



Universiteit  
Leiden

## A nuisance, a crime or a moral issue? Municipal discourse surrounding sex work in Amsterdam 1880-1985.

### Applicants

*Eligible proposals must have at least two applicants from Humanities, preferably with an interdisciplinary approach.*

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Dr Marion Pluskota	History
Dr Peter Verhaar	Media Studies (LUCAS) / Centre for Digital Scholarship

### Project description

Provide a brief description of the project (max. 300 words)

This project aims to use text mining as a method to analyse the municipal discourse surrounding the use of the urban space, built and non-built, for sex work in Amsterdam (1880-1985). We are particularly interested in the changes over time of the vocabulary and word associations used in the discussions held during the meetings of the municipal council (*gemeentebestuur*) and in the official legislation. The main research question is thus: how was sex work framed by the municipal authorities over the century? Was it seen as a nuisance, a crime, a moral issue or something else? By using text mining to analyse the Amsterdam *Gemeentebladen* – in particular sections 2 and 3, which are reports of discussions, decisions and regulations by the municipal council - we will gain a unique insight into the discursive practice of the municipality about sex work but also into the other political, economic and social issues that motivated the evolution of the discourse. Text mining is essential to use this archive effectively: between 300 and 1,000 scans are available for each year of the *Gemeenteblad*, and the research is complicated by incomplete indexes. The *Gemeentebladen* which have been digitised already will be fed to the computer, starting with sample years 1880; 1897; 1911; 1926; 1940; 1965; 1985.<sup>1</sup> The pdfs will be converted into machine-readable text through optical character recognition, followed by coding to identify references to individuals, institutions and locations (Named Entity Recognition), word frequencies and to carry out analyses of ‘keywords in context’ in

<sup>1</sup> These dates are meant to represent the zeitgeist surrounding sex work at the time: 1880 campaign for abolition of prostitution; 1897 brothel ban in Amsterdam; 1911: National brothel ban; 1926 Paul Kinsie, representant of the League of Nations, visited the Netherlands to study prostitution; 1940 prostitution under the new German regime; 1965: gradual end of pillarization of Dutch society; 1985: creation of the Rode Draad and international movement for sex workers’ rights.

the municipal debates surrounding prostitution. Methods such as Keyword Lexicons about prostitution/sex work combined with Topic Modelling (iterative process of text analysis) and Word Embeddings will allow the analysis of the context surrounding a word. For instance, concordance and collocation analyses of words such as 'prostitutie' and 'gevaarlijk', 'ziekte', or 'politie' unveil the evolution of the municipal discourse, their sentiment and strategies about prostitution.

### Research Trainee Profile

*Each proposal requests two Research Trainees. Describe the general tasks of the research trainees, how these tasks are academically challenging to the research trainees, whether they need any preliminary knowledge (regarding the topic and/or research methods) and which skills the research trainees should have. Also specify which type of students are eligible to apply (3<sup>rd</sup> year Ba, Ma, ResMa).*

The research trainees will be in regular contact with Dr Verhaar and myself and will have to be on site one day per week (according to their contracted hours). In this project, the students will be actively involved in setting up a research plan. During the first two months, students will be following workshops of approximately two hours to develop the basic skills needed to search the *Gemeentebleden* via Text Mining. The first few weeks will be devoted to learning the Python programming language, and coming to grips with basic terms and concepts. On the basis of this foundational knowledge, students will learn how to apply techniques such as Part of Speech Tagging, Topic Modelling, Named Entity Recognition and Geocoding. As part of this process, they will learn how to create network visualisations and interactive maps. They will also have the opportunity to publish a data-article in a peer-reviewed journal. By the end of the traineeship, the two students will be at ease with, and programming, and text mining method, giving them a strong basis for further research and increasing their employability.

Knowledge of Dutch is essential, and a good understanding of the issues linked with prostitution and of the discourse used to talk about it in the period studied is desirable. It is essential, additionally, for the students to have an interest in digital humanities and the motivation to be actively engaged in the research and in developing the methodology. ResMA, MA and BA3 students can apply.

### Collaboration (max. 300 words)

Thanks to the expertise of Dr Verhaar, this project will give a new impulse in using digital humanities tools to carry out research in social history at Leiden University. The research trainees (and myself) will be able to learn how to use text mining programmes and analytical methods and apply them to subject in social history. I will bring my knowledge of sex work history, archival resources and historical context but I am hoping, as a result of our collaboration, to be able to update my current BA2 *hulpvack* on GIS to a text-mining course.

### Deliverables (max 200 words)

1. A co-authored (whole team) peer-reviewed article on the evolution of the municipality's discourse about sex work, its strategies to contain, shape and redistribute sex work in the city and their results.
2. A database of the geography of sex work in Amsterdam based on the *Gemeentebleden*. This is a unique chance to collect addresses which may not be appearing in other archives. The database will be deposited in DANS under a 2-year embargo.
3. A data-article published in the *TSEG* and written by the two research trainees (up to 3,000 words) introducing the text-mining method used to create the database and discussing the pros and cons of this database.

4. The basis for a larger research proposal (NWO M-grant) to be submitted in October 2024 by the P.I.

### Planning

*Provide a breakdown of the project into phases with tentative timing (max 150 words)*

Dates	Actions	Results
February 2024	Kick-off meeting	Formulation of research questions; development of methodology
February 2024	Digitisation of sources	Machine readable documents
February – April 2024	Weekly Python workshops Spot-checks on quality of the OCR'd documents	Refinement of methodology; proficiency in Python; usable and reliable corpus.
May-June 2024	Analysis and reaching conclusions	Basis for article; database of places
July-August 2024	Writing of a data-article by trainees	Publication of article in the <i>TSEG</i> ; Submission of database to DANS
September-October 2024	Writing of peer-reviewed article by PI	Publication of article in <i>Clio. Women, gender, history</i> journal
October 2024	Writing of a research proposal (PI)	Submission to the NWO

### Student Application

Students wishing to apply should send an email to [m.pluskota@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.pluskota@hum.leidenuniv.nl) including a motivation letter explaining their interests in digital humanities and/or social history, as well as a short CV.