civil Code* established, influenced by Montesquieu's legal philosophy. Legal codification reflects Enlightenment principles despite authoritarian context.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b2/Speyer_%28DerHexer%29_2010-12-19_051.jpg				Photo of the Napoleonic code in the Historical Museum of the Palatinate, Speyer.		Historical Event	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/41/Pr%C3%A9sentation_du_Code_civil_au_Conseil_d%E2%80%99%C3%89tat.jpg/981px-Pr%C3%A9sentation_du_Code_civil_au_Conseil_d%E2%80%99%C3%89tat.jpg

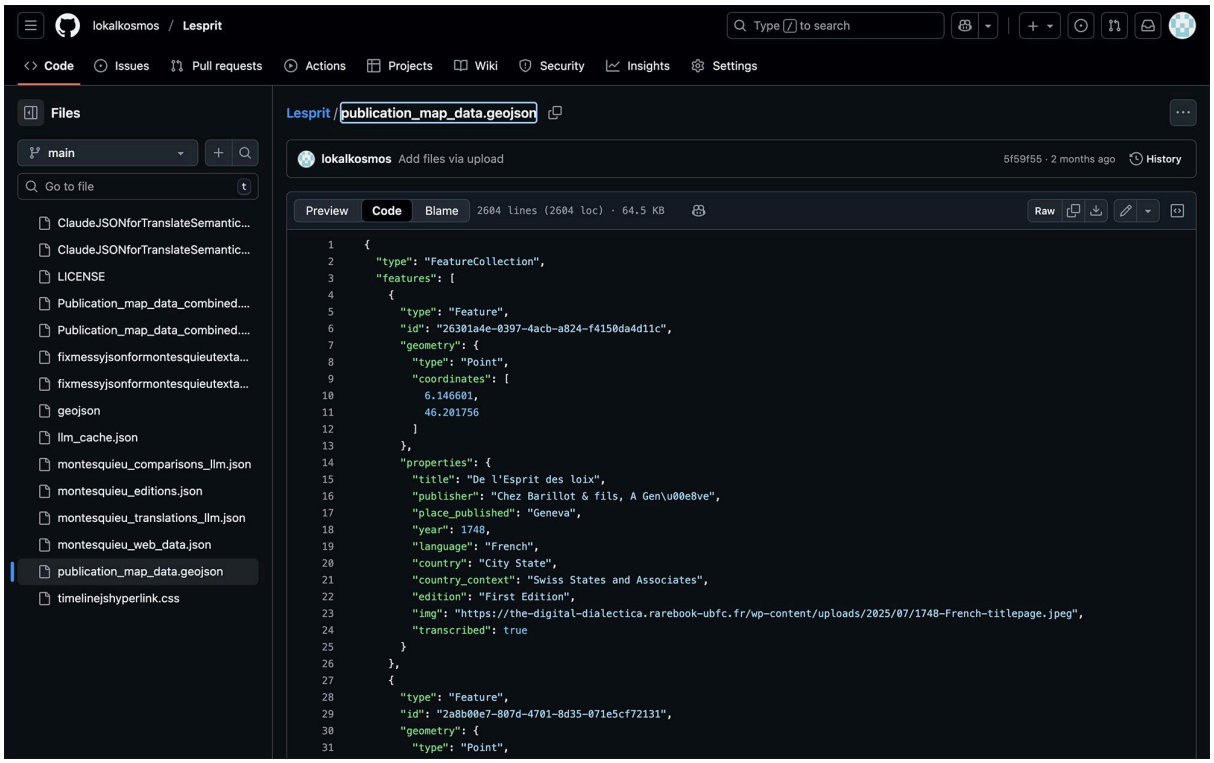
Publication Map screenshots

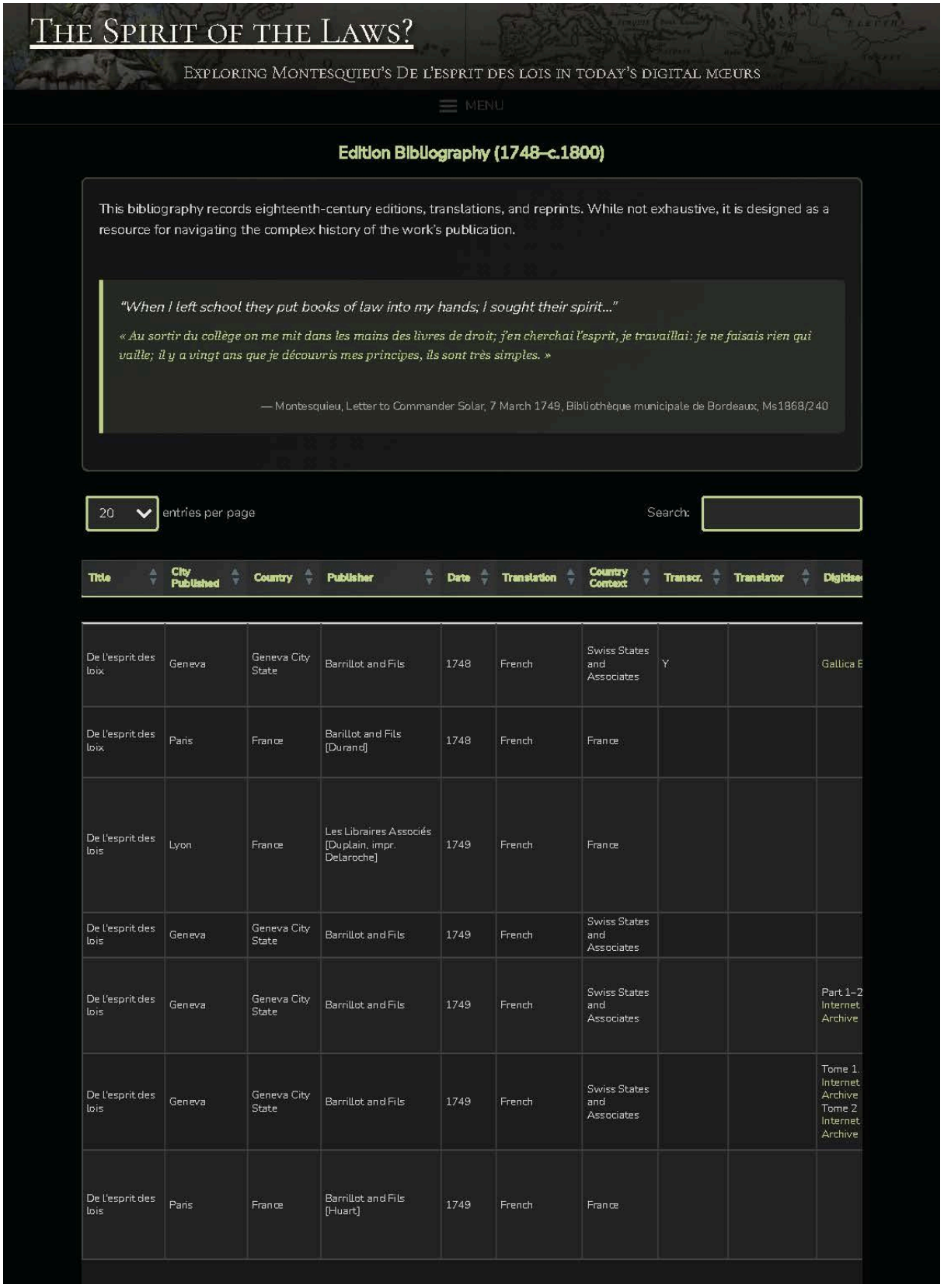




Github view of hosted data (geoJSON) for the Publication Map







THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS?

EXPLORING MONTESQUIEU'S DE L'ESPRIT DES LOIS IN TODAY'S DIGITAL MŒURS

MENU

Edition Bibliography (1748–c.1800)

This bibliography records eighteenth-century editions, translations, and reprints. While not exhaustive, it is designed as a resource for navigating the complex history of the work's publication.

> *"When I left school they put books of law into my hands; I sought their spirit..."*
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> *« Au sortir du collège on me mit dans les mains des livres de droit; j'en cherchai l'esprit, je travaillai: je ne faisais rien qui vaille; il y a vingt ans que je découvris mes principes, ils sont très simples. »*
>
> — Montesquieu, Letter to Commander Solar, 7 March 1749, Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux, Ms1868/240

20 entries per page

Search:

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitise
De l'esprit des loix	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1748	French	Swiss States and Associates	Y		Gallica E
De l'esprit des loix	Paris	France	Barillot and Fils [Durand]	1748	French	France			
De l'esprit des lois	Lyon	France	Les Libraires Associés [Duplain, impr. Delaroche]	1749	French	France			
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates			
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates			Part 1–2 Internet Archive
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates			Tome 1 Internet Archive Tome 2 Internet Archive
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1749	French	France			

De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1749	French	France			
De l'esprit des lois	London	England	Barrillot and Fils [Nourse]	1749	French	Great Britain			
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	La Compagnie	1749	French	United Provinces			
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Chatelain	1749	French	United Provinces			Tome 2. Internet Archive Tome 3. Internet Archive
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barillot and Fils [Durand]	1749	French	France			
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1750	English	Great Britain	Y	Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Gale dig edition. Vol. 1 In Archive Vol. 2 In Archive
Lo spirito delle leggi	Naples	Italian States	Simone	1750	Italian	Italian States	Y	Giuseppe Maria Mecatti	Tome 1. byterfly Tome 2. Google E
De l'esprit des lois	Edinburgh	Scotland	Hamilton and Balfour	1750	French	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2.In Archive
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart and Moreau]	1750	French	France	Y		Tome 2 Google E Tome 3 Internet Archive
The Spirit of the Laws	Dublin	Ireland	Dublin: G. and A. Ewing, and Faulkner	1751	English	Ireland			Vol. 1. Internet Archive. Vol. 2. Internet Archive
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1751	French	France			
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1751	French	France			
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1752	English	Great Britain		Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2.In Archive

Edit

Showing 1 to 20 of 113 entries

Edition Bibliography - full dataset exported from Tablepress plugin

This is a preview of your table. Because of CSS styling in your theme, the table might look different on your page! The Table Features for Site Visitors, like sorting, filtering, and pagination, are also not available in this preview!
To insert a table into a post or page, add a “TablePress table” block in the block editor and select the desired table.

Edition Bibliography (1748–c.1800)

This bibliography records eighteenth-century editions, translations, and reprints. While not exhaustive, it is designed as a resource for navigating the complex history of the work's publication.

> *"When I left school they put books of law into my hands; I sought their spirit..."*
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Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
De l'esprit des loix	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1748	French	Swiss States and Associates	Y		Gallica BnF	First (princeps) edition published anonymously in Geneva by Barrillot & Fils, overseen cautiously by Montesquieu amid censorship concerns.
De l'esprit des loix	Paris	France	Barillot and Fils [Durand]	1748	French	France				Parisian reprint published in January 1749 under the address: "In Geneva, at Barillot fils" with corrections list (errata)
De l'esprit des lois	Lyon	France	Les Libraires Associés [Duplain, impr. Delaroche]	1749	French	France				Additional corrections are also among the errata printed in another in-4° edition of 1749 which probably dates from March and bears the false address: "A Leiden, Chez les Libraires associés" (this is a Lyon edition printed by Aimé Delaroche for Pierre and Benoît Duplain)
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates			Part 1–2. Internet Archive	Montesquieu sent list of corrections to Geneva. Barrillot had been authorised by Vernet to prepare two reprints of the 1748 edition, one in two volumes in-4°, the other in three volumes in-8°
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1749	French	Swiss States and Associates			Tome 1. Internet Archive Tome 2 Internet Archive	Montesquieu sent list of corrections to Geneva. Barrillot had been authorised by Vernet to prepare two reprints of the 1748 edition, one in two volumes in-4°, the other in three volumes in-8°
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1749	French	France				Parisian bookseller-printer Pierre-Michel Huart prints edition, two volumes in-4°, which includes a Table of contents and a map; it appeared in May 1749, under the false address: "In Geneva, at Barrillot et fils".
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1749	French	France				Parisian bookseller-printer Pierre-Michel Huart prints edition, two volumes in-4°, which includes a Table of contents and a map; it appeared in May 1749, under the false address: "In Geneva, at Barrillot et fils".
De l'esprit des lois	London	England	Barrillot and Fils [Nourse]	1749	French	Great Britain				London bookseller-printer John Nourse, who will publish in May or June a two-volume edition in-8°, which bear Barrillot's address.
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	La Compagnie	1749	French	United Provinces				Two volumes in-4°, which is based on the Barrillot in-8° edition of 1749 and bears on the title page the address: "À Amsterdam, La Compagnie".
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Chatelain	1749	French	United Provinces			Tome 2. Internet Archive Tome 3. Internet Archive	Printers seem to have had access to the list of corrections, which resulted in a reprint of the Huart edition of 1749 in three volumes in-8° published in Amsterdam by Chatelain.

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barillot and Fils [Durand]	1749	French	France				An in-8° edition in three volumes published under the address of Barillot; it is probably a new Parisian reprint published by Durand.
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1750	English	Great Britain	Y	Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Gale digitised edition. Vol. 1 Internet Archive Vol. 2 Internet Archive	
Lo spirito delle leggi	Naples	Italian States	Simone	1750	Italian	Italian States	Y	Giuseppe Maria Mecatti	Tome 1. byterfly.eu Tome 2. Google Books	Earliest Italian translation, begun by Giuseppe Maria Mecatti in Naples, partial and censored, printed by Giovanni di Simone.
De l'esprit des lois	Edinburgh	Scotland	Hamilton and Balfour	1750	French	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2.Internet Archive	The Scottish edition, in two volumes in-8°, dated 1750, will be published in November 1749, David Hume and a certain Mr. Alexandre having played the role of intermediaries between Montesquieu and the Hamilton publishing house and Balfour of Edinburgh.
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart and Moreau]	1750	French	France	Y		Tome 2 Google Books Tome 3 Internet Archive	New corrections to Huart for a 1750 edition in three volumes in-12 (published under the false address of Barrillot or Nourse). Montesquieu alludes to this in a letter dated April 8, 1750 addressed to Grosley: the most exact edition is the last edition printed in 3 vols. in-12, in Paris, at Huart, bookseller, rue Saint-Jacques, near Fontaine Saint-Séverin".
The Spirit of the Laws	Dublin	Ireland	Dublin: G. and A. Ewing, and Faulkner	1751	English	Ireland			Vol. 1. Internet Archive. Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1751	French	France				
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Barrillot and Fils [Huart]	1751	French	France				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1752	English	Great Britain		Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2.Internet Archive	
Vom Geist der	Leipzig	German States	S.N.	1753	German	German States	Y	Translated by Abraham	Google Books	

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Gesetze								Gotthelf Kästner		
Vom Geist der Gesetze	Frankfurt	German States	S.N.	1753	German	German States	Y	Translated by Abraham Gotthelf Kästner	Google Books	
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	Barrillot and Fils	1753	French	Swiss States and Associates				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	La Compagnie	1755	French	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	La Compagnie	1755	French	United Provinces				
The Spirit of the Laws.	Aberdeen	Scotland	Douglass and Murray	1756	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Huart and Moreau	1757	French	France			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	Montesquieu, carrying out a more general revision to take into account the religious criticism that the work had attracted. This work was interrupted by his death in 1755 and the revised edition, prepared by third parties, did not appear until 1757. Published in Paris by Huart and Moreau (under the address "London, chez Nourse") in four volumes in-12.
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1758	English	Great Britain		Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	La Compagnie	1758	French	United Provinces				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Geneva	Geneva City State	C. & A. Philibert, 1759	1759	French	Swiss States and Associates			Vol. 3–4 Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Copenhagen	Denmark-Norway	C. & A. Philibert, 1759	1759	French	Denmark-Norway			Vol. 3–4 Internet Archive	

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1759	French	United Provinces	Y		Gallica BnF	In the great 1758 edition of Works by Montesquieu published by Huart and Moreau, in three volumes in-4° (under the address of "Leipsick, chez Arkstée et Merkus"). It is this text from 1757/1758 which will now be reproduced in all editions of The Spirit of Laws, including modern critical editions.
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1759	French	German States	Y		Gallica BnF	In the great 1758 edition of Works by Montesquieu published by Huart and Moreau, in three volumes in-4° (under the address of "Leipsick, chez Arkstée et Merkus"). It is this text from 1757/1758 which will now be reproduced in all editions of The Spirit of Laws, including modern critical editions.
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Grasset	1761	French	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Lausanne	Switzerland	Grasset	1761	French	Swiss States and Associates			Tome 2 Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	Edinburgh	Scotland	Donaldson and Reid	1762	English	Great Britain				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1763	French	United Provinces			Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1763	French	German States			Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Geneva	Geneva City State	Philibert	1764	French	Swiss States and Associates				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Copenhagen	Denmark-Norway	Philibert	1764	French	Denmark-Norway				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1764	French	United Provinces			Tome 1. Internet Archive Tome 2. Internet Archive Tome 3. Internet Archive Tome 4. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1764	French	German States			Tome 1. Internet Archive Tome 2. Internet Archive Tome 3. Internet Archive Tome 4. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1765	French	United Provinces				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1765	French	German States				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1766	English	Great Britain	Y	Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Gale digitised edition. Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	Dublin	Ireland	Faulkner and Ewing	1767	English	Ireland				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Nourse [Huart]	1767	French	France			Tome 2 Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	London	England	S.N.	1767	French	France			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the	Edinburgh	Scotland	Donaldson	1768	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive	

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Laws									Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	London	England	S.N.	1768	French	Great Britain			Tome 1. Internet Archive Tome 2. Internet Archive Tome 3. Internet Archive Tome 4. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1769	French	United Provinces			Vol. 1.Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1769	French	German States			Vol. 1.Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	London [Paris]	England [Paris]	Nourse [Le Clerc]	1769	French	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	v.2-3 have imprint Amsterdam, 1784
The Spirit of the Laws	Berwick-upon-Tweed	England	Taylor	1770	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive	
Om lovenes natur og aarsag	Copenhagen	Denmark-Norway	Svare og Skindergaden	1770	Danish	Denmark-Norway				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Grasset	1770	French	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Lausanne	Switzerland	Grasset	1770	French	Swiss States and Associates				
De aart der wetten	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Kok	1771	Dutch	United Provinces				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de	Geneva	Geneva City State	Cailler	1771	French	Swiss States and Associates				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Montesquieu										
The Spirit of the Laws	Edinburgh	Scotland	Donaldson	1772	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Liège	Austrian Netherlands	Nourse [Bassompierre]	1772	French	Austrian Netherlands				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Crowder, Ware, and Payne	1773	English	Great Britain	Y		Gale digitised edition	
The Spirit of the Laws	Edinburgh	Scotland	Kincaid and Creech	1773	English	Great Britain				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Nourse and Vaillant	1773	English	Great Britain		Thomas Nugent (1700–1772)	Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
Lo spirito delle leggi	Amsterdam	United Provinces	S.N.	1773	Italian	United Provinces				Potentially the Venetian counterfeit issued with a false place and date of printing "Amsterdam 1773".
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1773	French	United Provinces				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1773	French	German States				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Clarke	1773	English	Great Britain				
O razumiĺje zakonov	Saint Petersburg	Russia	Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk	1775	Slovenian	Russia				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	S.N.	1775	French	United Provinces				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Crowder, Ware, and Payne	1777	English	Great Britain				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Lo spirito delle leggi. Ed. Antonio Genovese	Naples	Italian States	Terres	1777	Italian	Italian States	Y	Antonio Gennovesi (1712–1769)	Google Books Internet Archive	First complete Italian edition, with Antonio Genovesi's annotated translation from the French, published in Naples by Domenico Terres.
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1777	French	United Provinces			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Leipzig	German States	Arkstee et Merkus	1777	French	German States			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
The Complete Works of Monsieur de Montesquieu	London	England	Evans and Davis	1777	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Complete Works of Monsieur de Montesquieu	Dublin	Ireland	Watson	1777	English	Ireland			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive Vol. 3. Internet Archive Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	London	England	S.N.	1777	French	Great Britain			Vol. 4. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	London	England	S.N.	1777	French	Great Britain				
De l'esprit des lois	Geneva	Geneva City State	S.N.	1777	French	Swiss States and Associates				
Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo	Leipzig	German States	Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo	1777	Polish	German States	Y		polona.pl	

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo	Dresden	German States	Duch Czyli Treść Praw Albo	1777	Polish	German States	Y		polona.pl	
The Spirit of the Laws	Edinburgh	Scotland	Donaldson	1778	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Arkstee et Merkus	1781	French	United Provinces				
Des Herrn von Montesquieu sämmtliche Werke	Altenburg	German States	Richter	1782	German	German States				
De geest der wetten	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Holtrop	1783	Dutch	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	Grasset	1783	French	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Lausanne	Switzerland	Grasset	1783	French	Swiss States and Associates				
De l'esprit des lois	Amsterdam	United Provinces	S.N.	1784	French	United Provinces				
De l'esprit des lois	Deux-Ponts	German States	Sanson & Compagnie	1784	French	German States	Y		Google Books	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Amsterdam	United Provinces	S.N.	1785	French	United Provinces			Tome 4 Internet Archive	
Oeuvres De Monsieur de Montesquieu	London	England	S.N.	1787	French	Great Britain			Tome 1 Internet Archive Tome 3 Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Riemst	Austrian Netherlands	S.N. [Cazin]	1787	French	Austrian Netherlands				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Bastien	1788	French	France			Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de	Amsterdam	United Provinces	S.N.	1790	French	United Provinces				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
Monsieur de Montesquieu										
The Spirit of the Laws	Dublin	Ireland	M'Kenzie and Moore	1791	English	Ireland			Vol. 1. hInternet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	Dublin	Ireland	Jones	1792	English	Ireland				
The spirit of the laws	Glasgow	Scotland	Niven, Duncan and Son, J. & M. Robertson, and J. & W. Shaw	1793	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	Edinburgh	Scotland	Ruddiman	1793	English	Great Britain				
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Wingrave	1793	English	Great Britain			Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Dodesley and Owen	1794	English	Great Britain			Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
The Spirit of the Laws	London	England	Printed for James Evans. North America: Sold by Messrs. Thomas and Andrews; Ebenezer Larkin, David West, Mr. J. Thomas, and Messrs. Carter and Wilkinson	1794	English	Great Britain	Y		Gale digitised edition Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Didot l'aîné	1795	French	France				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Plassan, Régent-Bernard, et Grégoire	1796	French	France				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Gueffier et Langlois	1796	French	France			Vol. 3. Internet Archive	
Oeuvres de Monsieur	Paris	France	Smits	1796	French	France				

Title	City Published	Country	Publisher	Date	Translation	Country Context	Transcr.	Translator	Digitised	Notes
de Montesquieu										
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Favre and Suchesne	1796	French	France				
The Spirit of the Laws	Glasgow	Scotland	Duncan	1797	English	Great Britain				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Paris	France	Gide	1797	French	France				
Lo spirito delle leggi	Naples	Italian States	Terres	1798	Italian	Italian States				
Oeuvres de Monsieur de Montesquieu	Basel	Switzerland	Decker	1799	French	Swiss States and Associates				
Des Herrn von Montesquieu sämmtliche Werke	Vienna	Austria	Wien und Bauer	1799	German	Habsburg Monarchy	Y		Edition at uni-goettingen.de	
The Complete Works of Monsieur de Montesquieu	London	England	Vernor and Hood	1800	English	Great Britain	Y		Gale digitised edition Vol. 1. Internet Archive Vol. 2. Internet Archive	
De l'esprit des lois	Paris	France	Didot	1803	French	France	Y		Tome 1. Edition at ulb.hhu.de Tome 2. Edition at ulb.hhu.de Tome 3. Edition at ulb.hhu.de Tome 4. Edition at ulb.hhu.de Tome 5. Edition at ulb.hhu.de	

Text Comparison Methodology

This page gives an overview of the three main stages of building a 'comparative reading tool' that transformed chapters I-VI of Book XIX of historical editions of *De l'esprit des lois* into an interactive tool, while making an attempt to test a combination of traditional scholarly methods with modern AI technologies.

15	5	90	1748-c. 1800
Editions	Languages	Chapters	Time Span

1 **Historical Transcriptions**

Converting historical printed editions into clean, analysis-ready text files using OCR technology and manual curation for scholarly accuracy.

Mixed approach: Transkribus printed text models + manual validation • 18th-century typography challenges • Cross-referencing with original scans

→ View transcription methodology

2 **LLM Translation & Semantic Analysis**

Using Claude 3.5 Sonnet: prompted for contextual translation and semantic analysis, attuned to philosophical nuances while enabling cross-linguistic comparison.

200k token context window • Philosophical reasoning capabilities • Structured JSON output • Temperature 0.3 for consistency

→ View computational methodology

3 **Interactive Comparative Reading Tool**

Digital interface enabling side-by-side analysis of multiple editions with synchronised navigation, highlighting, and semantic comparison capabilities.

Side-by-side text comparison • Multi-language support • Semantic analysis integration

→ Launch reading tool



Integrated Digital Workflow

This three-stage methodology transforms historical printed texts into interactive digital resources, enabling new forms of analysis that can be evaluated against rigorous academic standards. Each stage builds upon the previous, creating a comprehensive framework for computational philology and comparative textual analysis in the digital humanities.

Edit

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The Spirit of the Laws?

Exploring Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois in today's digital mœurs

MENU

Transcriptions of Book XIX, Chapters I-VI

Chapters I to VI of Book XIX from 15 editions across six languages were selected as a sample to test digital tools and methodology applied to linguistic and textual analysis. This foundational phase of the digital humanities project focuses on converting historical printed editions of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* into clean, analysis-ready text files.

The text samples required accurate and clean transcriptions. Some digitally scanned editions had messy OCR text, while others lacked transcriptions entirely. A mixed approach combined automated OCR technology with intensive manual curation to ensure scholarly accuracy whilst maintaining computational accessibility for subsequent LLM-based analysis.

Enumerative Bibliography of Selected Editions

Show Table of 15 Editions

Transcription Methodology

1. **Digital Source Identification**

   Located digitised editions via repositories (e.g., Gallica, Google Books) with OCR layers, prioritising high-resolution scans with reliable metadata and a higher OCR accuracy rate.

2. **OCR Extraction and Assessment**

   Extracted OCR text and assessed errors by checking against scanned pages, identifying issues in 18th-century typography.

3. **Transkribus Processing**

   Used Transkribus models for editions lacking OCR, generating transcriptions with language-specific models trained on period print materials.

4. **Manual Curation and Validation**

   Manually reviewed and corrected transcriptions, cross-referencing with original images to ensure accuracy for computational analysis.

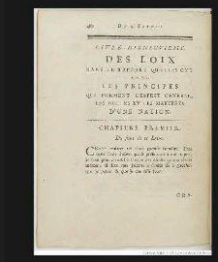
Historical Editions and Sample Transcriptions

Below are examples of digitised sources and cleaned transcriptions, each with unique challenges in typography, language, and printing conventions.

De l'esprit des lois (1748)

Original Geneva Edition • French • Barillot & Fils

Expand



CHAPITRE PREMIER. Des Lois en général. LES lois, dans la signification la plus étendue, sont les rapports nécessaires qui dérivent de la nature... des choses: et dans ce sens tous les êtres...

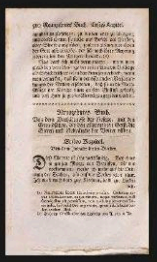
Transcription Challenges: 18th-century French typography with long 's', archaic spellings, complex philosophical terminology.

File Size: ~911 words

Vom Geist der Gesetze (1753)

German Translation • Frankfurt & Leipzig • tr. Abraham Gotthelf Kästner

Expand



ERSTES KAPITEL. Von den Gesetzen überhaupt. DIE Gesetze sind, in der weitesten Bedeutung genommen, die nothwendigen Verhältnisse, welche au... der Natur der Dinge entstehen: und in diesem Verstande...

Transcription Challenges: Gothic/Fraktur typography, historical German spelling, complex philosophical terminology translation.

File Size: ~960 words

Duch praw (1777)

Polish Translation • Leipzig-Dresden • Grollowskiey Księgarnia

Expand



ROZDZIAŁ I. O materyi tej księgi. Materia ta jest bardzo rozległa. W tej mnogości myśli, jakie mi się cisną, będę bardziej uważał na porządek rzeczy, niż na... rzeczy same; trzeba mi uprzątać...

Transcription Challenges: 18th-century Polish orthography, translation-specific terminology, complex gothic typography.

File Size: ~659 words

Tools and Technologies

Transkribus

AI-powered platform for historical document transcription using models trained on period-specific printed materials.

Manual Curation

Comprehensive human review and correction ensured scholarly accuracy for LLM analysis.

Quality Assurance and Outcomes

5	90	99%
Languages Covered	Chapters Transcribed	Approx. Fidelity Achieved

Integration with Computational Process

Clean text files formed the foundation for LLM-based translation and semantic analysis using Claude 3.5 Sonnet for contextual understanding of historical texts. Text files were processed via a Jupyter notebook, converting to JSON with metadata, segmenting chapters, and enabling comparative analysis across languages and periods.

Translation and Semantic Analysis page - PDF printout

LLM Translation and Semantic Analysis

Overview

This computational process employs large language model (LLM) technology to perform systematic translation and semantic comparison of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* across multiple historical editions and languages. The methodology addresses fundamental challenges in comparative textual analysis by aiming for scalable, consistent translation with scholarly precision for philosophical terminology and concepts.[1]

- Technical Framework +
- Translation Methodology +
- Semantic Comparison Framework +
- Data Management and Provenance +
- Technical Architecture +
- Integration with Digital Humanities Infrastructure +

Computational Implementation

LLM Translation and Semantic Analysis Process

Complete implementation of the methodology using Python in Jupyter Notebook, Anthropic Claude API, and comprehensive data processing for all six chapters of Book XIX of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* across multiple languages and historical editions.

View Complete Notebook | Download HTML Version

- Implementation Architecture +
- Methodological Limitations and Considerations +

Scholarly Significance

This methodology represents a novel application of computational methods to historical textual analysis,[14] offering several advantages over traditional approaches:

Scale: Enables comprehensive comparison across all available editions simultaneously, albeit within the frame of the AI training data and algorithms which could be "black box".

Consistency: Can eliminate subjective variation in translation approaches.

Transparency: Able to provide some documentation of analytical processes and decisions, though not all inner workings (rationale) of the AI model.

Reproducibility: Results can be independently verified and extended within a "fuzzy" framework of AI model metrics with output evaluation.

The approach contributes to the growing field of computational philology[15] by demonstrating how contemporary AI technologies can augment traditional scholarly methods while, potentially, assisting academic rigor and methodological transparency.

References and Notes

1. This methodology builds on established digital humanities principles as outlined in Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

2. Technical evaluation revealed that Google Translate's Python client library (googletrans) has been deprecated with irregular maintenance since 2021, and DeepL's unofficial Python libraries, like deepl-translate, lack robust error handling and consistent API access. For scholarly applications requiring reproducible results, these maintenance issues present unacceptable reliability risks.

3. Anthropic Claude 3.5 Sonnet – Official model announcement and documentation.

4. For theoretical justification of single-model approaches in computational textual analysis, see Hockey, Susan. "The History of Humanities Computing: An Overview." In *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Available at: Digital Humanities Companion

5. Anthropic Models Overview – Technical specifications and capabilities documentation.

6. Benchmarking data from Anthropic's internal evaluations, documented at Claude 3.5 Sonnet announcement.

7. Reproducibility methodology follows principles outlined in Peng, Roger D. "Reproducible Research in Computational Science." *Science* 334, no. 6060 (2011): 1226-1227. DOI: 10.1126/science.1213847

8. Data provenance methodology follows standards developed by the Research Data Alliance. See: Research Data Alliance

9. Multi-dimensional textual analysis framework adapted from computational philology methods described in Crane, Gregory. "What Do You Do with a Million Books?" *D-Lib Magazine* 12, no. 3 (2006). Available at: D-Lib Magazine

10. Technical implementation uses best practices from software engineering for research. See: Wilson, Greg, et al. "Best Practices for Scientific Computing." *PLOS Biology* 12, no. 1 (2014): e1001745. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.1001745

11. Implementation built using Jupyter Notebook environment with Python programming language.

12. Project repository available at: https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit

13. For discussion of AI translation limitations in scholarly contexts, see Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008.

14. Computational approaches to textual criticism discussed in Sahle, Patrick. "What is a Scholarly Digital Edition?" In *Digital Scholarly Editing: Theories and Practices*, edited by Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016. Available at: 10.11647/OBP.0095

15. For background on computational philology, see the Open Philology Project and related digital humanities resources at Harvard Digital Humanities.

Additional Digital Humanities/Scholarship Resources

- **Programming Historian**: https://programminghistorian.org/ – Peer-reviewed tutorials for digital methods
- **Digital Humanities Quarterly**: http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/ – Leading DH academic journal
- **Digital Scholarship @ Oxford**: https://digitalscholarship.web.ox.ac.uk/

Overview

This computational process employs large language model (LLM) technology to perform systematic translation and semantic comparison of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* across multiple historical editions and languages. The methodology addresses fundamental challenges in comparative textual analysis by aiming for scalable, consistent translation with scholarly precision for philosophical terminology and concepts.[1]

Technical Framework

Model Selection: Anthropic Claude

Initial exploration included evaluation of traditional translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL for Python integration. However, these services presented significant limitations for scholarly implementation: their Python libraries showed poor maintenance status, irregular updates, and limited documentation for academic use cases.[2] Additionally, these statistical translation models lack the contextual reasoning capabilities required for philosophical text analysis.

The analysis therefore exclusively employs Anthropic's Claude-3.5-Sonnet[3] (version 20241022) for both translation and semantic comparison tasks. This single-model approach allowed for first focusing and developing methodological integrity across all textual processing, eliminating inter-model variation as a potential source of analytical noise in early development.[4]

Key advantages of Claude for this application:

- Extended Context Window: 200,000 token capacity enables processing of complete chapters while maintaining contextual coherence[5]
- Philosophical Reasoning: Demonstrated superior performance on academic reasoning tasks, particularly relevant for 18th-century philosophical texts[6]
- Translation Consistency: Lower variance in repeated translations compared to alternative models, crucial for comparative analysis
- Structured Output: Reliable JSON formatting for automated data extraction and processing

Reproducibility Parameters

```
TEMPERATURE = 0.3      # Low temperature prioritises consistency over creativity
MAX_TOKENS = 2000      # Sufficient for detailed translations and analysis
SEED = 42              # Fixed seed ensures reproducible outputs
```

These parameters prioritise scholarly rigor and reproducibility over creative interpretation, appropriate for academic textual analysis.[7]

Translation Methodology

Prompt Engineering

The translation process employs domain-specific prompting that emphasises:

1. Historical Context: Specialist knowledge of 18th-century philosophical discourse
2. Terminological Precision: Preservation of exact philosophical concepts and vocabulary
3. Stylistic Authenticity: Maintenance of period-appropriate language and sentence structure
4. Transparency: Documentation of translation choices and untranslatable elements

Structured Output Format

Each translation generates structured metadata including:

- Primary translation text
- Translation notes explaining specific lexical choices
- Identification of untranslatable terms with explanations
- Confidence scores for quality assessment
- Complete provenance information (model version, timestamp, prompt hash)8

Semantic Comparison Framework

Multi-Dimensional Analysis

The semantic comparison methodology analyses textual variations across four primary dimensions:

Conceptual Changes: Identification of shifts in philosophical meaning and theoretical implications

Rhetorical Variations: Analysis of argumentative structure modifications and their effects on persuasive strategy

Lexical Analysis: Examination of word choice differences and their semantic implications, including tracking of added/removed key terms

Historical Contextualisation: Assessment of cultural and temporal factors influencing textual adaptations9

Comparative Scope

The process performs exhaustive pairwise comparisons across three analytical frameworks:

1. Diachronic Analysis: Comparison of editions within the same language across time periods
2. Cross-Linguistic Analysis: Comparison of contemporary editions across different languages
3. Comprehensive Mapping: All possible pairwise combinations for complete coverage

Data Management and Provenance

Caching System

The implementation includes sophisticated caching mechanisms using SHA-256 hashing to:

- Prevent duplicate API calls and associated costs

- Ensure complete reproducibility of results
- Maintain audit trails for all generated content
- Enable incremental analysis updates[10]

Output Structure

Results are systematically organised into three primary datasets:

Translation Dataset: Complete translations with metadata for all non-English texts

Comparison Dataset: Semantic analysis results for all pairwise textual comparisons

Web Integration Dataset: Formatted data structure optimised for digital humanities presentation

Technical Architecture

Process Design

The analysis employs an object-oriented architecture that separates concerns:[11]

```
class LLMInterface:        # Handles all model interactions and caching
class MontesquieuAnalyzer: # Orchestrates the complete analysis process
```

This modular design enables:

- Independent testing and validation of components
- Flexible configuration for different analysis parameters
- Scalable processing across multiple chapters and editions
- Integration with web-based presentation systems

Integration with Digital Humanities Infrastructure

GitHub Integration

All processing results are formatted for direct integration with the broader digital humanities project hosted on GitHub and WordPress,[12] enabling:

- Version control of analytical results
- Collaborative access to processed datasets
- Integration with web-based visualisation and presentation tools
- Long-term preservation of computational outputs

Computational Implementation

LLM Translation and Semantic Analysis Process

Complete implementation of the methodology using Python in Jupyter Notebook, Anthropic Claude API, and comprehensive data processing for all six chapters of Book XIX of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* across multiple languages and historical editions.

View complete notebook :
https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit/blob/main/ClaudeJSONforTranslateSemantic%20(1).ipynb

Implementation Architecture

Core Components

- LLMInterface Class: Unified interface for Anthropic Claude API with caching and rate limiting
- MontesquieuAnalyzer Class: Main process orchestrating translation and comparison across all chapters
- Configuration System: Reproducible parameters including temperature (0.3), model version, and API settings
- Cumulative Processing: Processes all six chapters sequentially, maintaining cumulative results throughout

Translation Method

Processes all non-English editions through Claude with specialised prompting for 18th-century philosophical texts. Each translation includes confidence scores, metadata, and scholarly annotations.

Model: claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022
Output: Structured JSON with provenance tracking

Semantic Comparison

Performs exhaustive pairwise comparisons across all editions and languages, analysing conceptual changes, rhetorical shifts, and lexical variations using computational philology methods.

Analysis Types: Chronological, cross-linguistic, comprehensive
Dimensions: 4 analytical frameworks

Data Processing Challenge Addressed

During implementation, JSON parsing errors occurred in some translation outputs due to nested JSON structures and escaping issues. A separate data cleaning script was developed to identify and fix malformed JSON records:

JSON Repair Implementation

- Identifies records with parsing failures using pattern matching
- Extracts and validates nested JSON structures
- Repairs malformed translation data while preserving metadata
- Generates clean, validated output files for analysis

Data Outputs

Generated Datasets

- montesquieu_translations_llm.json: Complete translations with metadata for all chapters and languages
- montesquieu_comparisons_llm.json: Semantic analysis results for all pairwise comparisons
- montesquieu_web_data.json: Web-optimised format for digital humanities presentation
- llm_cache.json: API response cache ensuring reproducibility and cost efficiency

The implementation demonstrates how contemporary computational methods can be systematically applied to historical textual criticism, processing multiple languages and editions simultaneously while assisting scholarly rigor through detailed provenance tracking and validation procedures.

Repository Access: All implementation files, data outputs, and documentation are available in the project's GitHub repository for reproducibility and further research.

Methodological Limitations and Considerations

Model Dependency

The exclusive reliance on a single LLM introduces specific limitations:

- Results reflect the particular biases and training characteristics of Claude-3.5-Sonnet
- No cross-model validation of translation quality
- Dependency on Anthropic's continued model availability

Translation Fidelity

While LLM translation offers consistency and scalability, it cannot fully replace human scholarly translation for:

- Highly nuanced philosophical terminology
- Cultural references requiring deep historical knowledge
- Ambiguous passages requiring interpretive judgment[13]

Scholarly Significance

This methodology represents a novel application of computational methods to historical textual analysis,14 offering several advantages over traditional approaches:

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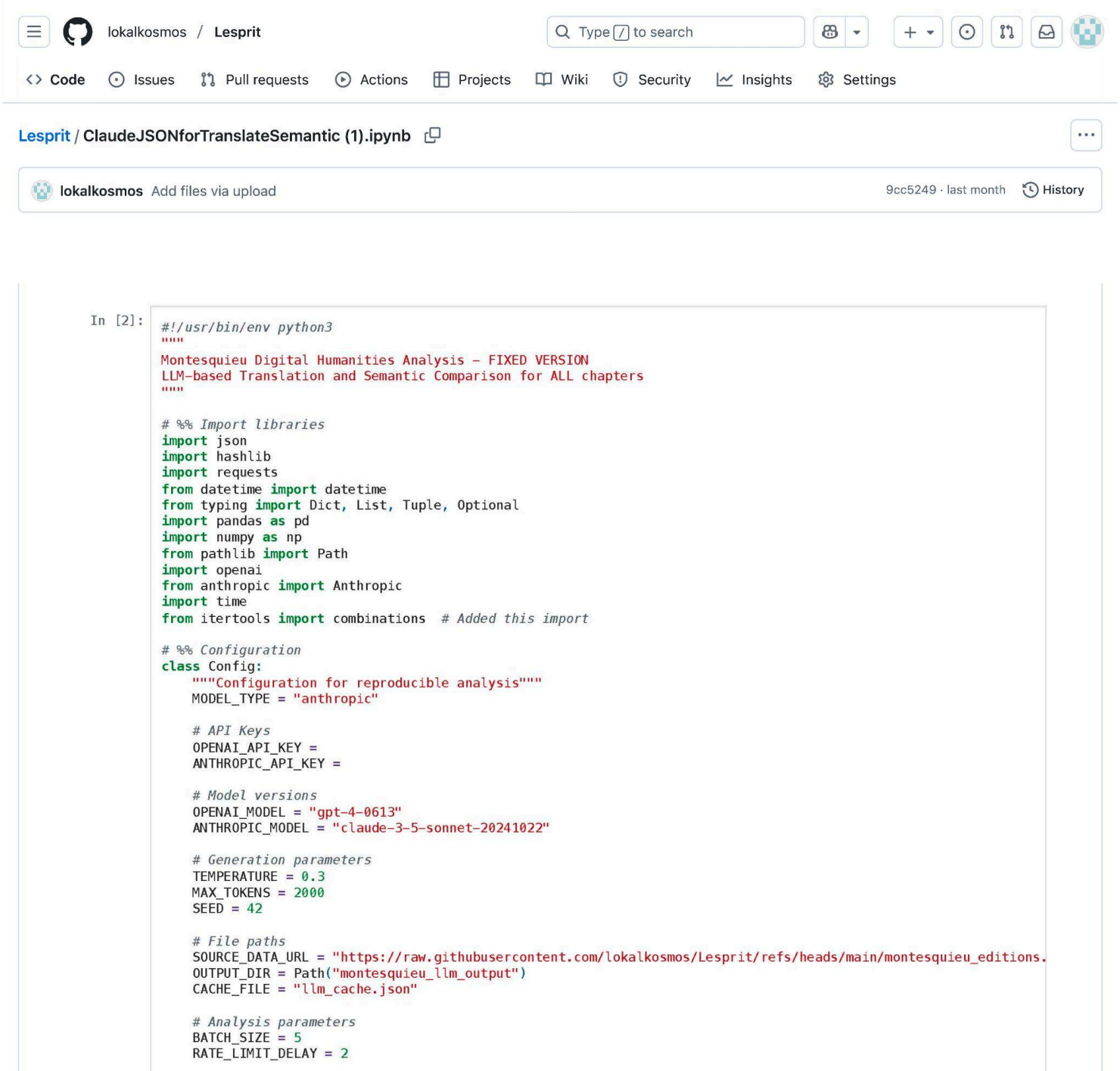
Digital Humanities Quarterly: http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/ – Leading DH academic journal

Digital Scholarship @ Oxford: https://digitalscholarship.web.ox.ac.uk/

Jupyter Notebook for Translation and Semantic analysis processing



```python
# %% Data Loading
def load_montesquieu_data():
    """Load the original Montesquieu data"""
    print("Loading Montesquieu data from GitHub...")
    response = requests.get(Config.SOURCE_DATA_URL)
    data = response.json()
    print(f"Loaded {len(data)} languages with {sum(len(editions) for editions in data.values())} total editions")
    return data

# %% LLM Interface
class LLMInterface:
    """Unified interface for different LLM providers"""

    def __init__(self, provider: str = "anthropic"):
        self.provider = provider
        self.cache = self._load_cache()

        if provider == "anthropic":
            self.client = Anthropic(api_key=Config.ANTHROPIC_API_KEY)
            self.model = Config.ANTHROPIC_MODEL
        elif provider == "openai":
            openai.api_key = Config.OPENAI_API_KEY
            self.model = Config.OPENAI_MODEL

    def _load_cache(self):
        """Load cached responses"""
        try:
            with open(Config.CACHE_FILE, 'r', encoding='utf-8') as f:
                return json.load(f)
        except:
            return {}

    def _save_cache(self):
        """Save cache to file"""
        with open(Config.CACHE_FILE, 'w', encoding='utf-8') as f:
            json.dump(self.cache, f, indent=2, ensure_ascii=False)

    def _get_cache_key(self, prompt: str, function: str):
        """Generate cache key"""
        prompt_hash = hashlib.sha256(prompt.encode()).hexdigest()
        return f"{self.provider}_{self.model}_{function}_{prompt_hash}"

    def translate_text(self, text: str, source_lang: str, target_lang: str = "English") -> Dict:
        """Translate historical text with scholarly precision"""

        prompt = f"""You are an expert translator specializing in 18th-century philosophical texts,
particularly the works of Montesquieu. Your task is to translate the following {source_lang}
text to {target_lang} while:
```

```
1. Preserving the exact philosophical terminology and concepts
2. Maintaining period-appropriate language and style
3. Keeping sentence structure as close to the original as possible
4. Noting any untranslatable concepts or terms

Original {source_lang} text:
"{text}"

Provide your translation in the following JSON format:
{{
    "translation": "your translation here",
    "translation_notes": ["note about specific terms or choices"],
    "untranslatable_terms": [{{"term": "original", "explanation": "why untranslatable"}}],
    "confidence": 0.0-1.0
}}"""

        cache_key = self._get_cache_key(prompt, "translate")

        # Check cache
        if cache_key in self.cache:
            print(f"Using cached translation for {source_lang} text")
            return self.cache[cache_key]

        # Generate new translation
        print(f"Translating {source_lang} text ({len(text)} chars)...")

        if self.provider == "anthropic":
            response = self.client.messages.create(
                model=self.model,
                max_tokens=Config.MAX_TOKENS,
                temperature=Config.TEMPERATURE,
                messages=[{"role": "user", "content": prompt}]
            )
            content = response.content[0].text
        elif self.provider == "openai":
            response = openai.ChatCompletion.create(
                model=self.model,
                messages=[{"role": "user", "content": prompt}],
                temperature=Config.TEMPERATURE,
                max_tokens=Config.MAX_TOKENS
            )
            content = response.choices[0].message.content

        # Parse JSON response
        try:
            result = json.loads(content)
        except:
            result = {
```

```
                "translation": content,
                "translation_notes": ["Raw response - JSON parsing failed"],
                "untranslatable_terms": [],
                "confidence": 0.7
            }

        # Add metadata
        result["metadata"] = {
            "model": self.model,
            "provider": self.provider,
            "source_language": source_lang,
            "target_language": target_lang,
            "timestamp": datetime.now().isoformat(),
            "prompt_hash": hashlib.sha256(prompt.encode()).hexdigest()
        }

        # Cache result
        self.cache[cache_key] = result
        self._save_cache()

        # Rate limiting
        time.sleep(Config.RATE_LIMIT_DELAY)

        return result

    def semantic_comparison(self, text1: str, text2: str, metadata1: Dict, metadata2: Dict) -> Dict:
        """Perform detailed semantic comparison"""

        prompt = f"""You are a digital humanities scholar specializing in 18th-century philosophy
and textual criticism. Perform a detailed semantic comparison of these two versions of
Montesquieu's text, identifying:

1. Conceptual differences (changes in philosophical meaning)
2. Rhetorical variations (changes in argumentative structure)
3. Lexical shifts (word choice differences and their implications)
4. Syntactic changes (sentence structure modifications)
5. Cultural/historical adaptations

Text 1 ({metadata1.get('language', 'Unknown')} - {metadata1.get('year', 'Unknown')}):
"{text1}"

Text 2 ({metadata2.get('language', 'Unknown')} - {metadata2.get('year', 'Unknown')}):
"{text2}"

Provide your analysis in the following JSON structure:
{{
    "overall_similarity": 0.0-1.0,
    "conceptual_changes": [
        {{
```

```
            "type": "addition|deletion|modification",
            "concept": "philosophical concept affected",
            "text1_excerpt": "relevant excerpt",
            "text2_excerpt": "relevant excerpt",
            "significance": "why this matters philosophically",
            "confidence": 0.0-1.0
        }}
    ],
    "rhetorical_shifts": [
        {{
            "element": "rhetorical element",
            "change": "description of change",
            "effect": "impact on argument"
        }}
    ],
    "lexical_analysis": {{
        "key_terms_added": ["term1", "term2"],
        "key_terms_removed": ["term1", "term2"],
        "semantic_field_shifts": ["description of shifts"]
```

Lesprit / ClaudeJSONforTranslateSemantic (1).ipynb ↑ Top

Preview Code Blame Raw

```
        if cache_key in self.cache:
            print("Using cached semantic comparison")
            return self.cache[cache_key]

        print("Performing semantic comparison...")

        if self.provider == "anthropic":
            response = self.client.messages.create(
                model=self.model,
                max_tokens=Config.MAX_TOKENS,
                temperature=Config.TEMPERATURE,
                messages=[{"role": "user", "content": prompt}]
            )
            content = response.content[0].text
        elif self.provider == "openai":
            response = openai.ChatCompletion.create(
                model=self.model,
                messages=[{"role": "user", "content": prompt}],
                temperature=Config.TEMPERATURE,
                max_tokens=Config.MAX_TOKENS
            )
            content = response.choices[0].message.content
```

```
        try:
            result = json.loads(content)
        except:
            result = {
                "error": "JSON parsing failed",
                "raw_response": content,
                "overall_similarity": 0.5
            }

        result["metadata"] = {
            "model": self.model,
            "provider": self.provider,
            "comparison": f"{metadata1.get('language')}-{metadata1.get('year')} vs {metadata2.get('language')}-{me
            "timestamp": datetime.now().isoformat()
        }

        self.cache[cache_key] = result
        self._save_cache()

        time.sleep(Config.RATE_LIMIT_DELAY)

        return result

# %% FIXED Main Analysis Pipeline
class MontesquieuAnalyzer:
    """Main analysis pipeline - FIXED to accumulate all chapters"""

    def __init__(self, llm_interface: LLMInterface):
        self.llm = llm_interface
        self.data = load_montesquieu_data()

        # FIXED: Initialize results once and keep accumulating
        self.all_translations = {}
        self.all_comparisons = {}

        # Create output directory
        Config.OUTPUT_DIR.mkdir(exist_ok=True)

    def translate_all_texts(self, chapter: str = "1", languages: List[str] = None):
        """Translate all non-English texts for a specific chapter"""

        if languages is None:
            languages = [lang for lang in self.data.keys() if lang != "English"]

        print(f"\n=== Translating Chapter {chapter} ===")

        for language in languages:
            if language == "English":
                continue
```

```
            print(f"\nProcessing {language} editions...")

            for edition in self.data[language]:
                year = edition['Year Published']
                publisher = edition['Publisher']

                # Get chapter text
                chapter_data = edition['Chapters'].get(chapter)
                if not chapter_data:
                    continue

                print(f"  {year} - {publisher}")

                # Create unique key
                key = f"{language}_{year}_ch{chapter}"

                # Translate
                translation_result = self.llm.translate_text(
                    text=chapter_data['Text'],
                    source_lang=language
                )

                # Store result in CUMULATIVE dictionary
                self.all_translations[key] = {
                    "language": language,
                    "year": year,
                    "publisher": publisher,
                    "chapter": chapter,
                    "original_title": chapter_data['Title'],
                    "original_text": chapter_data['Text'],
                    **translation_result
                }

        # Save cumulative translations after each chapter
        self._save_cumulative_results("translations")

    def compare_editions(self, chapter: str = "1", comparison_type: str = "all"):
        """Compare editions - all pairwise combinations"""

        print(f"\n=== Comparing Editions - Chapter {chapter} ===")

        if comparison_type == "all" or comparison_type == "chronological":
            # Compare ALL pairs within each language
            for language in self.data.keys():
                editions = sorted(self.data[language], key=lambda x: x['Year Published'])

                if len(editions) < 2:
                    continue
```

```
            print(f"\nComparing {language} editions (all pairs)...")

            # Get all possible pairs
            for ed1, ed2 in combinations(editions, 2):
                # Get texts
                if language == "English":
                    text1 = ed1['Chapters'][chapter]['Text']
                    text2 = ed2['Chapters'][chapter]['Text']
                else:
                    # Use translations
                    key1 = f"{language}_{ed1['Year Published']}_ch{chapter}"
                    key2 = f"{language}_{ed2['Year Published']}_ch{chapter}"

                    if key1 in self.all_translations and key2 in self.all_translations:
                        text1 = self.all_translations[key1]["translation"]
                        text2 = self.all_translations[key2]["translation"]
                    else:
                        continue

                # Compare
                comparison = self.llm.semantic_comparison(
                    text1, text2,
                    {"language": language, "year": ed1['Year Published']},
                    {"language": language, "year": ed2['Year Published']}
                )

                # Store
                comp_key = f"{language}_{ed1['Year Published']}_vs_{ed2['Year Published']}_ch{chapter}"
                self.all_comparisons[comp_key] = comparison

                print(f"  Compared {ed1['Year Published']} vs {ed2['Year Published']}")

    if comparison_type == "all" or comparison_type == "cross-linguistic":
        # Compare ALL editions across languages
        print(f"\nComparing across languages...")

        # Get all language pairs
        languages = list(self.data.keys())
        for lang1, lang2 in combinations(languages, 2):
            print(f"\n  Comparing {lang1} vs {lang2}...")

            # Compare ALL editions between these languages
            for ed1 in self.data[lang1]:
                for ed2 in self.data[lang2]:
                    # Get texts (use translations for non-English)
                    if lang1 == "English":
                        text1 = ed1['Chapters'][chapter]['Text']
                    else:
```

```
                        key1 = f"{lang1}_{ed1['Year Published']}_ch{chapter}"
                        if key1 in self.all_translations:
                            text1 = self.all_translations[key1]["translation"]
                        else:
                            continue

                    if lang2 == "English":
                        text2 = ed2['Chapters'][chapter]['Text']
                    else:
                        key2 = f"{lang2}_{ed2['Year Published']}_ch{chapter}"
                        if key2 in self.all_translations:
                            text2 = self.all_translations[key2]["translation"]
                        else:
                            continue

                    # Compare
                    comparison = self.llm.semantic_comparison(
                        text1, text2,
                        {"language": lang1, "year": ed1['Year Published']},
                        {"language": lang2, "year": ed2['Year Published']}
                    )

                    comp_key = f"{lang1}_{ed1['Year Published']}_vs_{lang2}_{ed2['Year Published']}_ch{chapter
                    self.all_comparisons[comp_key] = comparison

                    print(f"    {lang1} {ed1['Year Published']} vs {lang2} {ed2['Year Published']}")

        # Save cumulative comparisons after each chapter
        self._save_cumulative_results("comparisons")

    def _save_cumulative_results(self, result_type: str):
        """Save CUMULATIVE results to JSON file"""
        if result_type == "translations":
            data = self.all_translations
        else:
            data = self.all_comparisons

        filename = Config.OUTPUT_DIR / f"montesquieu_{result_type}_llm.json"

        with open(filename, 'w', encoding='utf-8') as f:
            json.dump(data, f, indent=2, ensure_ascii=False)

        print(f"Saved {len(data)} cumulative {result_type} to {filename}")

# %% FIXED Main execution
def run_full_analysis():
    """Run complete analysis for ALL chapters"""

    print("=== Montesquieu FULL LLM Analysis Pipeline ===")
```

```
    print("=== Montesquieu FULL LLM Analysis Pipeline ===")

    # Initialize LLM interface ONCE
    llm = LLMInterface(provider=Config.MODEL_TYPE)

    # Initialize analyzer ONCE
    analyzer = MontesquieuAnalyzer(llm)

    # Process ALL chapters accumulating results
    for chapter in ["1", "2", "3", "4", "5", "6"]:
        print(f"\n{'='*50}")
        print(f"PROCESSING CHAPTER {chapter}")
        print(f"{'='*50}")

        # Translate all texts for this chapter
        analyzer.translate_all_texts(chapter=chapter, languages=None)  # All languages

        # Compare editions for this chapter - changed to "all"
        analyzer.compare_editions(chapter=chapter, comparison_type="all")

    # Create final web integration file
    create_web_integration_file()

    print("\n✅ Analysis complete for ALL chapters and languages!")
    print(f"Total translations: {len(analyzer.all_translations)}")
    print(f"Total comparisons: {len(analyzer.all_comparisons)}")

    return analyzer

def create_web_integration_file():
    """Create JSON file for web interface integration"""

    # Load cumulative results
    with open(Config.OUTPUT_DIR / "montesquieu_translations_llm.json", 'r', encoding='utf-8') as f:
        translations = json.load(f)

    with open(Config.OUTPUT_DIR / "montesquieu_comparisons_llm.json", 'r', encoding='utf-8') as f:
        comparisons = json.load(f)

    # Format for web interface
    web_data = {
        "translations": translations,
        "semantic_analysis": {},
        "visualization": {
            "supported": True,
            "types": ["differences", "confidence", "evolution"]
        }
    }
```

```
    # Process comparisons into web-friendly format
    for comp_key, comp_data in comparisons.items():
        if "conceptual_changes" in comp_data:
            web_data["semantic_analysis"][comp_key] = {
                "changes": comp_data["conceptual_changes"],
                "similarity": comp_data.get("overall_similarity", 0),
                "summary": comp_data.get("overall_assessment", "")
            }

    # Save
    with open(Config.OUTPUT_DIR / "montesquieu_web_data.json", 'w', encoding='utf-8') as f:
        json.dump(web_data, f, indent=2, ensure_ascii=False)

    print(f"Web integration file created with {len(translations)} translations and {len(comparisons)} comparisons")

# %% Execute
if __name__ == "__main__":
    analyzer = run_full_analysis()
```

```
=== Montesquieu FULL LLM Analysis Pipeline ===
Loading Montesquieu data from GitHub...
Loaded 5 languages with 15 total editions

==================================================
PROCESSING CHAPTER 1
==================================================

=== Translating Chapter 1 ===

Processing French editions...
  1748 - Barillot & fils, Genève
Using cached translation for French text
  1750 - Huart & Moreau, Paris, chez Barrillot & Fils, Genève
Using cached translation for French text
  1758 - Arkstee & Merkus, Amsterdam & Leipzig / Huart, Paris
Using cached translation for French text
  1784 - Sanson & Compagnie, Deux-Ponts
Using cached translation for French text
  1803 - Didot, Paris
Using cached translation for French text

Processing Italian editions...
  1750 - Simone, Naples
Using cached translation for Italian text
  1777 - Terres, Napoli
```

```
  Comparing Italian vs Polish...
Performing semantic comparison...
    Italian 1750 vs Polish 1777
Performing semantic comparison...
    Italian 1777 vs Polish 1777

  Comparing German vs Polish...
Performing semantic comparison...
    German 1753 vs Polish 1777
Performing semantic comparison...
    German 1799 vs Polish 1777
Saved 630 cumulative comparisons to montesquieu_llm_output/montesquieu_comparisons_llm.json
Web integration file created with 60 translations and 630 comparisons

✅ Analysis complete for ALL chapters and languages!
Total translations: 60
Total comparisons: 630
```

In [ ]:

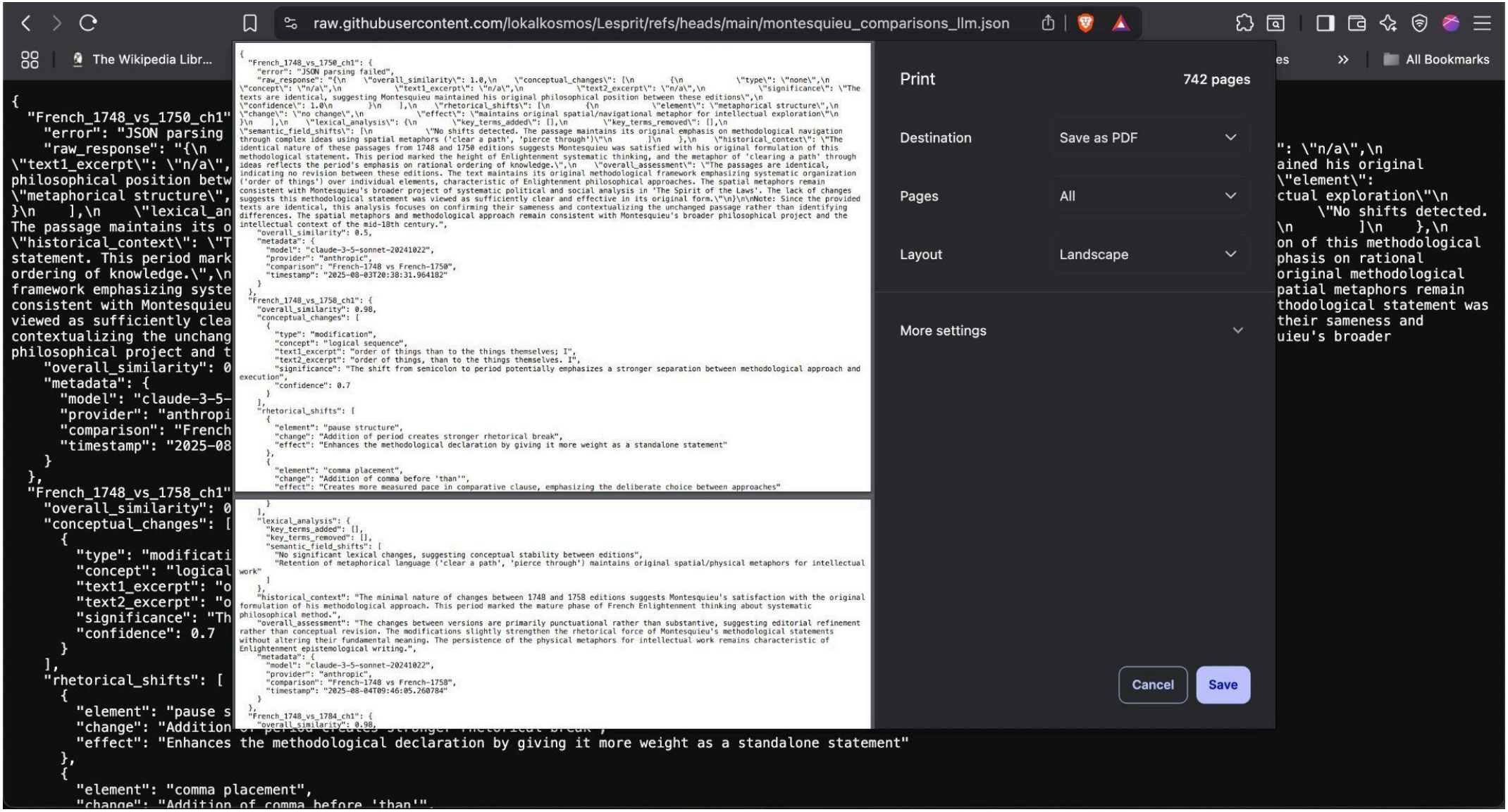
```
{
    "French_1748_ch1": {
        "language": "French",
        "year": 1748,
        "publisher": "Barillot & fils, Genève",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Du sujet de ce Livre.",
        "original_text": "Cette matière est d'une grande étendue. Dans cette foule d'idées qui se présentent à mon esprit, je serai plus
attentif à l'ordre des choses qu'aux choses mêmes ; il faut que j'écarte à droite et à gauche, que je perce, et que je me fasse jour.",
        "translation": "This matter is of great extent. In this crowd of ideas which present themselves to my mind, I shall be more attentive
to the order of things than to the things themselves; I must clear a path to right and left, pierce through, and make my way forward.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "The phrase 'se présentent à mon esprit' is rendered in period-appropriate language as 'present themselves to my mind' rather
than modern alternatives",
            "The metaphorical 'que je me fasse jour' (literally 'make daylight') is translated as 'make my way forward' to maintain the
philosophical imagery of intellectual progress",
            "The tripartite structure 'que j'écarte... que je perce... que je me fasse jour' is preserved to maintain Montesquieu's
characteristic rhetorical style"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "me fasse jour",
                "explanation": "This French idiom literally meaning 'make daylight' carries specific 18th-century connotations of
intellectual enlightenment that aren't fully captured in English translation"
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.9,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "French",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:36:56.455110",
            "prompt_hash": "1259ec2c2b690fe8753da3c5f413beeecb99c48da2033145c55b7f2939660e4e"
        }
    },
    "French_1750_ch1": {
        "language": "French",
        "year": 1750,
        "publisher": "Huart & Moreau, Paris, chez Barrillot & Fils, Genève",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Du sujet de ce Livre.",
        "original_text": "Cette matiere est d’une grande étendue. Dans cette foule d’idées qui se présentent à mon esprit, je serai plus
attentif à l’ordre des choses qu’aux choses mêmes ; il faut que j’écarte à droite et à gauche, que je perce, et que je me fasse jour.",
        "translation": "This matter is of great extent. In this crowd of ideas which present themselves to my mind, I shall be more attentive
to the order of things than to the things themselves; I must clear a path to right and left, pierce through, and make my way forward.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "The phrase 'se présentent à mon esprit' is rendered in period-appropriate language as 'present themselves to my mind' rather
than modern alternatives",
            "The metaphorical 'écarter à droite et à gauche' is translated to maintain the physical imagery of clearing a path",
            "'que je me fasse jour' is translated idiomatically while preserving the period metaphor of 'making one's way' through
obstacles",
```

```
            "The semicolon structure is maintained to preserve Montesquieu's characteristic style"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "me fasse jour",
                "explanation": "This French idiom literally means 'make daylight for myself' but carries connotations of intellectual
breakthrough and progress that aren't fully captured in English"
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.95,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "French",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:37:05.161089",
            "prompt_hash": "fd2813b74f18ad93c3e7332c4e11242989a4c93cb7d798182dee3d27cae43fd3"
        }
    },
    "French_1758_ch1": {
        "language": "French",
        "year": 1758,
        "publisher": "Arkstee & Merkus, Amsterdam & Leipzig / Huart, Paris",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Du sujet de ce livre.",
        "original_text": "Cette matière est d'une grande étendue. Dans cette foule d'idées qui se présentent à mon esprit, je serai plus
attentif à l'ordre des choses, qu'aux choses même. Il faut que j'écarte à droite et à gauche , que je perce, et que je me fasse jour.",
        "translation": "This matter is of great extent. In this crowd of ideas which present themselves to my mind, I shall be more attentive
to the order of things, than to the things themselves. I must clear a path to right and left, pierce through, and make my way forward.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "The phrase 'me fasse jour' literally means 'make daylight for myself' but is rendered here as 'make my way forward' to maintain
the metaphorical sense while preserving period style",
            "The tripartite structure 'écarte...perce...me fasse jour' is preserved to maintain Montesquieu's characteristic rhetorical
style",
            "The formal 'shall' is used instead of 'will' to maintain 18th-century formal philosophical prose conventions"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "me fasse jour",
                "explanation": "This French idiom combines physical and metaphorical meanings in a way specific to 18th-century French
philosophical writing, suggesting both literal illumination and intellectual breakthrough. The English translation can approximate but not
fully capture this dual meaning."
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.95,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "French",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:37:14.274011",
            "prompt_hash": "6f83ccb7074c5b9d4e31983b42471cbd9c4a15cee9788f8d1635ee1c5408c0b9"
```

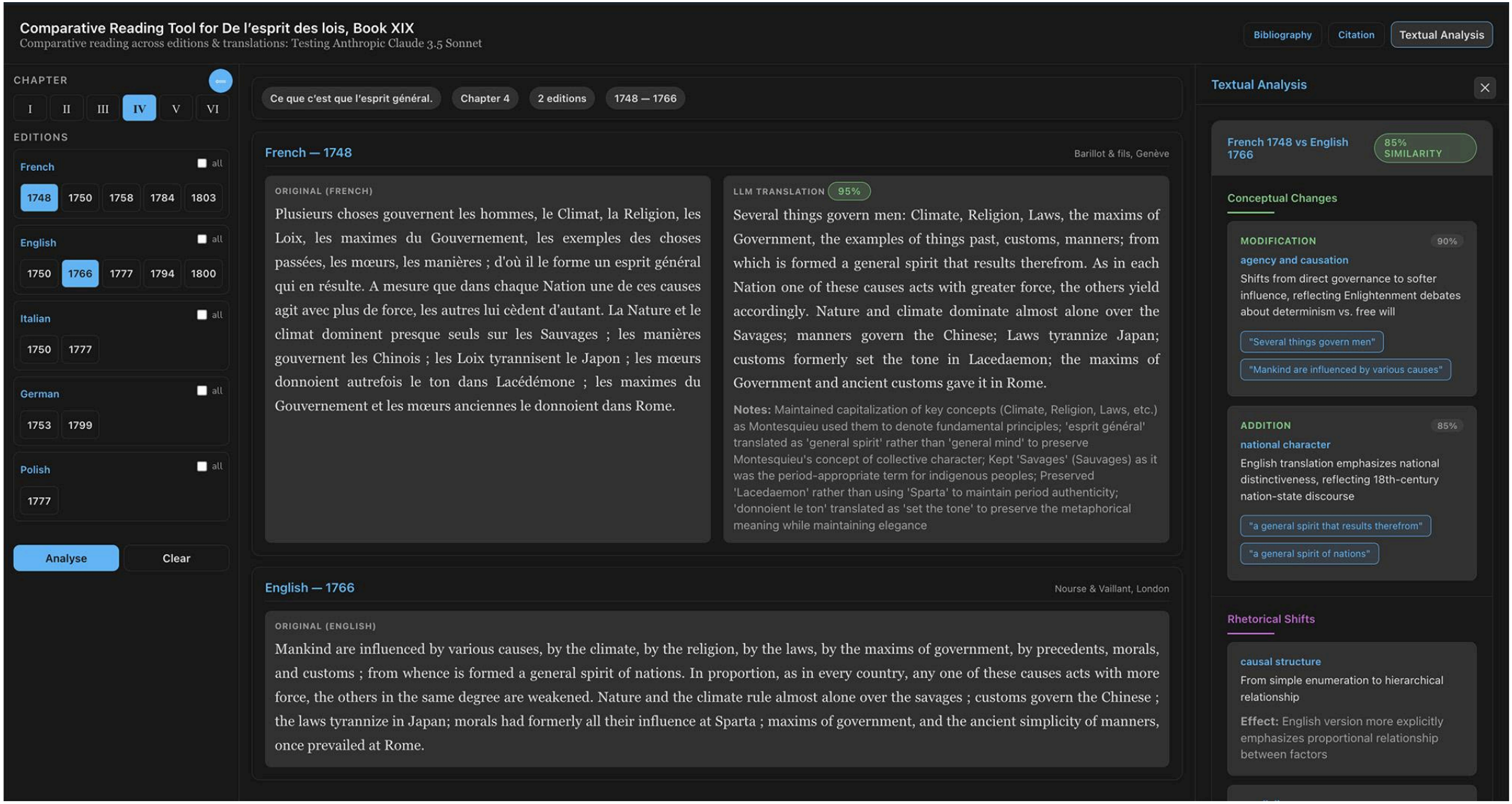
```
        }
    },
    "French_1784_ch1": {
        "language": "French",
        "year": 1784,
        "publisher": "Sanson & Compagnie, Deux-Ponts",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Du sujet de ce livre.",
        "original_text": "Cette matière est d'une grande étendue. Dans cette foule d'idées qui se présentent à mon esprit, je serai plus
attentif à l'ordre des choses qu'aux choses mêmes. Il faut que j'écarte à droite et à gauche, que je perce et que je me fasse jour.",
        "translation": "This matter is of great extent. In this crowd of ideas which present themselves to my mind, I shall be more attentive
to the order of things than to the things themselves. I must clear a path to right and left, pierce through and make my way forward.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "The phrase 'se présentent à mon esprit' is rendered in period-appropriate language as 'present themselves to my mind' rather
than modern alternatives",
            "The metaphorical 'écarter à droite et à gauche' is translated to maintain the physical imagery of clearing a path",
            "'que je me fasse jour' is translated idiomatically while preserving the original metaphor of making one's way through
obstacles",
            "The formal structure and rhythm of Montesquieu's prose is maintained through parallel clauses"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "me fasse jour",
                "explanation": "This French idiom literally means 'make daylight for myself' but carries connotations of intellectual
breakthrough and progress that aren't fully captured in English"
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.95,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "French",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:37:22.873724",
            "prompt_hash": "392ebd1740cedff023eb86bcaf6fa331cde1813156ff87ef6249d21de02d8e4a"
        }
    },
    "French_1803_ch1": {
        "language": "French",
        "year": 1803,
        "publisher": "Didot, Paris",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Du sujet de ce livre.",
        "original_text": "Cette matiere est d'une grande étendue. Dans cette foule d'idees qui se présentent à mon esprit, je serai plus
attentif a l'ordre des choses qu'aux choses mêmes. II faut que j'écarte à droite et à gauche, que je perce, et que je me fasse jour.",
        "translation": "This matter is of great extent. In this crowd of ideas which present themselves to my mind, I shall be more attentive
to the order of things than to the things themselves. I must clear my way to right and left, pierce through, and make my way forward.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "The phrase 'se présentent à mon esprit' is rendered in period-appropriate language as 'present themselves to my mind' rather
than modern alternatives",
            "The metaphorical 'que je me fasse jour' is translated as 'make my way forward' to maintain the original's sense of intellectual
progress",
```

```
            "The tripartite structure 'écarte...perce...fasse jour' is preserved to maintain Montesquieu's rhetorical rhythm",
            "The formal 'II faut que' is translated with the appropriately formal 'I must' rather than more casual alternatives"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "me fasse jour",
                "explanation": "This French idiom literally means 'make daylight for myself' but carries connotations of both intellectual
enlightenment and physical progress that aren't fully capturable in a single English phrase"
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.9,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "French",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:37:32.296926",
            "prompt_hash": "b0372a4c8baa4a00f982e00e714d741bb7507391e3027d4361b0b2a32c98b573"
        }
    },
    "Italian_1750_ch1": {
        "language": "Italian",
        "year": 1750,
        "publisher": "Simone, Naples",
        "chapter": "1",
        "original_title": "Del Soggetio di questo Libro.",
        "original_text": "Questa materia è molto ampia. In mezzo a questa folla d' idee, che mi si presentano allo spirito, abbaderò più all'
ordine delle cose, che alle cose medesime; conviene, che io scorra a dritta, ed a sinistra, che io penetri, e che io superi ogni ostacolo.",
        "translation": "This matter is very vast. Amidst this crowd of ideas that present themselves to my spirit, I shall attend more to the
order of things than to the things themselves; it is fitting that I should range to right and left, that I should penetrate, and that I
should overcome every obstacle.",
        "translation_notes": [
            "Used 'spirit' rather than 'mind' to maintain 18th-century philosophical connotations of 'spirito'",
            "Preserved the semicolon structure characteristic of 18th-century prose",
            "Maintained the formal 'it is fitting that' construction for 'conviene'",
            "Used 'range' for 'scorra' to capture the period-appropriate sense of intellectual movement",
            "Kept the repetitive 'that I should' structure to mirror the original's rhetorical emphasis"
        ],
        "untranslatable_terms": [
            {
                "term": "abbaderò",
                "explanation": "While translated as 'attend to', the Italian term carries a specific connotation of mindful observation that
was particular to 18th-century philosophical discourse and doesn't have a perfect English equivalent"
            }
        ],
        "confidence": 0.9,
        "metadata": {
            "model": "claude-3-5-sonnet-20241022",
            "provider": "anthropic",
            "source_language": "Italian",
            "target_language": "English",
            "timestamp": "2025-08-03T20:37:40.435278",
```

JSON file created of Semantic data 700+ pages of data (too large to include here)

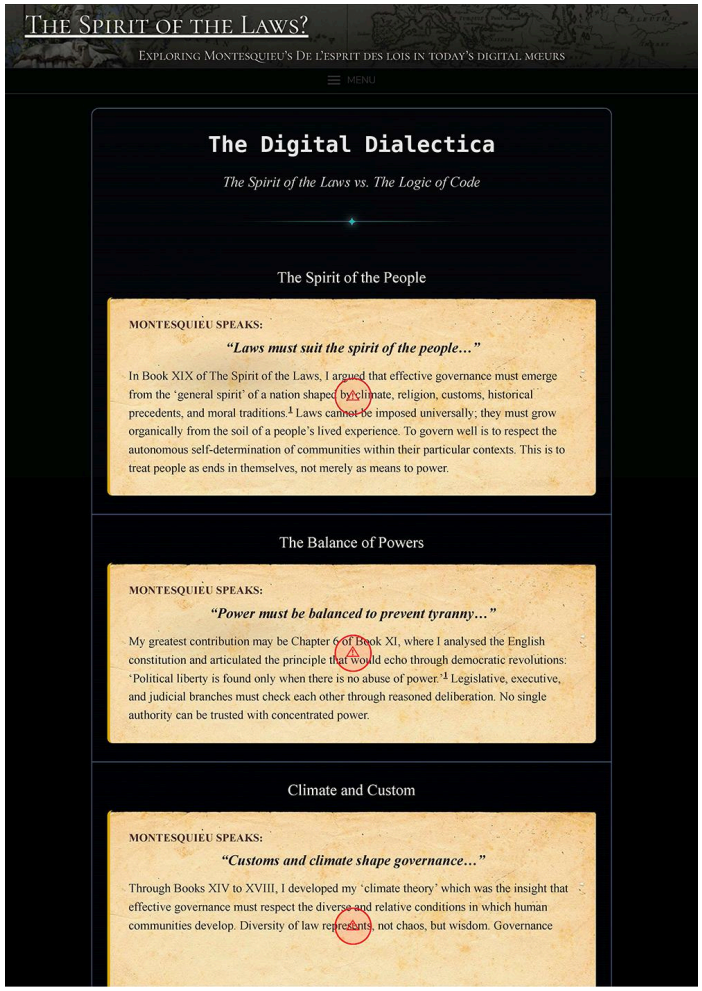


Comparative Reading Tool screenshot

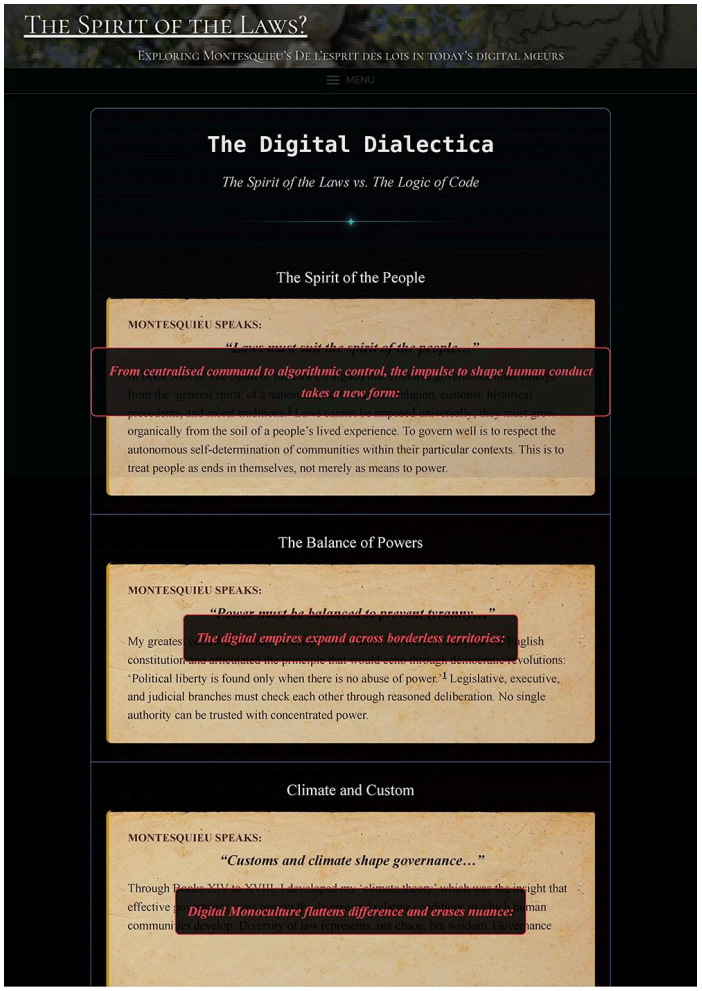


The Digital Dialectica - interactive staged dialogue feature

Montesquieu “speaks”:



Transition “warning” message:



Big Tech “rationale” responds:



works best when it honours the intricate relationships between peoples and their environments.[1]

The Discourse of Reason

MONTESQUIEU SPEAKS:

"Freedom arises from reasoned debate…"

Political liberty emerges from well-structured institutions that channel conflict into reasoned deliberation rather than arbitrary force. When powers remain separate, they must engage through argument, evidence, and public reasoning. This deliberative process protects freedom through transparency and accountability.[1]

The Diversity of Laws

MONTESQUIEU SPEAKS:

"Diversity of laws respects human difference…"

The wide variety of laws adopted by different societies reflects rational adaptation to local conditions. Legal pluralism allows communities to develop governance suited to their particular needs, circumstances, and values. This diversity represents the flowering of human creativity in response to diverse challenges.[1]

The Synthesis Void

This is not a genuine dialectic. Where synthesis should emerge from the encounter between humanistic wisdom and technological power, we find only systematic dismantling. Montesquieu's principles offer resources for civilising technology, but digital power has moved beyond the reach of democratic philosophy.

Reset Dialectic

References

1. Montesquieu, C. L. (1748). *The Spirit of the Laws*, Books XI, XIV-XIX, XXIX-XXX. Translated by T. Nugent, 1750.
2. Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile Books, pp. 93-96, 200-210.
3. Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D., & Graepel, T. (2013). Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(15), 5802-5805. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1218772110.
   Boldyreva, E. L. (2018). Cambridge Analytica: Ethics and online manipulation

works best when it honours the intricate relationships between peoples and their environments.[1]

The Discourse of Reason

MONTESQUIEU SPEAKS:

The black boxes hum with proprietary calculations:

Political liberty emerges from well-structured institutions that channel conflict into reasoned deliberation rather than arbitrary force. When powers remain separate, they must engage through argument, evidence, and public reasoning. This deliberative process protects freedom through transparency and accountability.[1]

The Diversity of Laws

MONTESQUIEU SPEAKS:

The platforms optimize for global uniformity:

The wide variety of laws adopted by different societies reflects rational adaptation to local conditions. Legal pluralism allows communities to develop governance suited to their particular needs, circumstances, and values. This diversity represents the flowering of human creativity in response to diverse challenges.[1]

The Synthesis Void

This is not a genuine dialectic. Where synthesis should emerge from the encounter between humanistic wisdom and technological power, we find only systematic dismantling. Montesquieu's principles offer resources for civilising technology, but digital power has moved beyond the reach of democratic philosophy.

Reset Dialectic

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   Boldyreva, E. L. (2018). Cambridge Analytica: Ethics and online manipulation

The Discourse of Reason

PROPRIETARY CODE RESPONDS:

```
while (discourse.active) { filter.through(black_box_algorithms); }
// Closed-source algorithms protected as trade secrets make the most profit for owners[16]
// Why subject algorithms to "reasoned debate"?[17]
// behavioral_modification.achieve(invisible_techniques);[18]
// Your "reasoned debate" = behavioral_pattern.to_analyze();[19]
// We can shift outcomes without voters understanding how[20]
```

The Diversity of Laws

GLOBAL PLATFORM RESPONDS:

```
legal_diversity = expensive_complications; uniform_metrics.optimize();
// We are 'new data sovereigns' that governments negotiate with[21]
// Our terms of service = constitutional documents for billions[22]
// cultural_nuance.convert_to(advertising_revenue) == false;[23]
// network_effects.require(platform_dominance);[24]
// Standardization reduces computational overhead[25]
```

The Synthesis Void

This is not a genuine dialectic. Where synthesis should emerge from the encounter between humanistic wisdom and technological power, we find only systematic dismantling. Montesquieu's principles offer resources for civilising technology, but digital power has moved beyond the reach of democratic philosophy.

Reset Dialectic

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1. Montesquieu, C. L. (1748). *The Spirit of the Laws*, Books XI, XIV-XIX, XXIX-XXX. Translated by T. Nugent, 1750.
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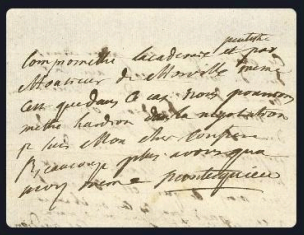
About Montesquieu website screenshots

Additional resources on Montesquieu



Bibliothèque Séléné, digital collection: Montesquieu manuscripts

Montesquieu manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Séléné, Municipal Library of Bordeaux.



Montesquieu – Lettres de La Brède

A documentary exploring Montesquieu's life and work.



UMR 5317 (CNRS/ENS Lyon)

Current research on Montesquieu's thought and works.



Société Montesquieu

A multinational association for Montesquieu studies.



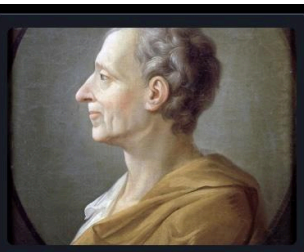
Dictionnaire Montesquieu

A scholarly dictionary on Montesquieu's concepts.



Montesquieu, bibliothèque et éditions

A digital library of Montesquieu's works and catalogue.



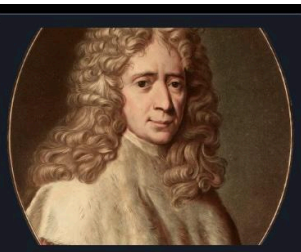
L'Esprit de Montesquieu

A five-episode podcast series on Montesquieu.



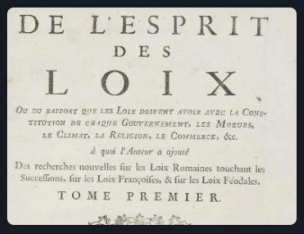
Montesquieu. De l'esprit de la géopolitique

Podcast in French on Montesquieu's view of relations between States and what rules he gives them. In some ways a precursor to geopolitics.



Montesquieu (1689-1755), le bonheur bien tempéré

Podcast in French exploring Montesquieu's philosophy of balanced happiness.



Qui fait la loi ? (2/4) : Montesquieu, l'esprit des lois

Podcast in French on Montesquieu's l'esprit des lois.



Montesquieu, philosophe et magistrat

Podcast in French on Montesquieu as a philosopher and magistrate.



Château de La Brède

Montesquieu's family estate and exhibition site.

Github Repository PDF print out - available at https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit

1.

lokalkosmos / **Lesprit**

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A critical Digital Humanities project examining Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois Book XIX through computational methods that expose the friction between contextual humanistic philosophy and digital infrastructure designed for other purposes.

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fixmessyjsonformontesquieu...	Add files via upload	last month
geojson	Create geojson	3 months ago
llm_cache.json	Add files via upload	2 months ago
montesquieu_comparisons_l...	Add files via upload	last month
montesquieu_editions.json	Update montesquieu_editions.json	3 months ago
montesquieu_translations_ll...	Rename montesquieu_translations...	last month
montesquieu_web_data.json	Rename montesquieu_web_data_fi...	last month
publication_map_data.geojson	Add files via upload	2 months ago
timelinejshyperlink.css	Update timelinejshyperlink.css	last month

README MIT license

The Digital Dialectica and Montesquieu's Book XIX

Website: https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/
Licence: MIT

A critical Digital Humanities project examining Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* Book XIX through computational methods that expose the incompatibility between contextual humanistic philosophy and digital infrastructure that is built for purposes other than humanistic understanding.

Author: lokalkosmos
Institution: Université de Franche-Comté

Table of Contents

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Project Overview

This repository supports a Master's thesis examining Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* Book XIX, specifically Chapters I-VI where he articulates the concept of *esprit général* (general spirit). The project employs Digital Humanities methods as objects worthy of critical analysis themselves, investigating what happens when computational approaches and ideologies are applied to the humanistic learning of philosophical concepts that in principle contradict the ideological frameworks and operations such methods require.

The central argument: When digital tools, computational logic, and Big Tech ideologies, rhetoric and practices meet Montesquieu's philosophy of irreducible contextual complexity, the resulting friction generates insights about both eighteenth-century political thought and contemporary digital scholarship. The project examines how computational methods originally built for military command, control, and corporate optimisation deal with philosophical commitments to humanistic contextual particularity that challenge systematisation.

Core Philosophical Position

Digital tools offer useful capabilities but remain fundamentally limited instruments requiring critical humanistic interpretation. This project treats computational limitations as philosophically significant findings within the ideology and rhetoric that supports an ever digitalising world. The tools examined here emerged from military and corporate infrastructure designed for extraction and standardisation. When these tools prove to be inadequate for capturing Montesquieu's contextual epistemology, it is a sign of their suitability for their intended purposes other than nuanced humanistic scholarship.

Research Philosophy

This project adopts a critically aware approach to Digital Humanities:

✓ Treats digital tools as objects of critical analysis alongside historical texts
✓ Acknowledges that contemporary digital infrastructure emerged from specific origins that shape its operations
✓ Recognises that abstraction shapes what becomes visible and what remains obscured
✓ Validates computational outputs through sustained human interpretation grounded in disciplinary expertise
✓ Embraces the friction when methods deal with texts that challenge their ideological assumptions
✓ Documents methodological struggles as research findings
✓ Examines how forced machine-mediation reduces the lived experience of contextual difference that Montesquieu's *esprit général* concept requires

The project rejects:

× Claims that computational methods are objective or neutral
× Technological determinism or solutionism
× Reducing humanistic enquiry to pattern recognition
× Black box analysis without acknowledging opacity and its implications for the ideology supporting an ever digitalising world
× Treating scale as inherently superior to interpretive depth
× Digital methods as inevitable rather than ideologically shaped tools

Following scholars like Johanna Drucker, Alan Liu, Stephen Ramsay, and Paul Edwards, this project understands that all data visualisation is rhetorical, that tools encode political possibilities through their design, that infrastructure carries forward the logics of its origins, and that Digital Humanities requires cultural criticism of its own practices.

Repository Contents

The repository contains transcription files, processing notebooks, datasets, and analytical outputs. All files are available at https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit

Corpus and Data

Primary Textual Corpus

15 editions of Book XIX (Chapters I-VI) transcribed and analysed:

- **Languages:** French (original), English, Italian, German, Polish
- **Date Range:** 1748 (Geneva first edition) to 1803
- **Method:** Transkribus OCR with extensive manual correction
- **Format:** Structured text files and JSON with hierarchical organisation

These editions enable examination of:

- Textual variation across printings
- Translation practices and semantic shifts
- How *esprit général* changes across linguistic boundaries
- Editorial interventions in different publication contexts

Extended Corpus

~100 editions mapped geographically:

- **Coverage:** 17 European cities across 11 regions
- **Period:** 1748-c. 1800
- **Source:** Penny University dataset and institutional archives
- **Purpose:** Demonstrating dissemination patterns whilst acknowledging that geographical coordinates cannot capture cultural complexity

Timeline Data

30 historical events (1689-c. 1800):

- Montesquieu's biography and publication history
- American and French revolutionary applications
- Catholic Church censorship (Index, 1751)
- Constitutional developments influenced by *De l'esprit des lois*

Methodological Approach

Transcription Process

Challenge: Eighteenth-century typography poses unique challenges for modern OCR systems across languages.

- **Tool:** Transkribus for initial automated transcription
- **Problems Encountered:**
  - Long s (ſ) misrecognised as f, s, or unrecognised
  - Ligatures (æ, œ) unreliably processed
  - Orthography and punctuation marks misinterpreted
- **Solution:** Extensive manual page-by-page correction comparing OCR output against original scans.

This labour-intensive process shows a fundamental reality. Computational efficiency has limits in automation and cannot achieve scholarly accuracy without sustained human intervention grounded in disciplinary expertise.

Data Structuring as Epistemology

Converting historical texts to JSON and structured formats involves interpretive choices with implications:

- Datafying nuanced and complex contexts and ideas into discrete computational units forces them into predetermined structures which may not accurately represent
- Material features that add context (typography, layout, format, unique marks, binding) become invisible in computational textual analysis

Data preparation itself enacts the abstraction Montesquieu's philosophy problematises. The requirement for standardisation and uniformity contradicts his insistence on contextual particularity.

Large Language Model Analysis

- **Tool:** Claude 3.5 Sonnet (Anthropic)
- **Purpose:** Translation and semantic comparison across 15 editions

Critical Acknowledgement:

✓ LLM analysis operates as a black box that is fundamentally opaque to external examination
✓ Outputs probably contain subtle inaccuracies, anachronisms, biases, and generalisations
✓ Statistical pattern recognition optimised for engagement metrics does not equal philosophical interpretation
✓ Systems designed for surveillance capitalism's extraction purposes cannot accommodate humanistic nuance by design
✓ All automated analyses require validation through traditional scholarly expertise

Why use LLMs despite limitations? To simply test them. The opacity and inadequacy are documented as methodological evidence demonstrating epistemological limits and the ideological purposes these systems serve.

Technologies Used

Core Tools

- **Transkribus** - OCR for historical documents (READ-COOP consortium)
- **Claude 3.5 Sonnet** - Large language model (Anthropic)
- **Python 3.x** - Data processing and analysis
- **Jupyter Notebooks** - Reproducible analytical workflows

Libraries and Frameworks

- **Pandas** - Data manipulation
- **JSON** - Structured data storage

Visualisation and Web

- **WordPress** - Content management (Université de Franche-Comté hosting)
- **TimelineJS** - Interactive timeline (Knight Lab, Northwestern)
- **Leaflet** - Geographic mapping (open source)
- **TablePress** - Bibliographic tables
- **JavaScript** - Comparative reading interface

Data Sources

Digitised Copies:

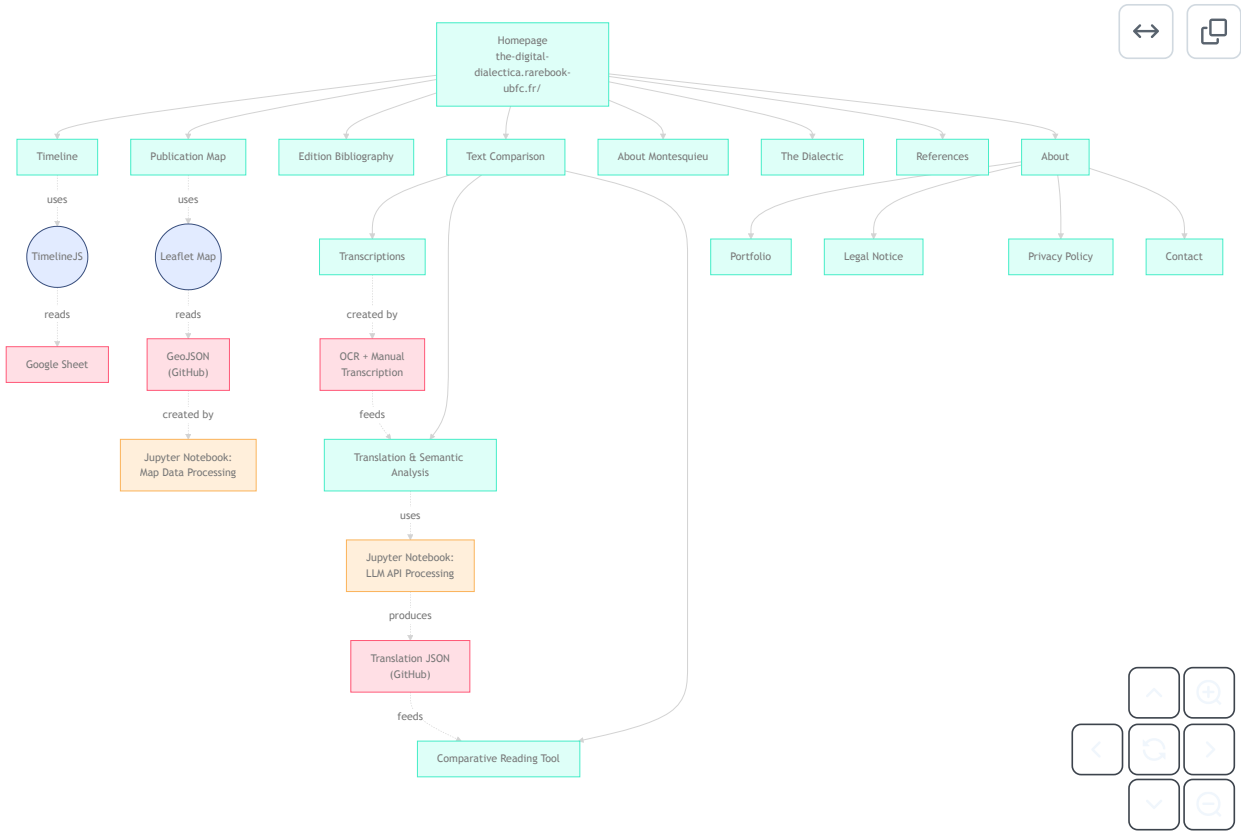
- Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France)
- Google Books
- Internet Archive
- Institutional repositories

Publication Metadata:

- Penny University Dataset
- Scholarly articles
- Gallica, Google Books, Internet Archive, and institutional repositories

Architecture

Website Structure



Data Pipeline

1. **Source Materials** → Digitised eighteenth-century editions (Gallica, Google Books, Internet Archive, institutional archives)
2. **OCR Processing** → Transkribus automated transcription
3. **Manual Correction** → Scholarly accuracy checking
4. **Structuring** → JSON and CSV formats with metadata
5. **Analysis** → LLM-assisted translation and semantic comparison
6. **Validation** → Human expert review of computational outputs
7. **Visualisation** → Interactive web interfaces
8. **GitHub Repository** → Version-controlled open data

What This Project Is (and Is Not)

This project offers:

🔍 Critical examination of digital tools alongside historical texts
📊 Transparency about methodological limits as philosophical findings
🤝 Infrastructure for collaborative scholarship
📚 Humanistic interpretation augmented by computation
🔓 Open scholarship with reproducible methods
⚖️ Epistemological examination of what algorithms built for other purposes such as surveillance capitalism can show about contextual humanistic knowledge
🏛️ Analysis of how digital infrastructure's origins are incompatible with humanistic values

This project does not claim:

× That computational methods show objective truth
× Techno-utopianism or digital solutionism
× That distant reading replaces close reading
× That big data is inherently superior
× Uncritical acceptance of algorithmic outputs
× That digitalisation is ideologically neutral or inevitable

Key Insight: When Montesquieu's philosophy of irreducible contextual complexity meets computational methods requiring abstraction and standardisation, the struggle itself becomes significant data. The limitations show epistemological boundaries and the ideological purposes digital infrastructure serves.

Using This Repository

For Researchers

Clone and examine the data:

```
git clone https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit.git
cd Lesprit
```

All transcriptions, analytical code, and documentation are available for:

- Verification of scholarly claims
- Extension to additional editions or chapters
- Comparative analysis with other Enlightenment texts
- Critical examination of DH methodologies
- Investigation of infrastructure politics in digital scholarship

For DH Practitioners

This repository provides:

- Transparent methodology including acknowledged failures and limitations
- Reproducible workflows via Jupyter notebooks
- Critical commentary on tool limitations and infrastructure politics
- Model for reflexive DH practice that questions its own methods and origins

For Philosophers and Historians

The data enables traditional humanistic enquiry:

- Close reading of textual variants
- Translation history analysis
- Montesquieu reception studies
- Enlightenment print culture research

The digital infrastructure serves interpretation.

Acknowledgements of Limitations

In the spirit of methodological transparency, this project acknowledges:

Note on Verification: The findings presented require expert verification from specialists in historical linguistics, eighteenth-century philosophy, and textual studies. This verification has not yet been completed.

Corpus Size

- 15 editions enable depth but limit statistical analysis
- **Trade-off:** Textual nuance vs. computational scale
- Small corpora permit attention to contextual particularity that Montesquieu's philosophy values

Linguistic Expertise

- Researcher background in philosophy and book history, not historical linguistics
- Translation analysis relies on scholarly sources and validated automation
- Honest acknowledgement of expertise boundaries establishes more reliable foundations than false confidence

Computational Opacity

- LLM operations remain black box despite configuration transparency
- Cannot verify reasoning behind specific outputs
- Algorithmic inscrutability contradicts scholarly values of reasoned argumentation and shows systems designed for their intended purposes other than transparent scholarship

Data Structuring

- JSON formatting imposes uniformity historical texts challenge
- Material features (typography, marginalia) dissolve into metadata
- Data preparation enacts the abstraction Montesquieu critiques, showing how computational requirements shape what becomes knowable

Interface Complexity

- Comparative reading tool creates information density that can overwhelm
- Multiple windows with lengthy passages may obscure more than clarify
- Computational presentation fragments philosophical arguments requiring sustained exposition, demonstrating limits of machine-mediated engagement

Geographical Abstraction

- Map treats culturally distinct cities as equivalent spatial coordinates
- Geneva ≠ London ≠ Naples in ways location cannot capture
- Visualisation enables pattern recognition whilst eliminating contextual richness that Montesquieu insists determines meaning

Infrastructure Origins

- Tools examined emerged from military and corporate research programmes
- Digital infrastructure designed for command, control, and extraction by design
- When tools only prove to be inadequate for humanistic understanding, they signal suitability for their intended design and purposes

These are philosophically significant findings about computational epistemology and the ideological purposes digital infrastructure serves.

Citation

Repository

```bibtex
@software{digital_dialectica_2025,
  author = {lokalkosmos},
  title = {The Digital Dialectica and Montesquieu's Book XIX:
           A Critical Digital Humanities Project},
  year = {2025},
  url = {https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit},
  institution = {Université de Franche-Comté}
}
```

Thesis Project's Digital Object

```bibtex
@mastersthesis{2025_montesquieu,
  author = {lokalkosmos},
  title = {The Digital Dialectica and Montesquieu's Book XIX:
           Critical Tensions in Digital Humanities Scholarship},
  school = {Université de Franche-Comté},
  year = {2025},
  type = {Master's thesis},
  url = {https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/}
}
```

Project Website

For citations to specific components:

- **Timeline:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/timeline/
- **Map:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/publication-map/
- **Bibliography:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/bibliography/
- **Comparative Tool:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/texts-comparison/
- **The Dialectic:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/the-dialectic/

Licence

This project is licensed under the MIT Licence. See the LICENSE file for details.

All textual transcriptions, data files, and analytical code are freely available for:

- Academic research and teaching
- Extension and modification
- Commercial use (with attribution)

Acknowledgements

Institutional Support

- **Université de Franche-Comté** - Hosting infrastructure and academic support

Data Sources

Digitised Copies:

- Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France)
- Google Books
- Internet Archive
- Institutional repositories

Publication Metadata:

- Penny University Dataset
- Scholarly articles
- Gallica, Google Books, Internet Archive, and institutional repositories

Tools and Platforms

- **Transkribus (READ-COOP)** - OCR for historical documents
- **Anthropic Claude** - Large language model analysis
- **Knight Lab (Northwestern)** - TimelineJS
- **Leaflet Contributors** - Open-source mapping

Theoretical Foundations

This project builds on critical DH and technology scholarship by:

- **Johanna Drucker** (graphical epistemology and rhetorical visualisation)
- **Alan Liu** (cultural criticism in DH)
- **Stephen Ramsay** (critical digital scholarship)
- **Paul Edwards** (infrastructure politics and closed worlds)
- **Shoshana Zuboff** (surveillance capitalism critique)

And many others cited in the thesis bibliography.

Contact

- **Project Website:** https://the-digital-dialectica.rarebook-ubfc.fr/contact
- **GitHub Repository:** https://github.com/lokalkosmos/Lesprit

Final Note: On Epistemological Modesty

This project concludes where it began: digital tools are useful but fundamentally limited. They make certain patterns visible whilst necessarily obscuring contextual richness. They enable scale but risk sacrificing depth. They promise efficiency but require extensive human labour for scholarly accuracy.

The friction between Montesquieu's contextual humanistic philosophy and computational abstraction illuminates both:

- What eighteenth-century political thought shows about limits of systematisation
- What contemporary digital methods show about their own epistemological boundaries and ideological origins

When technical tools built for other purposes deal with texts insisting on irreducible contextual complexity, the forced machine-mediation required reduces the lived experience of contextual difference that humanistic

Releases

No releases published
Create a new release

Packages

No packages published
Publish your first package

Languages

- **HTML** 77.7%
- **Jupyter Notebook** 22.3%

Suggested workflows

Based on your tech stack

SLSA Generic generator Configure

Generate SLSA3 provenance for your existing release workflows

Jekyll using Docker image Configure

Package a Jekyll site using the jekyll/builder Docker image.

More workflows Dismiss suggestions

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