

## **Sailing Networks: Mapping Colonial Relations with Suriname's Seventeenth-century Sailing Letters**

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Using the Sailing Letters of the High Court of Admiralty Archives in London during the period of the Dutch Disaster Year, this paper suggests the usefulness of a social network analytical approach for studying correspondence networks in the early modern period. Networks are experiencing a great attention from digital humanistic scholars in recent years. The ePistolarium (Huygens Institute), Mapping the Republic of Letters (Stanford) and LONSEA (University of Heidelberg) projects are great examples of the ability of the humanities to succeed in the computational turn and to pluck the low-hanging fruit from the networks tree. In this paper we present a self-developed web research tool which illustrates the benefits of network analysis for reconstructing communities from different colonies and periods that were spatially dispersed and supplied support, information and sociability.

As an embedded research project of The Centre for Digital Humanities (UvA, VU & KNAW), the *Sailing Networks* project is a collaboration between public and private partners. Together with the software engineers of Geodan, the embedded historian (Mark Opmeer, UvA) develops an online, open source platform that allows the user to visualize overseas correspondence networks between different locations. With multiple filters the user can reconstruct personal networks of correspondents and apply basic social network analysis to measure the centrality, betweenness and closeness of its members. Secondly, using GPS data of senders and receivers enables the possibility to map communities, providing information about places that functioned as a centre or hub in one or more subnetworks. These SNA- and GIS-functions will hopefully produce new insights on the structure and operation of social networks that channel knowledge and resources, provide access to new milieux and support connections that face hardship in seventeenth-century Suriname and The Dutch Republic.

A technical challenge for this project is the graphical representation of incomplete and complex data in a web browser. Historical data are uncertain and can be interpreted in different ways. The online web research tool will be designed to visualize uncertainties clearly without a too strict reduction of data. The underlying web service makes it possible to provide information that is fixed (e.g. gender, name), fluid (e.g. class, genre), uncertain and incomplete. The ability to discover patterns and exceptions in the interpersonal networks plays a very important key role in the development of the research tool.

In June 2014 the beta version of the web application will be available for research. Using the metadata of the Sailing Letters from 1671-1672 the first analyses of overseas community networks between the Republic and Suriname shall be employed. During the DHBenelux-congress we present the very preliminary research results, demonstrate the functioning of the web research tool and offer our expertise to e-humanists to foster new and fruitful collaborations in the digital humanities.