

Literature in Context: Reinventing the Anthology as a Digital Open Educational Resource



Tonya Howe, George Mason University (thowe@gmu.edu)
John O'Brien, University of Virginia (jobrien@virginia.edu)
Chris Ruotolo, University of Virginia (ruotolo@virginia.edu)



About Literature in Context

Literature in Context: An Open Anthology of Literature in English, 1400-1925 is both a **digital humanities project** and an **open educational resource (OER)**. Developed from the ground up with digitally-mediated teaching and learning in mind, LiC can substitute for prohibitively expensive commercial textbooks. Unlike print textbooks, LiC is infinitely expandable, customizable, interactive, and readily accessible in both digital and print forms, drawing on the affordances of print as well as the web.

Project Goals

Literature in Context seeks to help teachers and students in secondary and higher education address several **problems with commercially published textbooks**:

- **Planned obsolescence**
- **Equity and accessibility issues** arising from textbook unaffordability
- **Surveillance capitalism and threats to privacy and ownership rights** arising from electronic textbook licensing models like “Inclusive Access”
- **Inconsistent quality and unreliability** of free or low-cost texts online
- **Wastefulness**, particularly in literature anthologies, of which only a fraction is typically used
- The **natural incompleteness** of anthologies

Literature in Context is an alternative that offers:

- **Infinitely expandable and inclusive content**
- **Choice in reading style** — for deep reading, students still prefer print, but LiC is also responsive to visual needs and mobile-friendly
- **Authentic, interactive learning opportunities** — LiC is edited and annotated by students, for students, with faculty mentorship

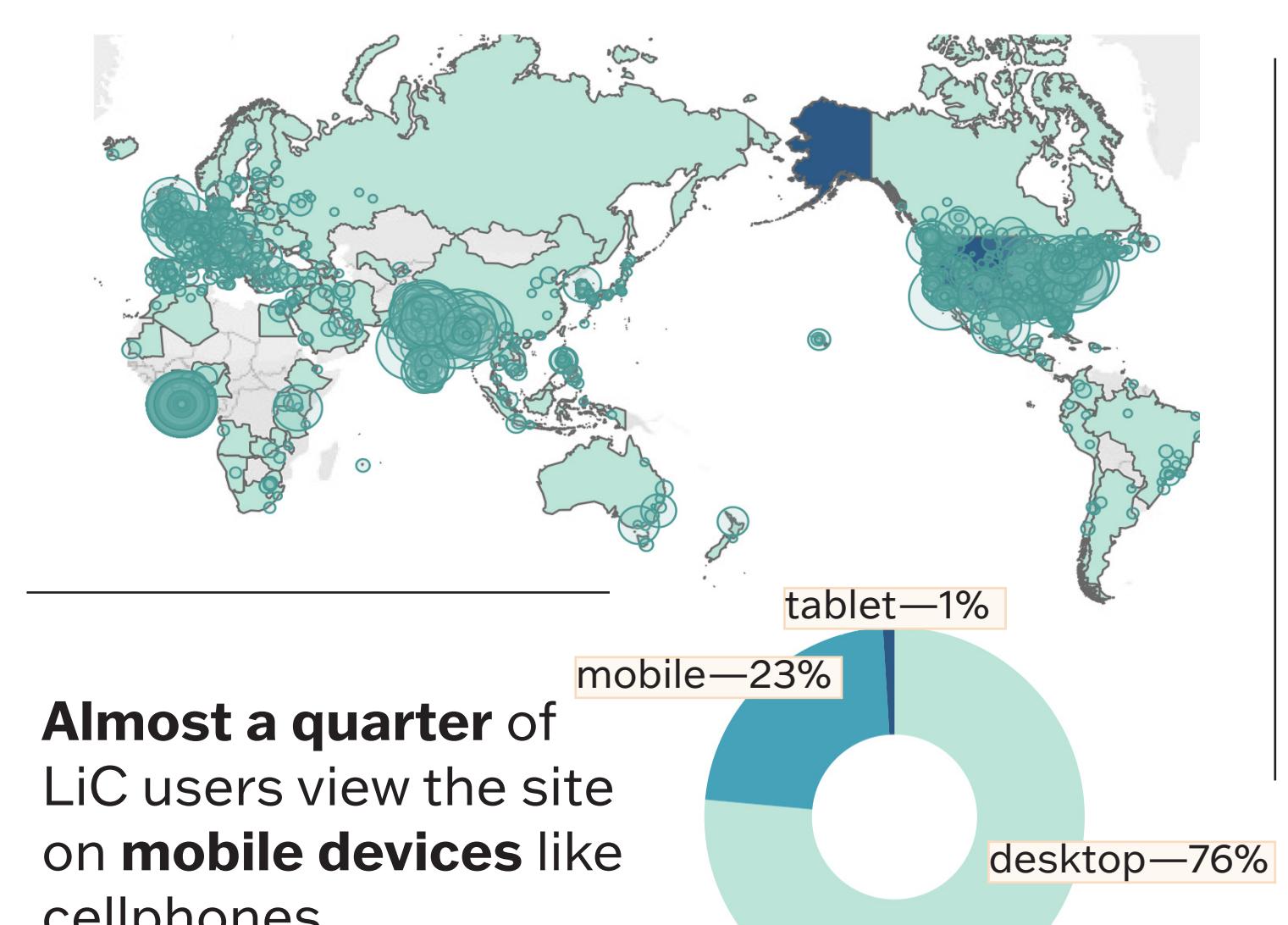
Project Architecture

Literature in Context uses **open tools and technologies**:

- The project is built in **eXist-db**, an open-source XML database platform for creating web applications
- Texts are marked up in **TEI XML**
- The platform and the data are stored on and updated via **GitHub**
- We use **open data** from the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names and the Library of Congress Name Authority File



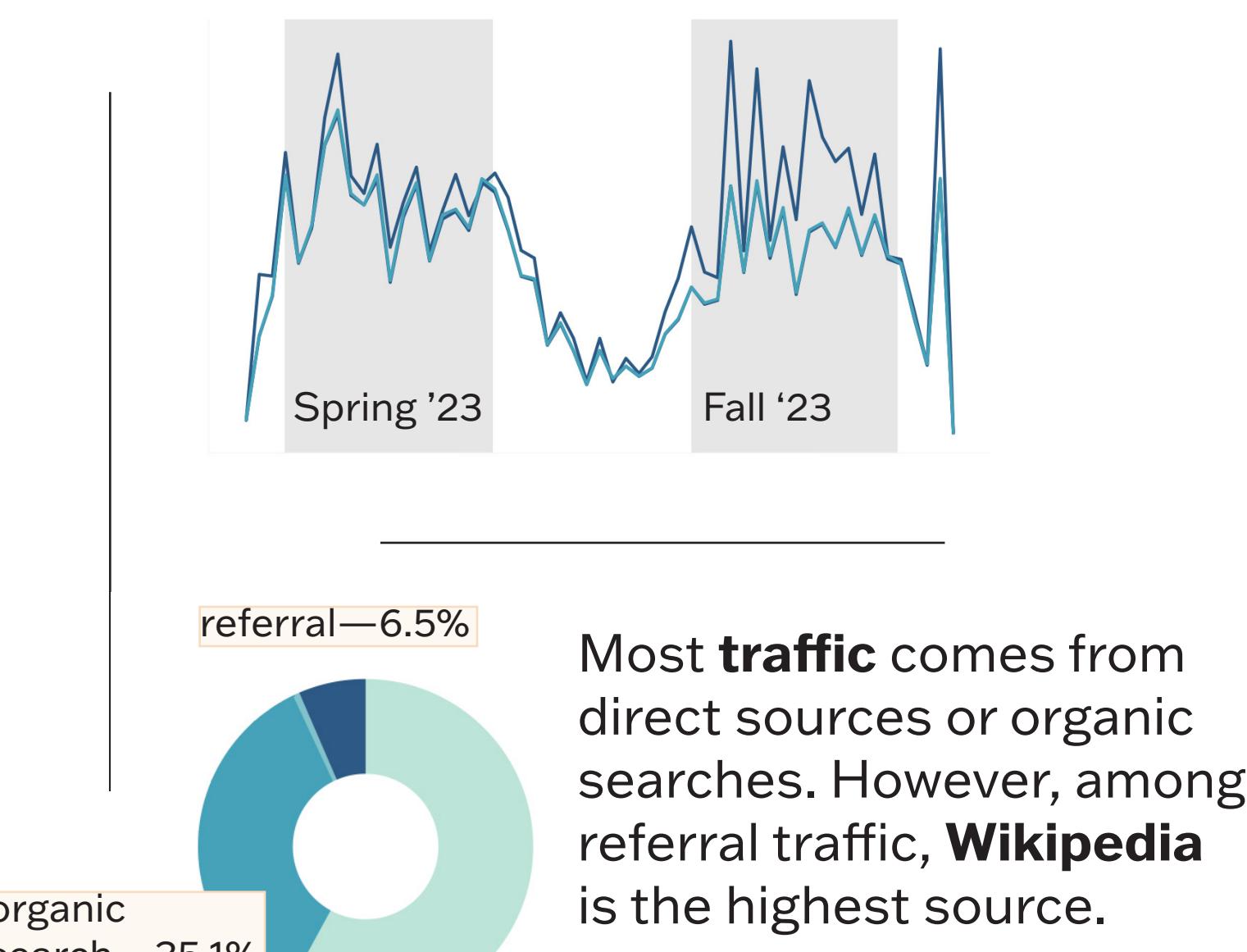
Literature in Context served **almost 12,000 users worldwide**, with activity centered in the **US**, followed closely by **India, the UK and Canada**.



2023 Year in Review

Of the top 15 works viewed, we note canonical white authors in the highest positions. However, this list also contains several texts dealing explicitly with race.

Site usage tracks closely to traditional academic terms



Challenges and Questions

- **How can we theorize this project at the intersection of DH & OER, discourses that are often siloed?**
 - The umbrella of DH rarely includes OER; the DH community still marginalizes pedagogy
 - OER seeks to address questions of surveillance capitalism and student data sale, making it a useful site of interrogation
 - The logic of print structures much OER; our project is born-digital, despite a focus on print texts
 - DH prizes innovation; OER prizes persistence, accessibility, and practical re-use
- **How do we maintain quality over time in a large, distributed environment?** Consistency is a struggle, but we strive to maintain it through checklists for students; documentation for faculty; an integrated workflow for annotation submission, review, revision, and incorporation; an editorial board that intersects with this workflow; and a ratings system for annotations.
- **How does re-use function in DH?** We often draw on legacy materials from places like the UVA Etext Center and the Text Creation Partnership. Challenges include concerns around copyright, provenance, pedagogical suitability, and availability of less canonical texts.
- **How do we ensure sustainability of the project?** Concerns include the cost of data storage & maintenance and the limits of grant funding. Wide adoption by teachers will help, so we are increasing dissemination and visibility by seeding Wikipedia and adding to OER commons projects. A widget to connect the project to LMS tools (like Canvas) would drive adoption, but institutional software review processes are a barrier.

Future Development

With the generous support of an **NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grant** (2023-2025) and an **Open Grant** from **VIVA**, Virginia's academic library consortium, we will:

- Build out to include a full range of diverse texts
- Conduct rigorous proofreading
- Develop an API and Canvas widget
- Create documentation
- Disseminate the project

Want to Collaborate?

Please get in touch! Visit our LinkTree to contact us, and to access our bibliography, our development and production sites, our GitHub page, and our site analytics.

linktr.ee/LiC.anthology

