
Refining our Concept of 'Access' for Digital Scholarly Editions: A DiXiT Panel on Accessibility, Usability, Pedagogy, Collaboration, Community and Diversity

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Introduction

Access, in all its iterations, continues to shape the discourse of digital scholarly editing as the field grapples with new models and methods. Our proposed 90 minute panel will frame a discussion around a broader definition of the concept in relation to the field of digital

textual scholarship, by critically reflecting on its meaning for Digital Scholarly Editions (DSEs) and theorizing how the term relates to issues of accessibility, usability, pedagogy, collaboration, community, and diversity. Each of the fellows will make short '7-14-28' presentations (seven minutes for 14 slides in 28-pt font), identifying results and questions arising from our research over the last three years and leaving 48 minutes for discussion. Refining our concept of access signifies a valuable contribution to the field: while 'accessibility' is a highly-cited term in digital editing, its use generally refers to making data (Sahle 2014) and source materials (Martens 1995: 222) more openly available rather than to making data more understandable to different types of users, including users with disabilities. Similarly, discussions regarding different user needs typically refer to those with a non-academic background (e.g. Apollon et al. 2014: 93; Pierazzo 2015: 151), rather than users with (in)visible disabilities.

Accessibility and Usability

The digital medium gives the DSE the capacity to be more accessible than its predecessor. Automated analysis and the processing of algorithms allow for the development of a host of tools useful to people with disabilities. Existing tools like screen magnification software or Text To Speech software, for example, already help people with visual impairment to better absorb and navigate the edition's contents. But such ready-made user-dependent solutions only scratch the surface of the ways in which we can make our editions more accessible to people with both visible and invisible disabilities. When designing a web interface for DSEs, current accessibility standards in web design are rarely taken into account — if indeed at all. The mere fact that two major points of reference in our field (Sahle 2014; Franzini 2016) do not mention accessibility in their respective lists of criteria already implies that standards such as @alt texts for links and images, consistent use of header tags, legibility of fonts, attentive use of colors and contrast, etc. are not sufficiently acknowledged or adopted. As editors, perhaps our preoccupation with the underlying XML of our editions has led us to be less conscientious about our use of the transformed HTML. In this respect, we could follow the example set by the World Wide Web Consortium, which has made a considerable effort in encouraging an increased coordination between the interrelated concerns of accessibility, usability, and inclusion in web design (W3C 2016).

Usability is inextricably linked with design approaches and practices, both in terms of functions and

aesthetics. Ruecker et al. (2011: 13) argue that aesthetic design promotes the perceived usability as well as the perceived value and legitimacy of digital cultural heritage materials. Editing projects can develop these skills internally as part of a change in pedagogy, or, in order to strengthen a community of practice and knowledge transfer, can develop them in collaboration with other disciplines, libraries, and private sector partners. Measuring usability and access can also be gauged through opportunities for reuse. This would involve determining the extent to which edition data is made available for open access and what type of licensing information for potential re-use is communicated to the user. Mapping the W3C's standards onto the practice of scholarly editing is not only a good way of supporting the community of people with disabilities, but also a constructive way to confront the digital divide and generally benefit users of DSEs.

Pedagogy and Collaboration

As new publication models emerge in this developing field of scholarly research, practitioners are continually expected to readjust their skillsets. Pierazzo (2016) noted that the role of the editor has changed significantly in the digital medium, growing from advanced awareness of classical theory to the 'super-editor' model with added requirements of technical skills including understanding of front and back-end web design, image processing, XML, specialized scripting languages, etc. In an environment where these skills are not only desired but also expected, aspiring editors spend significant time and money on acquiring them through workshops, courses, and prolonged research stays, in which specific projects provide opportunities for in-depth training as well as valuable networking opportunities.

Acknowledging our place of privilege in this debate as the recipients of a European research grant, we would argue that while our network's practice of sponsoring conference and workshop attendance for non-DiXiT early career researchers is a necessary first step, it may not be enough: we also need to rethink the way these courses are offered, and to develop best practice documents for training new editors. To accomplish this, we need to ask ourselves whether we want to focus on a broad and comprehensive skillset with an overall understanding of concepts and principles, or accept a specialisation ethos that invites more collaborative work. Our own training has primarily involved literary or historical materials using the latin alphabet and reflecting dominant editorial schools, traditions, and

scholarly disciplines. Indeed, the majority of the training material produced for digital editing (workshops, seminars, books, guidelines, etc.) is produced in English or in western-European languages, thereby excluding scholars from smaller communities from fruitful engagement with the field. How do we actively promote a more inclusive approach both to the content of editions and to the training of future editors? Can we adopt a vantage point that justifies the inclusion of and training in a variety of disciplines, without diminishing the value of highly specialized knowledge?

Community and Diversity

Overwhelmingly, DSEs have focused on the documents and narratives of western-European and North American males (for example, the catalogues of Sahle (2016) and Franzini (2016) predominately feature this demographic). We need to be critical in asking ourselves hard questions about our assumed audience, gender-equity and social justice, and which narratives we are gatekeeping by choosing these texts. Given that our editions increasingly do not reflect the gender array of our practitioners, a reorientation toward underrepresented voices is called for. This is modelled by digital libraries and archives, which offer significant collections about women's history, LGBTQIA culture, people of color, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities. It would behoove digital editors to follow the example set by our collaborators and seek out opportunities to expand the canon, attributing the same care and attention to texts produced by these groups.

Finally, along with thinking of ways to expand the canon of scholarly editions, we also need to reflect on new ways to diversify the community of scholarly editors — which, like its subject, could also be characterised as a predominantly white, Western-European or North American male community. Bordalejo (2016) presented a similar argument about demographics in DH that could easily be extrapolated to our subfield. In a recent paper Robinson (2016) called for a reconsideration of the role of editors and scholars by taking a more social approach whereby these academics should become 'key participants in, and enablers of, communities' rather than leaders of more exclusive collaborations. This encourages us to reflect thoughtfully about how digital scholarly editing is conceived and performed as an elite activity, accessible mostly to researchers and communities with sufficient financial, infrastructural, and societal means to support them. If we recognize this, how can we encourage a more inclusive approach?

On the Panel

The Digital Scholarly Editions Initial Training Network (DiXiT) is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie EU-Funded 7th Framework Programme. During the grant period (2013-2017), twelve Early Stage Research Fellows and five Experienced Research Fellows engage with questions and tensions surrounding the evolving theory and practices of digital scholarly editing. As our projects draw to a close we are reflecting critically on how we have examined and contributed to the changing nature of digital textual scholarship. With access being such a pertinent issue to the field of digital textual scholarship, we hope to stimulate a lively and productive conversation with the audience around these interrelated themes.

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