The Salvetti Project: A Journey Toward Digital Approaches and Public History

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Abstract   This article offers an in-depth exploration of *The Salvetti Project*, a ground-breaking initiative dedicated to the digitisation and analysis of handwritten newsletters from the Medici Residents in London between 1640 and 1660. It chronicles the project's development, emphasising its conceptual foundation and the collaborative efforts that brought it to fruition. *The Salvetti Project* merges academic scholarship with practical application, combining traditional research methods, digital approaches, and public history to create a comprehensive and accessible historical resource.

Keywords   Early modern diplomacy. Digital scholarly edition. Media history. Handwritten newsletters. Public history. Anglo-Italian relationships. Florence. London.

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1 Introduction

The Salvetti Project is a pioneering convergence of digital humanities and historical inquiry and exemplifies the profound impact of interdisciplinary collaboration within and beyond academia.[1] Spearheaded by the EURONEWS Project, in partnership with Stefano Villani of the University of Maryland, this initiative seeks to explore, analyse, and disseminate the rich correspondence between the Medici diplomats in London – Amerigo Salvetti and his son Giovanni Salvetti Antelminelli – and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany from 1640 to 1660, a crucial period characterised by rebellion, resistance and civil war. These documents are an essential source for scholars investigating the diplomatic, political, religious, and cultural dimensions of the Stuart and Restoration periods, as well as the complex interplay of Anglo-Italian relations. This article outlines the evolution of *The Salvetti Project* from its conceptual origins to its current digital format, exploring the motivations that drove the project and examining the activities of the Medici diplomats, immersed as they were in the shifting political, religious, and social landscape of a pivotal part of the early modern era. Additionally, it examines the impact of the use of digital technologies on historical sources, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that this methodological approach presents to historians. The discussion concludes with an introduction to the Salvetti Exhibition, which synergies scholarly research with educational outreach to emphasise the importance of public history. This article demonstrates that the integration of digital humanities with traditional historical research not only adds to the 'historian's toolbox' in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the past but also enhances public engagement with history. While this approach advances the scope of the historical practices, it also highlights issues that require innovative forms of collaboration and collective intellectual endeavours to fully harness its potential in both the academic and public spheres.

2   Collaborative Ventures:
The EURONEWS and Salvetti Projects

The Salvetti Project was conducted within the framework of the EU-RONEWS Project, led by Brendan Dooley at University College Cork, in collaboration with the Medici Archive Project in Florence.[2] From September 2019 to August 2023, EURONEWS delved into a remarkable yet underexplored source: handwritten *avvisi*. Emerging from the convergence of traditional diplomatic, mercantile and humanistic practice, handwritten newsletters became a vital informational commodity in the second half of the sixteenth century (Infelise 2002). Written by a wide range of authors, both known and anonymous, these *avvisi* capitalised on improvements in the communication network. They targeted not only political and cultural elites but also a broader readership (Dooley 2010). Access to these newsletters was facilitated through diplomatic patronage networks and the thriving information market in cities like Rome and Venice. Serving as precursors to the printed gazettes of the early seventeenth century, handwritten *avvisi* continued to coexist with printed periodicals well into the eighteenth century (Scarborough King 2016; Droste, Salmi-Niklander 2019).

Housed within the State Archive of Florence, the Mediceo del Principato (henceforth MdP) collection constitutes a pivotal repository of primary sources pertaining to the Medici dynasty from 1532 to 1737. This collection is a monumental assemblage, consisting of approximately three million letters that occupy nearly a mile of shelf space (Assonitis, Sandberg 2016). Within this extensive archive, there is a substantial portion of over one hundred volumes of *avvisi*, spanning chronologically from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The geographical scope of these documents is remarkably broad, extending from Amsterdam to Malta, Lisbon to Istanbul, and even reaching as far as Jamaica and Goa, illustrating the expansive network of Medici influence and power. These *avvisi* served as critical pieces of contextual information, frequently accompanying dispatches sent by Florentine residents stationed at major courts and cities throughout early modern Europe (Barker 2016). They were crucial in disseminating information, shaping public opinion, orchestrating diplomatic initiatives, and impacting the geopolitical strategies of the era.

In recent years, several groundbreaking projects have employed computational methods to analyse historical newspapers on an unprecedented scale (Wijfjes 2017). Despite the burgeoning interest in digital humanities initiatives that focus on historical printed

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periodicals, their earlier, often overlooked counterpart – handwritten *avvisi* – remains relatively underexplored. A notable exception is the *Fuggerzeitungen* project, a pioneering endeavour overseen by the Austrian Institute of Historical Research in collaboration with the Austrian National Library in Vienna. This initiative has successfully digitised and meticulously examined 27 volumes of manuscript newsletters dating from 1568 to 1605 (Keller, Molino 2015). Although the project has carefully catalogued the metadata for individuals, dates, and places mentioned in these texts (Molino 2016; Schobesberger 2016), it has left a deeper analysis of the content to future researchers, who must rely on photographic replicas, rather than transcriptions, for their studies.

The EURONEWS project, which focuses on the analysis of the structures, forms, and content of manuscript newsletters, therefore represents a significant advancement in the field of digital humanities. This initiative has digitised hundreds of thousands of images and curated a dataset of approximately ten thousand handwritten newsletters, which are organised using an innovative digital XML scheme. This pioneering approach has offered insights into the structural features of early modern news networks by analysing a corpus of approximately one million words (Dooley et al. 2021). By integrating digital methods with historical research, the project enables a deep exploration of the cultural, material, social, and political contexts of these newsletters (Mansutti et al. 2024). It illuminated the complex dynamics of early news dissemination, including the temporality and spatiality of news flow (Kreuze 2022; Mansutti 2022), representations of power structures, and the interrelations between different modes of communication, i.e. oral, manuscript, and print (Dooley, Boerio 2022). By exploring how these *avvisi* reached and influenced diverse audiences, the project enhances our understanding of the public sphere's early development and the foundational role of *avvisi* in the evolution of early information society (Darton 2000; De Vivo 2005). Moreover, the collaboration with the *Birth of News* Program at the Medici Archive Project and with the *AVVISO* Project, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by Alessio Assonitis, has significantly expanded the scope of research. This partnership has facilitated scholarly access to several thousand documents in the Medici Archive Project's database, increasing the potential for in-depth research. Consequently, this database is the largest digital collection of *avvisi* freely available online.

Launched in 2019, the Medici Interactive Archive (MIA) is an innovative research portal that adopts self-digitisation and self-archiving methods, coupled with textual data entry, to reconstruct and

preserve the extensive Medici collection.[3] MIA's software architecture is divided into two principal components. The back end is developed using JAVA (J2EE) 8 and employs MYSQL as its relational database, ensuring efficient data management. It also utilises Tomcat as the servlet container, effectively managing server-side requests and maintaining the robustness and reliability of the system's core operations. The front-end is built with AngularJS, enhancing the user experience by offering dynamic and responsive interactions. A key feature here is a customised version of IIPImage, which facilitates the streaming of high-resolution images, essential for the Manuscript Transcriber feature. This tool allows users to view and edit manuscripts with great precision, demonstrating the platform's ability to handle detailed and complex tasks seamlessly. Together, these components form a cohesive and efficient digital ecosystem that robustly supports MIA's sophisticated functionality. This new database is a major development in the Medici Archive Project's (MAP) long-standing mission, initiated in the early 1990s, to preserve and enhance the Medici archival heritage. It greatly facilitates access to and engagement with one of the most important Renaissance and early modern collections. This development reflects MAP's commitment to safeguarding these historic treasures, ensuring that scholars and the public can more effectively explore and interact with this rich cultural and historical resource.[4] The MIA infrastructure has been instrumental in the development of the EURONEWS project (Allori, Paltrinieri 2020), serving as an essential virtual workspace. It facilitated the sharing of documentation and enabled remote collaboration, features that were particularly important during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

An important part of the EURONEWS corpus are the handwritten newsletters of *The Salvetti Project*. This initiative originated from a fruitful encounter between Stefano Villani and EURONEWS researchers at the conference *Anglo-Italian History, 1500-1700: Translating News, Politics and Commerce*, organised by the University of Florence together with the International Studies Institute in Florence, in February 2020, just a week before Italy entered a national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On this occasion, we discussed an extraordinary collection of primary sources: the unpublished correspondence of the two Tuscan residents in London, Amerigo Salvetti, and his son, Giovanni Salvetti Antelminelli, to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand II, and his secretaries. This paper trail offers a unique window on the Italian perception of the English Civil Wars and the Interregnum period covering the year 1648 to 1660.

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3 http://mia.medici.org/Mia/LoginUser.do.

4 https://www.medici.org.

Villani had previously transcribed this vast body of documents as an appendix to his 1999 Tesi di Perfezionamento at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa entitled *Uomini, idee, notizie tra l'Inghilterra della Rivoluzione e l'Italia della Controriforma* (Villani 1999). Despite initially securing a publishing agreement for the transcriptions with the series *Fonti per la storia d'Italia moderna e contemporanea*, issued by the Istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea, the project was ultimately derailed. Financial challenges within the institute proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, and the initiative was abandoned. Inspired by the historical importance of these documents, we considered the creation of a digital edition, an idea that catalysed collaboration and eventually led to the creation of the *Salvetti Project* under the auspices of the EURONEWS research group. This digital initiative has since made most of the transcribed handwritten newsletters and their digital replicas freely available on the MAP's platform, thereby opening this valuable historical resource to the wider community. To bring this project to fruition, we set up a crowdsourcing initiative which meticulously proofread the transcriptions and added preliminary metadata. The texts were then encoded in the XML protocol (Ray 2001), resulting in a corpus of nearly 400 documents, ranging in length up to three hundred thousand words, which are now marked up for detailed analysis. Before discussing this digital initiative, it is worth establishing a historical context for the documents and their main protagonist. This discourse lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the significance of the content. The use of digital tools in the analysis of historical sources will then be explored, critically examining both the advantages and challenges of this approach.

3 One Man, Dual Identities, and Hundreds of Newsletters

The key figure behind the manuscript newsletters is Amerigo Salvetti, whose real name was Alessandro Antelminelli. Born in Lucca in 1572, he belonged to one of the city's most prestigious merchant families, a collateral branch of the family of Castruccio Castrocani degli Antelminelli, the ancient lord of Lucca. Alessandro spent his early years in Lucca, where, towards the end of the sixteenth century, a few families, thanks to their commercial dealings, had managed to secure positions of power in the city government. This situation had created an oligarchic block that generated considerable discontent among those excluded. Moreover, the Republic of Lucca found itself in a delicate geopolitical position, being forced to choose between the dominant Spanish power and an emerging neighbour, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Discontent was particularly palpable in figures like Bernardino Antelminelli, Alessandro's father, a man of imperious and

proud character, and the son of Baldassarre, who had held important diplomatic positions on behalf of the Republic.

This complex political and social context would profoundly influence the life of Alessandro and his family. In 1596, under the guise of establishing a commercial venture, Bernardino travelled to Genoa where he became a spy, providing the Medici court with confidential information on the political strategies of the Spanish and Genoese. His duplicity was discovered, and he was arrested by the Genoese authorities, alongside one of his sons, and both were escorted back to Lucca. At the same time, two other sons were detained, and a search of the family's villa in San Colombano uncovered incriminating documents. Under torture, Bernardino confessed to divulging secrets to the Grand Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici. He and his sons were tried and sentenced to death. The news of his family's grim fate reached Alessandro as he was returning home from Flanders, where he had been engaged in financial activities. To avoid arrest, Alessandro sought refuge first in Florence and then in northern Europe, finally arriving in London where he adopted the name Amerigo Salvetti, to evade the Luccan authorities, who were actively searching for him and had even plotted his assassination. With his new alias, he began working as an informant for the Secretary of State of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. From February 1617, Salvetti sent manuscript newsletters to Florence, aligning himself with Francesco Quaratesi, the Tuscan envoy at the time, whom he officially replaced in 1618. He held this position until his death in July 1657, when, in recognition of his dedicated service, the post was given to his young son, Giovanni Salvetti Antelminelli (Villani 2004).

The correspondence from the Florentine diplomat offers a crucial perspective that informed a European state about the English Civil Wars. It offers a testimony to the interpretation of these events by a source deeply entrenched in the English context. When the Long Parliament was convened, Salvetti was already in his seventies and was one of the foreign diplomats with the longest period of residency in England. By this time, he had become deeply integrated into the social, cultural, and political milieu of the country (Orrell 1976). His connection with England was further strengthened in October 1635 when he married Frances Colbrand, a Catholic and the daughter of Sir John Colbrand. This marriage produced three daughters and three sons, one of whom, Giovanni, was to succeed him in the role of Tuscan resident.

Salvetti was the most well-informed Italian observer of the developments in England, and for a considerable time, he was alone in this capacity. This unique position was a direct consequence of the Republic of Venice's decision not to appoint a successor immediately after the unexpected death of its envoy, Gerolamo Agostini, in February 1645. Venice chose to wait for the political situation in England to stabilise,

delaying the resumption of diplomatic relations until the spring of 1652. Similarly, the Republic of Genoa did not establish diplomatic relations with England until the autumn of 1651, further highlighting Salvetti's exclusive access and insights into the English political arena during these crucial years (Villani 2004; Villani forthcoming).

With a deep understanding of the context that led to the revolutionary crisis, Salvetti's insights were further enriched by his mastery of the English language. Salvetti's fluency in English clearly gave him an informational advantage over other foreign diplomats. His predecessor, Ottaviano Lotti, had no command of the language, and instead conducted his conversations in French and Latin, while also taking advantage of the Stuart court's familiarity with Italian. Likewise, the ambassadors of the Republic of Venice candidly confessed their lack of English proficiency and consequently relied on interpreters for communication (Adair 1935, 127).

Salvetti sent a weekly newsletter to Tuscany, addressed to the Grand Duke, usually prepared on Thursday, summarising the events of the week in the most objective manner possible. Additionally, he sent a dispatch more closely related to his duties as a resident, addressed to the Secretary of State – during the years of the revolution, Balì Giambattista Gondi – often in code, with last-minute updates that could not be included in the news sheet, which was finalised on Friday, just before it was sent out. It took about a month for the letters to reach Florence.

Written in the third person, the handwritten newsletters were meticulously prepared in multiple copies, not only for the Grand Duke but also for a wider readership. This distribution network extended to Tuscan residents in various European capitals, other Italian states, and prominent members of the Medici court. For example, some newsletters were specifically sent to Niccolò Sacchetti, who served as ambassador to the Imperial court.[5] Moreover, numerous copies of these *avvisi* in the *Miscellanea Medicea* files suggest that they were also intended for influential figures like the *Princes du sang*, Mattias, the Governor of Siena, or Cardinal Giovanni Carlo.[6] Interestingly, the circulation of his newsletters was not confined to the diplomatic arena. This is illustrated by some of the newsletters sent to Ippolito Buondelmonti who, in addition to his diplomatic duties for the Grand Duchy in Milan and Venice, was a recognised figure in the political information network.[7] Buondelmonti's involvement

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[5] Archivio di Stato di Firenze (henceforth ASFi), Mediceo del Principato (henceforth MdP) 4235.

[6] ASFi, Micellanea Medicea (henceforth MM) 255, ins. 13.

[7] Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (henceforth BNCF), Magliabiechiano 99, Classe XXIV, cc. 224*r*-229*v*.

and the demand for his newsletters from a broad spectrum of correspondents demonstrates their value and impact beyond traditional diplomatic channels, serving as a vital conduit for information and political insight across Italy and Europe (Dooley 2023).

Salvetti's informational activities exemplify the burgeoning news culture that swept across the European continent from the late sixteenth century and underwent significant changes in the first half of the seventeenth century. The latter period saw the emergence of the first printed newspapers, which built on the foundation of earlier manuscript newsletters and found particularly fertile ground in revolutionary England (Raymond 1996). This period has been recognised by a significant body of historical scholarship as the beginning of an embryonic public sphere (Zaret 2000; Lake, Pincus 2012). As a firsthand observer, Salvetti highlighted the widening of political participation when, for instance, on 14 June 1641, he wrote:

> last week, in some churches of this city, one could publicly see preaching by someone who makes hats and another who makes buttons.[8]

Additionally, his correspondence shows that events in England were not isolated occurrences. Through printed gazettes from Genoa and Rome, Salvetti received information about the Neapolitan Revolution of 1647, allowing him to draw parallels with the English political scenario, thereby illustrating the interconnectedness and transnational impact of revolutions in the mid-seventeenth century (Boerio 2020, 2016).

4 From Paper to Bits

Interest in Salvetti's papers dates back to 1859, when Antonio Panizzi, the British Library's Italian head librarian, led a project to transcribe the copious correspondences of Tuscan diplomats in London from 1618 to 1691, envisioning a record analogous to the Venetian Calendar of State Papers (Laven 2015). This ambitious endeavor produced around thirty volumes, copied from the original file kept in Florence. The transcriptions, which include the diplomatic correspondence of the Salvetti, both father and son, have been indispensable to generations of scholars working on both British and European history. The transcribed volumes are now a part of the holdings of the British Library in London, where they are catalogued as Add. MSS., 27962 A-W. The historical value of these documents was further recognised when Charles Heath Wilson, an English intellectual living in Florence, translated the manuscript newsletters of Salvetti from

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8 ASFi, MdP, 4201, c. 43*r*: Avvisi from London, 14 June 164 (mapDocId#52896).

11 April 1625 to 16 December 1628. His translation was published by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 1887 (Wilson 1887).

In the recent shift towards the "New Diplomatic History," scholars have profoundly reevaluated diplomatic practices, viewing them through the prism of socio-cultural contexts and recognising the importance of informal, actor-based perspectives (Watkins 2008). Central to this historiographical reorientation has been a new focus on the editing and publication of diplomatic correspondence, which has emerged as a fundamental scholarly endeavour. These primary sources are indispensable for elucidating the intricate mechanics of international relations and the daily intricacies of diplomatic activity (Volpini 2020). In the wake of this scholarly resurgence, Orietta Santini's edited collection of Amerigo Salvetti's correspondence, covering the period from 1645 to 1649, was published in 1997 (Antelminelli 1997). Stefano Villani's doctoral thesis added to this archival repository with a detailed transcription and editorial effort, presenting a comprehensive corpus of documents. This corpus includes both incoming and outgoing correspondence between Florence and London from 1648 to 1660.

The archival records detailing the informational and diplomatic activities of Amerigo Salvetti and his son, Giovanni Salvetti Antelminelli form part of a subsection in the Mediceo del Principato (MdP) that focuses on relations between England and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany (Del Piazzo 1966, 140-1). The prominence of Salvetti's information-gathering work within the English sub-series is starkly evident from a simple quantitative analysis of the records. The English sub-collection, which spans the years 1542 to 1737 in 71 volumes, includes 20 volumes – or 28.17% – of Salvetti's diplomatic activities.[9] Therefore, the creation of a digital edition of Salvetti's handwritten newsletters was motivated by the intention to make this significant repository of primary sources accessible to the academic community. Seamlessly aligned with the objectives of the EURONEWS project, this initiative provides a dynamic and accessible platform that significantly enhances scholarly research (Driscoll, Pierazzo 2016). This digital initiative was organised through a carefully designed two-phase workflow, each phase comprising a series of deliberate steps. Such workflows in digital humanities projects exemplify the synthesis of technology, discipline-specific methodologies, and interpersonal collaboration, serving as a cornerstone for innovative scholarly practices (Dombrowski 2023, 140).

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9 The files concerning the dispatches and handwritten newsletters of Amerigo Salvetti and his son, Giovanni Salvetti Antlminelli, from England to Florence are in ASFi, MdP 4192; 4193; 4194; 4195; 4196; 4197; 4198; 4199; 4200; 4201; 4202; 4203; 4204; 4205; 4206; 4207; 4210; 4211. The minutes from Florence to England are in ASFi, MdP 4208; 4209.

Phase 1 focused on the digitisation of selected volumes from the State Archive of Florence (MdP 4202-04). This process involved taking high-resolution photographs on site with personal cameras, in accordance with the new regulations of the Italian Minister of Culture that allow the free reproduction of historical materials for non-commercial purposes. Following the acquisition of these images, the next steps were to ensure their clarity and to upload them onto the MIA platform, designed to facilitate the storage and organisation of collections of images. The photographs were then ordered according to the internal pagination of the volumes. Each document was assigned a unique ID to prevent duplication of records and categorised under "NEWS" with the document type "AVVISO". Additionally, documents were systematically titled with specific details (location and issuing date), for example "Londra 28 Novembre 1648". However, there was a significant temporal disparity in calendar use across early modern Europe. For example, the reform of the Gregorian calendar, introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, recalibrated the calendar by removing ten days; thus, the day following 4 October 1582 was designated as 15 October. Initially adopted in the Catholic countries, it was not until 1752 that this change was adopted in England. Moreover, the Florentine calendar, which prevailed until 1750, began the new year on March 25. Therefore, a document dated "London, 8 January 1648 *ab Incarnatione*" should be read as 8 January 1649. This distinct method of dating adds another layer of complexity to the accurate interpretation of historical documents from this period. A nuanced understanding of these calendar systems is essential for the accurate dating and contextual analysis of archival materials from this transitional epoch.

Phase 2 centred on developing a comprehensive corpus of Salvetti's handwritten newsletters, complete with XML markup and detailed metadata on the MIA platform. Initially, text was extracted from a Word document provided by Villani containing transcriptions of newsletters from 1648 to 1660. These transcriptions were meticulously verified against the original documents to ensure accuracy. Once confirmed, the text was uploaded to MIA's transcription section. Subsequently, enriched metadata was added, identifying language of the text, referenced individuals and locations, and topics related to material culture. Additionally, an English synopsis was provided, summarising the main information contained in the texts. Following this, an XML schema specifically developed by the EURONEWS project was then integrated with the plain text to facilitate paragraph-level analysis of the news content, thus enhancing the precision of the textual analysis [fig. 1].[10]

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10 https://github.com/lallori/euronews-xml-corpus/wiki/transcription-xml-encoding-guidelines.

This XML scheme is divided into two main sections: **NewsHeader** and **NewsFrom,** each serving specific roles in the transcription process. The **NewsHeader** segment captures the overarching details of the news item, specifically the metadata about where and when the news was gathered. It contains the following subfields:

- **hub:** indicates the geographic origin or the central hub from where the news was gathered and aggregated;
- **date**: specifies the date associated with the news header. This is particularly important for historical documents where dates may need to be inferred or are subject to uncertainty;
- **transc**: holds the transcription of the title or headline of the news document.

The **NewsFrom** segment details individual news items within the document, structured to provide a deeper dive into each specific news report. It includes:

- **from**: specifies the location where an event took place. This tag might include attributes to denote uncertainty or additional details such as exact date of the news;
- **plTransit**: details transit points and vectors pertinent to the news story, which may diverge from the origin of the News(hub) and News(from), and also records the mode of transmission and communication of the news item;
- **transc**: contains the full transcription of the news content;
- **newsTopic**: classifies the news into various categories such as Politics, Military, etc.;
- **wordCount**: counts the number of words in the transcription;
- **position**: indicates the sequential position of the news item within the overall document, helping to organise and retrieve news items;
- Attributes like **dateUnsure** and **fromUnsure** are used to mark elements where the researcher is uncertain about the data.

```xml
<newsFrom>
    <from date="15/01/1655" dateUnsure="y">London</from>
    <from fromUnsure="y">Mediterranean Sea</from>
    <transc>Di quella del Blake [Blake, Robert] non si ha altro avviso,
        se non che fusse entrata nel Mediterano, senza penetrarsi ancora
        dove anderebbe a parare il lor impiego, aspettato qui di
        sentirsi ben presto.</transc>
    <newsTopic>Military</newsTopic>
    <wordCount>32</wordCount>
    <position>4</position>
</newsFrom>
```

Figure 1   An example of EURONEWS XML Scheme

The multi-layered workflow for data entry and corpus creation greatly enhances the searchability of documents on the MIA platform, facilitating detailed, paragraph-level analysis by researchers (Slauter 2012). This method has also resulted in the creation of an XML-tagged dataset of transcriptions, vital for the preservation, retrieval, and in-depth examination of the texts. Access to these documents is granted through free registration on the MIA platform, which offers various consultation options.[11]

A central facet of *The Salvetti Project* was the integration of both junior and senior scholars through the EURONEWS online internship program.[12] Initiated in response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this program brought together sixteen students from diverse social, cultural, and academic backgrounds – including fields such as history, philology, digital humanities, and journalism. The program provided participants with a comprehensive, free training that included skills ranging from Renaissance palaeography to digital text analysis. Additionally, the curriculum was augmented with guest lectures in a range of disciplines, including history, art history, and philosophy, thus enhancing their interdisciplinary acumen. This rigorous educational endeavour not only elevated the students' research skills, but also equipped them to tackle subsequent challenges. For example, several participants successfully defended their Masters' theses with high honours and secured substantial doctoral scholarships with project proposals focused on media history.[13]

In the following sections, we introduce a series of digital experiments exploring Salvetti's documentation, resulting from the collaboration between the two authors within the internship online program. These investigations illustrate how computational techniques and visualisation tools can significantly enrich historical inquiry by revealing fresh data patterns (Moretti 2005). Additionally, they shed

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11 To access documents from *The Salvetti Project* in the Medici Archive Project Database, users must first register and then log in at `https://mia.medici.org`. Once logged in, documents can be found by searching for Volume 4202-02 or by looking up individual, Amerigo Salvetti. An index can be found at: `https://www.euronewsproject.org/salvetti-index/`

12 For the internship program see: `https://www.euronewsproject.org/internships/`. The Juniors fellows and interns who were involved on *The Salvetti Project* are: Nikat Ara, Lorenzo Bini, Miriam Campopiano, Enrico Di Prisco, Federica d'Augelli, Davide Limatola, Alba Malcangi, Simona Monaco, and Silvia Villafranca. We wish to convey our gratitude for their efforts and dedications.

13 To read the results of some research conducted as part of the internship program: Campopiano, M. (2022). "News from the New World". `https://www.euronewsproject.org/2022/03/02/news-from-the-new-world/`; Limatola, D. (2021). "Stars and News: The Siege of Vienna 1683". `https://www.euronewsproject.org/2021/10/15/stars-and-news-the-siege-of-wien-1683/`; Mori, A. (2022). "An Animated History of the First English Civil War (1642 1646)". `https://www.euronewsproject.org/2022/07/30/an-animated-history-of-the-first-english-civil-war-1642-1646/`.

light on the insights, challenges, and opportunities that arise integrating digital tools into the study of historical corpora.

5 The Sorrows of Old Salvetti

Salvetti's handwritten newsletters provide a fertile basis for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of emotions and sentiments, aspects increasingly recognised as central to a recent historiographical trend known as the "history of emotions" (Ferente 2019). Digital emotion research involves the detection of sentiment and emotion through Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques (Leemans 2017). This approach integrates computer science, cognitive science, and computational linguistics, enabling computational systems to interpret, analyse, and simulate human language in a manner that parallels human communication. Traditionally used to analyse content from social media, blogs, and product reviews for insights into political behaviour and marketing strategies, sentiment analysis employs rule-based, dictionary-based, and machine learning techniques to categorise texts based on the sentiments or emotional tone expressed. The investigation employs a taxonomy developed by Paul Ekman, focusing on six fundamental expressions-emotions: joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise, which, according to Ekman, are considered universal (Ekman 1999). Consequently, a decision was made to conduct an experiment focusing on the years 1649 and 1658, aimed at discerning the sentiments and emotions within the Salvetti corpus. To operationalize this research inquiry, a Python script was employed to analyse the transcriptions of individual news items (McKinney 2022). This script assigned a percentage to these sentiments (positive or negative) and emotions (joy, sadness, anger, and fear) using the FEEL-IT library, which is specifically tailored for the Italian language (Bianchi et al. 2021).

The analysis involved several steps, starting with the preprocessing of the text, which involves removing punctuation and stop words. Given that the newsletters are written in an archaic form of Italian, it was imperative to augment the default nltk Python library's stop words package with a selection of ancient stop words, such as "et" (and), "de" (of), and "lor" (them), to ensure their exclusion during the analysis. Subsequently, the processed text undergoes tokenization, whereby it is segmented into word units. Following this, a machine learning algorithm, trained on a labelled data model akin to a "dictionary" of phrases, examines individual sentences to ascertain, based on the model, those indicative of positive and negative sentiments (neutrality is not currently supported by the library), while also considering positive negations. A similar process is used for emotions. The result is then presented as a pie chart illustrating the resulting percentages.

The decision to use FEEL-IT was prompted by the absence of alternative sentiment analysis libraries dedicated to the Italian language. Despite recognising its limitations and its original application, FEEL-IT was chosen for its adaptability to Italian sentiment analysis, albeit designed for a different context. It was essential to test the library's efficacy on the archaic Italian used in the documentation. To this end, samples of newsletters were processed to verify that the sentiments and emotions identified by the output were consistent with our interpretations [fig. 2].

```python
from feel_it import EmotionClassifier, SentimentClassifier

emotion_classifier = EmotionClassifier()
sentiment_classifier = SentimentClassifier()

# Notizie campione
testo = [
    Testo 1 "Qui si fa gran diligenza per la spedizione a quella volta dei 16 g
    "rossi vasselli che sotto il comando del cavaliere Niccolì Crispe si devono
    "mandare per assistere al generale Penn nei suoi disegni in quelle Indie.",

    Testo 2 "Sopra del punto della religione si mostrono sempre molto arditi,
    "ma come le sette sono hoggi in queste parti molte et ostinate, si dubita
    "molto che non la potranno cos&#236; presto ridurla ad una sola; ma saranno
    "necessitati di connivare ad alcune di esse, purchè; non sia alla Cattolica Romana",

    Testo 3 "Qui si discorre questa settimana che i negoziati con Francia siano
    "molto avvanzati, et che ben presto sia per sentirsene una buona conclusione."
]

# Analisi delle emozioni
emozioni = emotion_classifier.predict(testo)
print("Analisi delle emozioni:")
for i, emozione in enumerate(emozioni):
    print(f"Testo {i+1}: {emozione}")

# Analisi del sentiment
sentimenti = sentiment_classifier.predict(testo)
print("\nAnalisi del sentiment:")
for i, sentiment in enumerate(sentimenti):
    print(f"Testo {i+1}: {sentiment}")


Analisi delle emozioni:
Testo 1: joy
Testo 2: anger
Testo 3: joy

Analisi del sentiment:
Testo 1: positive
Testo 2: negative
Testo 3: positive
```

Figure 2 The Python code of the Feel It library that handles sentiment and emotion analysis

The year 1649 was chosen for in-depth analysis due to its histori-
cal significance, highlighted by the execution of King Charles I. This
event marked the first time in European history that a reigning mon-
arch was tried and executed. This landmark moment led to profound
political upheaval, culminating in the dissolution of the monarchy
and the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell.
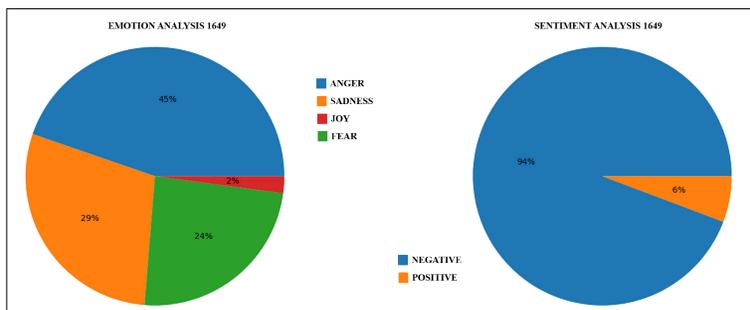
Figure 3 Results of sentiment and emotion analysis for the year 1649

The *avvisi* penned by Salvetti during this tumultuous year have a dis-
tinctly negative sentiment, marked by an undercurrent of anger and
sadness. Such emotional tones reflect Salvetti's deep-seated mon-
archist leanings and his devout Catholicism, factors that inevitably
shaped his perception of the events of the time. His writings, there-
fore, serve not only as historical accounts, but also as a window into
how his personal beliefs and religious convictions profoundly influ-
enced his reactions to the political landscape [fig. 3].

The year 1658 was significant because it was one of the last years
of the Protectorate, under the rule of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Pro-
tector. It was also notable for Cromwell's failing health and his sub-
sequent death on 3 September 1658. His passing marked the begin-
ning of the end for the Protectorate, as his son Richard Cromwell
succeeded him but lacked the political acumen and military leader-
ship to maintain control. This power vacuum eventually led to the
restoration of the monarchy in 1660 with the coronation of Charles
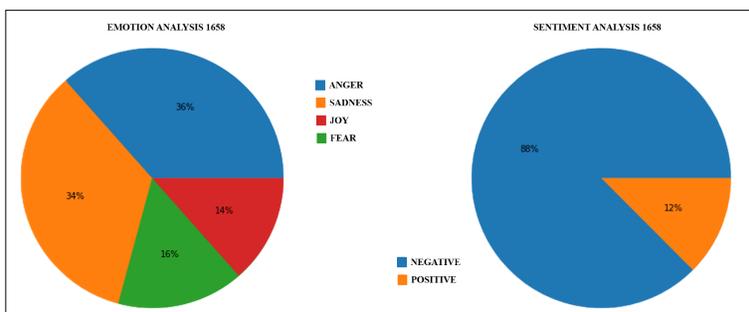II, signalling the end of this extraordinary political experience.

Figure 4 Results of sentiment and emotion analysis for the year 1658

The data analysis reveals a marked increase in expressions of joy, particularly as the Protectorate era drew to a close, reflecting the writer's optimism about the possible restoration of the monarchy. At the same time, there is a noticeable decline in expressions of anger and fear, sentiments that had previously been exacerbated by the prevailing uncertainty of the situation **[fig. 4]**.

The analytical exploration of Salvetti's *avvisi* which, as expected, reflect a negative bias due to his ideological leanings, reveals deeper implications when extended beyond a singular focus to a broader analysis encompassing diverse news stories over time and space. Much as this analysis of the Salvetti *avvisi* reveals his political stance, a similar text-based analysis of texts whose authors are unknown (as is the case with most *avvisi*) may indicate overall patterns of shifting opinions about political events. In short, this analysis could indicate a general picture of the impact of news on the public sentiment and provide hints towards the difficult issue of the identities and inclinations of the texts' writers. However, the current limitations of relying on closed-source model restrict this study by preventing a more detailed examination at the paragraph level. Future research needs to overcome these issues by training open-source model on large historical corpora so to explore broader patterns in how specific types of news stories trigger particular emotional responses, thereby enhancing our understanding of news impact on reader perception.

6   Words and Things

Like many of his contemporaries, Amerigo Salvetti was a staunch supporter of absolute monarchy. His allegiance stemmed from a profound personal conviction, exemplified by his own life story. Departing from the republican tradition of his native Lucca, Salvetti entered the service of the Medici dynasty. Consequently, his perspective on events inevitably reflected that of an individual deeply immersed in the conservative ideology of the period. This perspective is pervasive in the language of Salvetti's handwritten newsletters, which, despite their primary function of reporting, often betray his political and cultural stance. This is particularly evident in the analysis of specific terms that represent ongoing political conflict. To delve into this aspect, the frequency of selected terms year-by-year from 1649 to 1658 were tracked within the documents. A quantitative analysis was conducted using a custom Python script, allowing for the visual presentation of the data, akin to employing an n-gram viewer (Ledolter, VanderVelde 2022, 142-50). The words initially examined were "Republic" and "Monarchy", reflecting two of the most contentious issues in the political and public discourse.
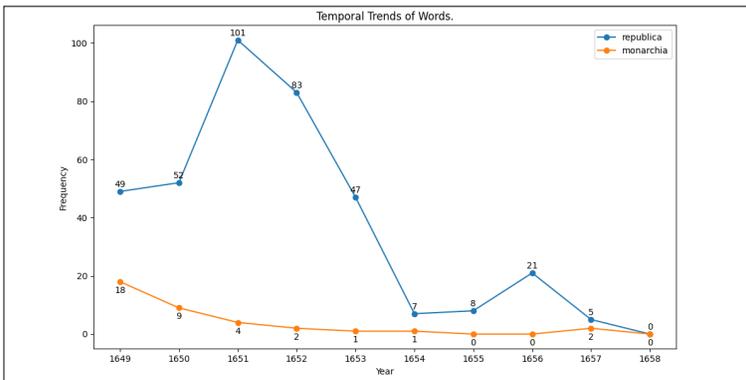
Figure 5   Temporal trend of the frequency of the terms *republica* and *monarchia*

It is apparent from the data that in 1649, a pivotal year marked by the execution of Charles I of England and the abolition of the monarchy, both the terms "monarchy" (*monarchia*) and "republic" (*republica*) received significant attention in Salvetti's texts **[fig. 5]**. Following Charles I's execution, the term "republic" experienced a notable surge in use, reflecting the profound shifts in England's political landscape, while the term "monarchy" showed a relatively consistent trend throughout the period. Salvetti consistently uses the Italian

term "repubblica" rather than "commonwealth" to explain the political transition, providing a familiar frame of reference for his Florentine audience. The circulation of political language is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing aspects of this period. During this time, contemplation of the republican model was stimulated not only by reflection on ancient republics (Hebrew, Greek, and Roman) or even on the mixed Venetian constitution, but also began to extend to more contemporary examples such as the republican model of the United Provinces (Van Gelderen, Skinner 2005).

However, his political discourse seems to be closely aligned with the Tuscan tradition, particularly with the historiography of Guicciardini over that of Machiavelli (Gilbert 1965). This inclination reflects a preference for descriptive inquiry over analytical scrutiny, prioritising observation of political dynamics over interpretation. Salvetti's proclivity towards political realism simplifies complex political constellations into broad classifications such as republic, monarchy, and democracy. Faced with the rise of radical factions, Salvetti's assessment of popular democracy was clearly and inherently pessimistic. On multiple occasions, he voiced his apprehension about the potential for disorder and anarchy resulting from the participation of lower social classes in the revolutionary process.

However, his concerns about the emergence of an "ochlocratic moment" were shared by many writers of the time, as evidenced by references to the multitude as a multi-headed hydra, an image also employed by Thomas Hobbes (Cuttica 2021). However, the use of pejorative terms to describe political factions was common to other contemporary political writers. To refer to the broad spectrum of English radicalism, he did not hesitate to label them as "republicants" (*repubblicanti*), perhaps drawing on his Italian heritage. Interestingly, this term appears in the title of a book published in Lucca in 1641, which was his birthplace.[14] Similarly, the use of the term *soldatesca* was a way of signalling the political radicalism achieved by the army. This phenomenon becomes particularly evident through the comparison of terms such as *repubblicanti* (republicans), *soldatesca* (military), and *realisti* (royalists) within the corpus of manuscript newsletters.

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14 *Il prencipe republicante illustrato sul Tabor discorso predicabile fatto nell'eccellentissimo senato di Lucca il secondo sabbato di quaresima dal p. Gioseffo Bonafede...* In Lucca: per Baldassar del Giudice 1641.
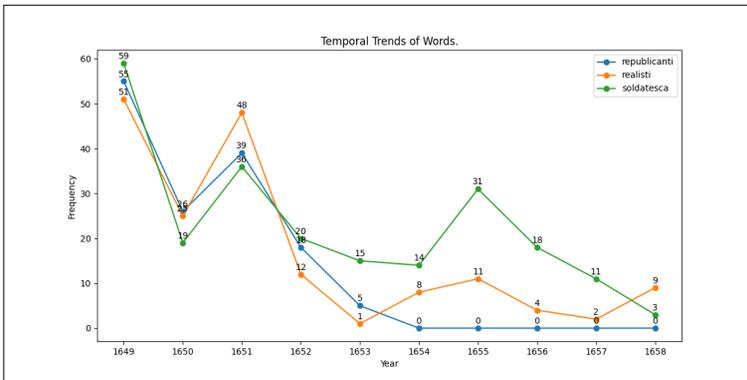
Figure 6   Temporal trend of the frequency of the terms *republicanti*, *soldatesca* and *realisti*

This graph shows that the occurrence of these terms fluctuates considerably different political periods **[fig. 6]**. The apex notably occurs at the onset of 1649, marked by the fervent political discussion surrounding the trial of the King and the establishment of a new form of government, which led to heightened tensions involving all factions. Another notable moment is in 1651, characterised by the culmination of Cromwell's military campaign in Ireland, the waning influence of radical movements, and the ascension of James II to the throne of Scotland. Subsequently, we observe a downward trend in the occurrence of these terms, with a pronounced divergence beginning in 1652. During this period, the term *repubblicanti* undergoes a continuous decline and finally disappears from the Salvetti *avvisi* by 1654. Conversely, the term *soldatesca* appears more frequently in 1655, coinciding with Cromwell's assumption of power.

Whereas word frequency analysis allows us to trace the changing meanings of words and concepts, a quantitative topic analysis offers interesting insights into the most common themes discussed in the *avvisi*. In order to operationalize this approach we relied on the XML EURONEWS scheme, which leverages a meticulously designed metadata framework to improve the accessibility of information by categorisingand tagging content across a broad spectrum of topics. These topics, which cover a wide range of areas, include **Politics**, which sheds light on political dynamics; **Commerce**, tracking the fluctuations in trade and economic activities; and **Family** and **Dynasty**, exploring familial relationships, gender roles, and dynastic alliances thorough marriages. Additionally, **Religion** and **Culture** probe the societal impacts of belief systems and artistic expressions, while **Government** and **Law** and **Order** address state governance and judicial proceedings. Public health issues are catalogued under **Health**, military operations and warfare-related news under **Military**, and international

relations under Diplomacy. The topic of **Nature** documents significant environmental phenomena. The selection of these topics was a careful process, conducted by researchers and validated through peer review, aimed at creating a human-supervised dataset of news stories. This method was preferred to automated topic modelling algorithms, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), to ensure thematic accuracy and relevance.
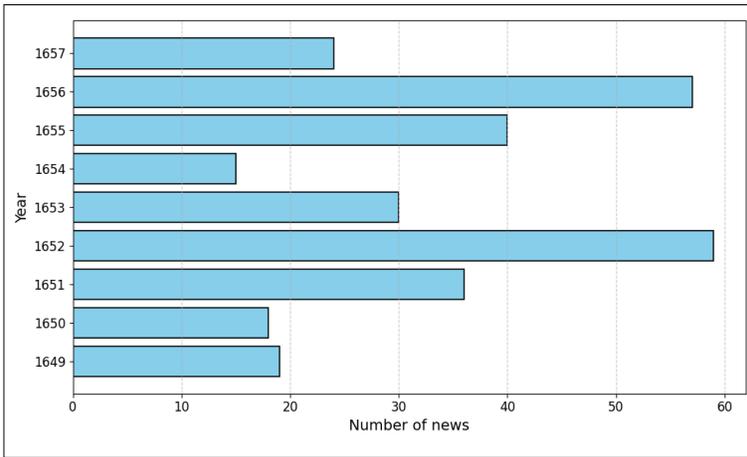
Figure 7   Presence of "Commerce" related news in the Salvetti corpus

A researcher interested in commerce, for instance, could use the XML dataset to pinpoint the year with the highest density of commerce-related news stories, thus gaining deeper insights into thematic trends over time **[fig. 7]**. This bar chart, delineating the frequency of commerce-related news items from 1649 to 1657, provides a useful lens through which to view England's economic and social priorities during a pivotal period in its history. The mid-1650s, which coincided with major naval engagements in the First Anglo-Dutch War, marks a pronounced increase in the reporting of news about commercial activity. This saw England's consolidation of power over essential maritime routes and the implementation of the Navigation Acts. This surge in commerce-related news is indicative of a broader economic expansion as the country laid the foundations for a global trading empire, including increased interactions with the Americas and East Indies.

7   Rooms with a View

The integration of digital technologies into historical research has had a profound impact on the field, making historical narratives more accessible and engaging for a wider audience. This transformation has been largely facilitated by the field of public history, which combines traditional historical scholarship with innovative digital tools and methodologies (Cauvin 2016). Digital platforms allow users to engage with historical narratives in a non-linear manner, fostering individual exploration driven by personal curiosity and interests. This method not only democratizes access to historical information, but also promotes a more participatory form of historical engagement. Recognising the need to innovate the modalities through which historical knowledge is disseminated, the decision was made to organise a digital exhibition.

Scheduled to launch in 2025, this virtual exhibition is designed to provide a dynamic platform to present and explore historical narratives, artifacts, and documents, thereby amplifying the reach and impact of historical scholarship. The digital exhibition will focus on the seminal events of a pivotal historical epoch, tracing developments from the early stages of the English Revolution, through the execution of King Charles I, the establishment of the Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell, the decline of the last Protector, and culminating in the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. This approach aims to guide visitors on a comprehensive journey through both the critical historical period under examination and the complexities of the primary sources. Additionally, the exhibition offers a window into the collective research approaches practices that have shaped the project, facilitating a deeper, more interactive engagement with the historical material. Initially conceived as a means for virtual visitors to grasp the participatory process that begat the project, it integrates diverse languages and narratives while connecting with an international scholarly network. Workshops with scholars from University College Cork (online) and the University of Florence (in person) gave us the opportunity to involve other interested parties from diverse academic backgrounds in the project.
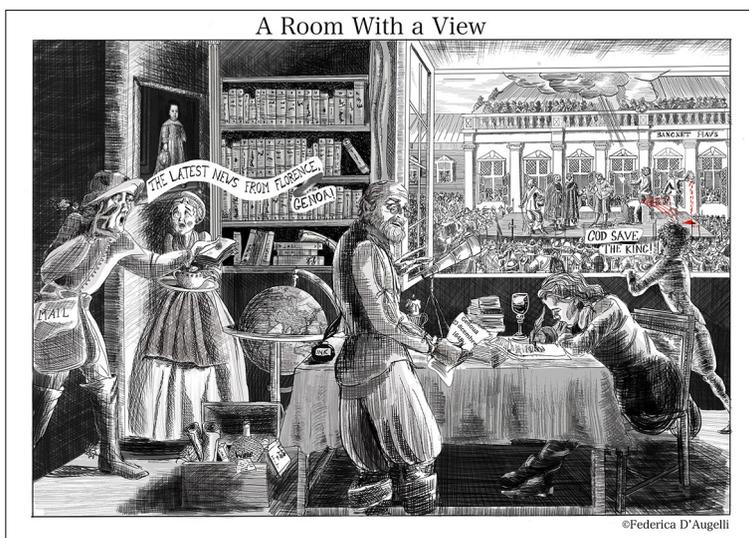
The exhibition will open with an illustration by Junior Research Fellow, Federica D'Augelli, which images Amerigo Salvetti surrounded by scenes, motifs, and objects present in his writings [fig. 8]. Salvetti features at the centre of the artwork, handling a printed gazette or *avvisi*, engaging directly with the viewer, creating a bridge between past and present. Surrounding him, several characters enliven the scene: on the left, a courier hurries into the study where Salvetti, assisted by a secretary, diligently compiles his newsletters. Positioned against the window, with his back to the viewer, his son Giovanni contemplates the scene of Charles I's execution, offering a meditation on the subjective experience of historical events. This scene is an imagined snapshot of the wider landscape of information and communication in the early modern period.

The exhibition's website is organised into four thematic sections – characters, places, stories, and topics – each focusing on different aspects of the project's research methodology. This structure emphasises the value of diverse analytical perspectives, creating a nuanced narrative that invites exploration and critical reflection. It aims to engage visitors, regardless of their foreknowledge of the period and subject, in a dynamic experience that not only piques curiosity, but also underlines the importance of historical research in bridging the past with the present. Such an interactive platform will foster dialogue and education, thereby making history accessible and compelling to a diverse audience in a meaningful way.

8   Conclusion

The Salvetti Project exemplifies how digital methodologies can be integrated with historical scholarship. It has effectively digitised, transcribed, and encoded a significant corpus of Salvetti's correspondence, preserving an essential historical source and enhancing its accessibility. This digital transformation not only broadens access but also establishes an analytical framework that combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. This approach has uncovered insights into the complexities of the early modern European information network. Utilising computational tools, the project has applied text mining techniques to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the texts, revealing narratives that may have been overlooked by traditional methods. Furthermore, the integration of

public history enhances the project's strategy of creating engaging, narrative-driven content that broadens the appeal of historical studies. Combining human intelligence and creativity with the practical application of digital tools, *The Salvetti Project* exemplifies best practices for future digital humanities initiatives, emphasising the critical role of this interplay in deepening our understanding of the complexity of historical phenomena.

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