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A certification model for digital scholarly editions.

Towards peer review-based data journals in the humanities

Anne Baillot, ESTS Antwerp 2016

Imagine if you were to stop being first and foremost a scholar for a little while in order to take a job in which you could do something that would be useful not just to your personal career, but to the whole scholarly community. What would be the focus, what would seem most useful to you?

For me, the answer to the question “What is it that you would like to do that would be useful to your scholarly community?” was: I would try to find ways for digital publications to be recognized. And by that, I mean all types of digital publications (monographs, articles, but also editions, databases or blogposts) and I mean the same kind of recognition as analog publications have: a clear way of evaluating quality, of making the careers of those who work towards such a quality move forward, of encouraging the community to reflect on the quality criteria we need.

I find it striking that, although we have been working with computers, and even with the internet, for several decades, the despise for digital publications of scholarly works is still noticeable. We are still at a point where, in general, nothing you can produce in a digital medium will be considered as good as a print production. You get tenure when you have produced the right books and papers – in print. This is equally true in North America and in Europe, even for DH professorships. Young scholars want to avoid “spoiling” their ideas by publishing them online, because that’s one publication that won’t count on the CV for their career. And among all types of digital publications, a digital scholarly edition usually amounts to peanuts in terms of academic recognition (“nice little by-product you’ve got there”). We are still living in a scholarly world that remains, in major parts of major humanities fields, ignorant of the fact that you can actually use computers for scholarly work: compiling, parsing and analyzing text, on the one hand, but also establishing, commenting and connecting text on the other hand. And digital scholarly editions combine two disadvantages in terms of academic recognition: they are editions (which is considered as “not research”) and they are digital (which is considered as “not serious”).

One of the reasons for this unsatisfying situation is that we don’t have clear evaluation criteria and procedures for digital publications in general. Quality criteria for digital publications lack the transparency and straightforwardness they would need, the organs to establish their authority.

In the German context in which I have been teaching and doing research for the past fifteen years, professors in humanities disciplines know exactly what they are telling students when they advise them to consult a historical-critical edition – not so much a digital scholarly edition.



In fact, it is strongly recommended in German academia to avoid citing digital sources in essays. (interestingly, on the other side of the mirror, many students are convinced that they can find all they need on the internet, or even that when they want to re-use it, they don't need to indicate they are citing a source, since what is on the internet is, by definition, for everyone to use and hence not a source that needs to be cited – these different forms of misleading citation (or non-citation) practices are adding to one another: professors and lecturers recommending not to cite digital sources and students copy-pasting without citing them.)

For digital publications in general, and for digital scholarly editions in particular, we are facing a problem of recognition that can be brought down to 5 aspects:

- 1) There are no quality criteria well established in the scholarly communities (I am not speaking of the TEI or the DH community, but of all the scholarly communities TEI aficionados and DHers come from)
- 2) There is no institutional need to change the old system (for those who are in a decisional position who in general reproduce themselves clone-wise when they retire – it is not me saying that, but Charlotte Roueche)
- 3) The students don't know how to use the internet properly for their assignments, then research (note that not being trained by experts doesn't really help there)
- 4) Who are the experts anyway?
- 5) And why is it always the same 2 people that are being asked to evaluate digital scholarly editions?

All of these questions are related to one another. In order to address them, we need clear criteria that would be acceptable for the scholarly communities, in our case the producers and users of digital scholarly editions. We need incentives to apply these criteria, and we need a critical mass of expertise. What I want to talk about in this paper is how to combine the three factors in a positive evaluation structure aiming at a win-win situation for all actors and resources.

The thoughts I am going to present to you are based on different initiatives I am part of: first, the working group “digital publishing” of the German-speaking DH association; then the current effort made by DARIAH to establish a data journal infrastructure in order for the Humanities communities to take advantage of it; and finally my activity as a Managing Editor of the Journal of the Text Encoding Initiative and especially the reflections that accompanied our re-drafting the overall workflow over the last summer. I will focus my argument on digital scholarly edition especially because, as I just mentioned, they combine the disadvantages of being digital and being editions: how can we promote the academic recognition of digital scholarly editions?



Certificate – or what?

Let's turn to the first problem, which is the one the title of this paper reflects most, namely the question of the quality criteria and giving them the shape of a certification model. The title "A certification model for digital scholarly editions. Towards peer-review-based datajournals in the humanities" reflects the idea I had at first that it would suffice to mimic the structure of a journal and apply it to digital scholarly editions, and the problem would be solved as soon as the newly shaped journal would have had time to establish itself, just like the jTEI did. Considering that it all comes down to a series of criteria which one could turn into a certification system would have simplified things considerably. In truth, it turned out to be, on second thought, a little bit more complicated.

It would have simplified things to mimic a traditional journal structure especially because there is already a solid basis for criteria that could serve for a certification of digital scholarly editions. There is a first criteria list put together by the Institut für Dokumentologie und Editorik in Germany, which is being used as a basis for an online journal reviewing digital editions.¹ Admittedly, it is not really a criteria catalogue, more a question list to be asked to a digital scholarly edition, but nonetheless used towards establishing a seal of approval. The MLA White Paper "Considering the scholarly edition in the digital age: a white paper of the modern language association's committee on scholarly editions" also offers a basis for the evaluation of digital scholarly editions in the form of guidelines.² While this paper is much more prescriptive than the I-D-E's, it states mostly the type of information that a digital scholarly edition should provide rather than prescribing how this type of information should be handled. In that sense, it does not list quality criteria in the sense that certification institutions do.

If we compare these two initiatives with other certification systems for digital publications or simply data, it is striking to see how much freedom of interpretation they leave in terms of how to reach a general goal, as long as the goal is aimed at and addressed. Certification platforms like DINI in Germany, DANS in the Netherlands, the WDS (World Data System certification) or the Data Seal of Approval,³ on the contrary, list technical requirements that need to be fulfilled for the resource to be delivered the certification. This is something completely different than what the I-D-E and the MLA's White Paper are encouraging, also in the overall approach to reaching quality: certification platforms are a service, they will test-proof your data, often requesting you to pay money or to affiliate to their service to do so. It seems difficult, at first sight, to make both approaches join. But as I will explain later, there are good reasons not to go for a prescriptive certification.

¹ <http://www.i-d-e.de/publikationen/weitereschriften/kriterien-version-1-1/> (English version: <http://www.i-d-e.de/publikationen/weitereschriften/criteria-version-1-1/>) and RIDE: <http://www.i-d-e.de/publikationen/ride/> .

² <https://scholarlyeditions.commons.mla.org/2015/09/02/cse-white-paper/> .

³ <https://dini.de/dini-zertifikat/> , <https://dans.knaw.nl/en>, <https://www.icsu-wds.org/services/certification>, <http://www.datasealofapproval.org/en/> .



The need for a certification does not solely emanate from the scholarly community. Generally, there is a strong political pressure towards Humanities scholarly communities to work with standards, with interoperable formats, to guarantee long-term archiving and to publish Open Access – there is a list of criteria from funding agencies. Some consider this interference of politics in scholarly endeavors an intolerable overstepping. Yes, there is something sad about coming to an extortion of the kind: I give you money, but only if your data is interoperable and properly archived. There is mostly something sad about it because this is so much in everybody’s interest anyway it shouldn’t even need to be a political constraint. But whether one agrees or not with funding bodies being able to impose constraining policies, the result is the same: in the end, these work as incentives, and in what I want to talk about today, we certainly have to consider them as our allies. So if we have a structured approach to quality criteria for digital scholarly editions and we have at least one incentive (money), what else do we need?

My thesis for today is that we need to think of the publication-review process differently when it comes to digital data. And this is why we don’t need solely quality criteria that can define a certification system and funding agencies going in the same direction.

First, let’s turn back to the “certification” in the title. Of course we need criteria for scholarly quality, and clear ones. But as long as they are used in the context of a one-time certification, which is what you probably thought of when you read “certification” in my title, they will quickly lose their orientation value. While some standards stay the same along time and some parts of the certification are likely to remain valid, other aspects develop and what was the highest possible quality yesterday isn’t today’s. And the speed at which this is changing is not comparable with changes in the analog standards: it goes much faster. The TEI guidelines are being updated⁴; some elements are in the guidelines this year that weren’t there last year (yes, I mean *correspDesc*⁵!). One would expect today to find codes and send tickets on github⁶, but chances are there will be another way of documenting or archiving these in a few years from now. So the criteria or recommendations we can use for the certification of digital scholarly editions need to be to some extent prescriptive, but they also need to be contextualized, which is a very good reason why not to inscribe them in stone. This means that we should accept that certification systems need to be actualized, reprocessed, in order to remain useful – at the risk of losing their readability. To sum it up, it takes more than checking boxes like “TEI-based”, “Open Access” and “Long Time Archiving” to conceive such a certification model for digital scholarly editions in order for it to be truly useful.

Before turning to the edition producers and what they have from it, let’s consider the problem from the point of view of the non-experts, which is decisive when it comes to the more general question of academic recognition. I mean our colleagues who are used to using print editions, the students who use google. They find it, in general, extremely difficult to know how reliable

⁴ <http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/ref-correspDesc.html>

⁶ <https://github.com/>



a source is when they find it on the internet. What exactly is the difference between a google scan and a digital scholarly edition? Not so clear. They definitely would appreciate that a clear certification appears on the resources, like a seal “this edition received a gold medal for its technical setting and a silver medal for its scholarly content”, and then a date allowing to reference to a certain status in the quality criteria. It would be easier for the professors to formulate what certification level is required to make a digital publication citable and it would be easier for students to understand there is a hierarchy in the textual resources available on the internet and they should abide to it. Considering this question from the point of view of the users, this is what I was thinking of at first. The problem is that the users would have to learn how to gain orientation in what would probably become various seals and certification systems, because the logical consequence of this appraisal of certification is that there will be different certification systems arising. As soon as there will be concurrent certification systems, what was at first clear hierarchies and orientation help will be confusion again. So there is a danger to see this kind of certification turn into the contrary of what it was meant to be – namely an orientation and a way of allowing good editions to be more trusted, more used and more recognized. It does not suffice to work with lists of criteria and certifications. This has to be accompanied by a pedagogical effort, so that the criteria are understood.

Authorship & the peer-review Machine

First and foremost, we need an evaluation system that is not author-centered. The concept of author as it emerged in the late 18th- early 19th century is mostly conceived to concentrate on one name (preferably a male name) all the authorship qualities. The reasons to this are economical: big names are more attractive and make sell, more than the mention of the actual contribution of copyist, editor, publisher, etc. would. Regarding books written by women, the mention of a male name on the cover (either as a pseudonym or as an editor) is a tribute to the moral standards that gained even more traction in 19th century than they had in the 18th – you can probably name counter-examples, but this is the general tendency. Also, copyright was conceived to honor maximally this notion of single authorship, which in turn encouraged single, big-name authorship practices. The opportunity to construct the publication system around a dispatched authorship model, which could maybe have emerged in the times of the Republic of Letters, went in a different direction in terms of institutionalization and recognition at the end of the 18th century and now we are stuck with that.

If you look at the facts, there is probably no point in our book history since the Enlightenment where authors as they appeared on book covers were the unique producers of the content of their books. Again, you can probably name single counter-examples, but the general trend is that book production, especially literature production, is and has always been a collaborative phenomenon. We can even identify, admittedly with variable accuracy, the different spheres of influence pretty well (family, friends, publishers). We also know the kinds of texts that are affected by that and at least some of the readings they did that are likely to have influenced them. We are aware that we need to decipher these modes of participation to the text of a



wider intertext. But the knowledge of split text or book production that we have remains some kind of hidden truth. It is not a major epistemological principal that reflects at large the humanities' understanding of authorship, so that literature history, and to a great extent also science and scholarship history, still lives in the myth of the author, this great man.

Why is this a problem for digital publications? Because part of the recognition we need there has to do with split authorship, or even, to be precise, split producership. This means that all of the actors involved in the production of a digital publication don't obey the same hierarchy rules than it was the case in print. In digital publications, we don't want the publisher to appear separately anymore, because we consider that what concerns design and funding – something that, in the analog world, was considered not in the domain of scholarship – does not have to be severed completely from the production of the work. Along with the designer, all intermediaries (software designer, technician) also contribute to the final form of the text that is offered to the reader. What is more, when it comes to a digital edition, the scholarly work proper can be split in as many producers as there are steps in the editorial process: archival research, transcription, encoding, annotation, commentary, documentation of the editorial choices, etc.

Arguably, this authorship distribution, which to a wide extent also existed and exists in the analog world, is not easy to reflect on or give an account of. But in digital publications, attribution and versioning are two key techniques, which have always belonged to the core principles of IT archiving and publishing. The TEI has it inscribed in the header - RevisionDesc is a mandatory element for good reasons, and other elements such as institution and funding have a prominent place there as well. It is the whole production context that is taken into account. The aim of such an inclusive understanding of text producing instances is obviously not to make all of them accountable for the content, in a legal sense, but to render the production context as extensively as possible.

In other words, there are no technical hindrances to the implementation of authorship distribution or split producership in the case of digital publications. There are, though, cultural issues. It is exactly this change of mentalities that the text recently published by the Working Group Digital Publishing of the DH association in the German-speaking countries addresses.⁷ In this text, we listed the various possible authorship/contribution forms, which can seem tedious, but really aims at showing the extension of this variety of functions in text production. In this position paper, we also insist on the fact that a digital publication can take a variety of forms: monograph, article, edition, database, code, images, videos, etc. It intends to show how narrow our understanding of a publication in the humanities has become in the course of their history. We are not the first to state it, but it is interesting to see which forms of institutionalization can carry such a discourse nowadays. The question of academic recognition is at the core of this position paper. The aim is, of course, not to preach to the

⁷ http://dhd-wp.hab.de/?q=content/empfehlungen_ag_digitales_publizieren



converted, but to reach out, for instance to the professors who recommend not to cite digital sources and to the students who quote without citing.

Now additionally to the question of displaying various and complex authorship and contribution modes, there are two other aspects that make the implementation of standards and any inherent certification even more difficult. The first one is the time machine problem. I mentioned before that standards and criteria develop and change and that this makes it difficult to attribute them once and for all. But the worst moving sands are not really on their side. One of the most difficult things to grasp for the traditional academic evaluation system is the fact that a digital publication is hardly ever “finished”. This is particularly the case for digital editions, which are a processual kind of publication. Some hypotheses are verified only later and implemented in an update of the edition. New material is found. The edition changes.

The reactions that this processuality phenomenon provokes are not unanimous. Some see this as a chance to publish editorial material progressively, that is not to wait ten years to start publishing results, but to enrich and improve progressively. Others find it hard to cope with the lability inherent to this openness to change. One must admit that tracking changes via logfiles and version history, which is basically the way to retrace and understand such changes, is not self-explaining. Again, here, there is a question of scholarly culture or mentality that needs to be addressed specifically.

And finally, there is the peer review conundrum. Pre-publication peer review was established at a point where it was not possible anymore to print everything. The analog production of all scholarly papers and books would have been too cost-intensive. Nowadays, pre-publication peer-review is considered on the one hand as the best way to evaluate good science, on the other hand as a system that has become unreliable. First, peer-review is taking more and more time as the increase in scholars and the concurrence between them induce an increase in submissions and in the need of sorting them. We all are suffocating under reviews, you, me, everyone. What is more, more and more voices raised recently telling that peer reviews are not really achieving their goal in that they generally contribute to encouraging research questions and answers already known rather than opening to innovation. What is more, quite a lot of the overall produced reviews consists in a reviewer being touchy because his work on the topic wasn't quoted. Enough to say that we have intrinsic problems with pre-publication peer-review, especially because of its dominant position in the evaluation system. And it induces delays in the whole publication process without necessarily improving the quality of the submitted papers at the end of the day.

And as opposed to the paper reality of the analog world, there is no real room problem in the digital world. It really doesn't matter if a paper has a pre-determined amount of pages, because there is no need to calculate paper and binding cost. It doesn't matter whether one, three or ten articles are published. The argument according to which we need to sort articles because it is not possible to print them all is, in that sense, obsolete. Even if the digital production and maintenance of online articles is not at zero cost, institutional repositories



now exist that can take care, for scholars at a research institution, of making their prose accessible, readable, without any valid cost argument.

One model that counters this method is post-publication open peer-review. Papers are being submitted and accepted for submission only if they already fulfill some basic editorial conditions of legibility and scholarship. They are then opened to review for whomever feels like they have something to say about the article, for a certain period of time. The *Zeitschrift für digitale Geisteswissenschaften* offers both options of pre-publication single blind peer-review or post-publication open peer review for instance (for the author to decide what he/she prefers), explaining in a short paragraph what the advantages and disadvantages of each model are.⁸ We still don't know what post-publication open peer review will bring in the long run, but it seems worth a try.

To sum up all of these analyses, there is a clear gap between the reality of research, especially in the digital era, in terms of temporality, of contribution types, of technics available to take all of these into account on the one hand, and the reality of the evaluation system on the other hand, which is slow, author-focused and in an authoritative position towards the research production. When it comes to digital scholarly editions, we add to this the problems mentioned in the first part: the lack of evaluation criteria known and accepted by the concerned scholarly communities, the lack of recognition for editorial work and, more generally in the humanities, what seems to be a sheer blindness towards modeling as an inherent part of scholarship.

Living Sources

It seems hardly possible to get a grip on all of these problems at once, but we definitely need to reverse the engine.

This is precisely what we are trying to do while putting up a workflow for data journals in the humanities, which is aiming at improving the recognition of the in-depth phenomena I just mentioned, especially in the case of digital scholarly editions. The initiative of the data journal as a structure comes from DARIAH-EU, it is supported by the French institution CCSD which hosts the episciences platform.⁹ It is this infrastructure we are currently adapting in order to offer to the scholarly communities who wish it a data journal model that is somewhat in adequation with the reality of scholarship.

This project started under the code name “living sources”, because it is based on the idea that the resources keep growing and need to be re-reviewed along time. Today and at this point in the development of the platform, what matters most to me is not to emphasize the lively character of the process, but more the adequacy it wishes to generate, in the overall process

⁸ <http://www.zfdg.de/node/156> .

⁹ <http://episciences.org/> .



of scholarship, between publication and evaluation. In this perspective, the role of the review is not to sort out the good from the bad for it to be published, nor is it to put a stamp on a digital edition. More importantly, the review is becoming an incentive to further development. The review is conceived as a dialogue with the digital resource, both of them working towards improvement.

Let me tell you briefly to finish here how this would work for digital scholarly editions. The general idea is that a digital scholarly edition can submit to the data journal a short paper describing the resource and an OAI-PMH access to it that allows to gather the version of the data which will be reviewed. At that point, it is up to the editorial committee to decide whether technical and content review should be separated, whether this should be double-blind, single-blind, not blind at all or open and in which time frame they want to operate. The outcome, though, would be about similar in all of these cases: The reviews would be published online together with a link to the resource (indicating the time of data extraction). Conversely, the edition could integrate a link to the review, which can be done in the form of a certification, but as I said at the beginning, I fear that certifications are a risky *modus operandi*, so that a simple link to the review seems to me at this point the most viable system. Concerning the content of the review, most likely, the review could raise points that could be improved, and the resource's team could be offered to resubmit for review some time later, for instance when these points have been taken into account. It would then be possible to show clearly the progress achieved along time.

Such an organ as a data journal for digital scholarly editions need two driving forces: a motivated editorial board willing to define a review model and to gather a critical mass of reviewers, and a solid web interface. What DARIAH wants to offer is the technical background, so that the workflow is backed by a solid structure and team. We hope that scholarly communities will find this offer appealing enough to take advantage of the structure we are currently developing. The data journal sandbox was opened this week, data has been imported from [ortolang](https://www.ortolang.fr/)¹⁰ and [nakala](https://www.nakala.fr/)¹¹, the [Deutsches Textarchiv](http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/)¹² should follow soon. The participants of the DARIAH winter school in Prag will be the first to test it apart from the development team and we hope to be operational at the beginning of next year.

What is the benefit of this for digital scholarly editions? First of all, an editorial board wanting to engage in such an endeavor would benefit from the technical infrastructure and the ongoing reflections on workflow and assessment procedures. Then, more generally, a datajournal by definition recognizes the value of data, something still often difficult to cope with in text-centered scholarly communities. Naming it that, namely data, will contribute to the change in mentality this initiative wants to induce or at least contribute to. Beyond the certification, which might be considered as a first level of readability (for example for our colleagues and students unaware of quality criteria for digital scholarly editions), the second

¹⁰ <https://www.ortolang.fr/>

¹¹ <https://www.nakala.fr/>

¹² <http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/>



level, and in-depth the most important one, is the reconciliation of the research process and the evaluation process. And there is one part of the research process that will gain great recognition from this, namely data modeling. This too is certainly one big mentality change, at least in Europe.