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## Digital ECCOs of the Eighteenth Century

By [Kinley Levack](#) - [November 2003 Issue](#), Posted Nov 03, 2003



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Any high school worth its salt teaches students the immeasurable impact of the eighteenth century. Counted among the events of those scant hundred years are the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution—but it has taken the Technological Revolution to better bring an Age of Reason to the modern researcher.

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In 1981, Gale began filming objects for a project commissioned by the British Library called the English Short Title Catalog (ESTC). The ESTC is a massive project that seeks to provide descriptions and pertinent information on letterpress works created in Great Britain, any of its dependencies, or in English anywhere else in the world between 1475 and 1700. Noting the importance of the work being done and the material being filmed, Gale saw an opportunity for a product of its own and decided to develop the Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO). The project was first conceptualized in the fall of 2002 and was essentially developed within nine months. ECCO currently consists of seven subject modules containing 150,000 works totaling approximately 33 million pages.

Why the eighteenth century? A number of reasons, both practical and abstract, not the least of which being the fact that Gale had the rights to use this particular collection of content. In the eighteenth century, the end of strict printing restrictions combined with the Industrial Revolution made the printed word available to the masses like never before. This was also an era, however, when print runs were exceedingly small, which means that very few copies of some material remain in existence today. It is a body of work that individuals have more limited access to except those creations by more famous or prolific artists, writers, and scholars.

What obscure material is available to researchers is often relegated to microfilm or microfiche that have long been the bane of students and researchers as they are difficult to manage, liable to break, and can only be used by one person at a time. The print quality can also be quite poor and difficult to read. The technology has long seemed outdated and for good reason. Gale found libraries and librarians poised to take academic research to the next level. "The digital world is there in libraries," says Rimmel Nunn, vice president and publisher of Primary Source Microfilm, a Gale imprint, "librarians take this as the next logical step."

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## In the Halls of Ivy

Although a variety of libraries have already purchased ECCO, one of Gale's marquee customers is Columbia University, which was the first to purchase ECCO in its entirety. Columbia's more than 20 libraries already contain in excess of eight million volumes, 5.2 million units of microform, and 28 million manuscript items according to their Web site, yet the university was impressed enough by ECCO to obtain the entire collection. "I think of it as a service providing a new level of accessibility for a large body of materials, much of which the library had already acquired in microfilm format," says John Tofanelli, Anglo-American bibliographer for the Columbia University Libraries.

Gale structured ECCO to be saleable in pieces or en masse, so the level of implementation varies depending on the needs of an individual institution. Florida Atlantic University has purchased the first module and Florida State University has purchased the first two modules, while Columbia has purchased them all. Each module is subject-specific and has a rollout date in the next year or so. History and Geography was the first module loaded and released, in June of 2003; Social Sciences and Fine Arts and also Medicine, Science, and Technology followed with a September 26, 2003 release; Literature and Language, which is the largest module and comprises 28% of the total collection, is scheduled for release December 12, 2003; and the other modules—Philosophy and Religion; Law; and General Reference—will be released sometime in 2004.

When a library purchases a module, they receive everything that has been loaded in ECCO up to that point. The library will have perpetual access to the information within the module, but will not automatically receive objects or titles that may be added at a later date. Gale expects to initiate future digital projects, but will make them available to libraries as either entirely separate purchases or as add-ons to previous purchases. List pricing for ECCO begins at \$500,000, but can vary depending on the institution and the extent of their implementation.

While the price tag may be a hurdle for many libraries, according to Mary Mercatante, marketing vice president, Academic and Public Libraries for Gale, an unanticipated added benefit for libraries recently came to light. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) ranks research libraries at institutions of higher education across North America and one of the criteria they use for ranking is the number of volumes a library makes available to its patrons. A library that purchases ECCO can significantly increase its total number of volumes available without requiring time to catalog, shelve, and maintain individual copies. Thus, ECCO "can give them a competitive advantage" when working toward ARL status, explains Mercatante, particularly for smaller institutions.

This is especially true since 10,000 of the titles in the collection are single copies or so rare and fragile that the general public could not handle them, so using ECCO makes information available to individuals who would otherwise never have access to it. Gale has approximately 1.5 billion objects or titles in their vault and selections for ECCO are generally made based on customer demand. "Customers tell us what their needs are," says Nunn, and if something is rare or deemed necessary enough then it goes on microfilm and the process begins.

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