

INTRODUCTION

Digital editing and publishing in the twenty-first century

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This book is a book that looks to a future beyond the book. To be slightly more specific, this is a book about the future of digital scholarly editions and how they are published and consumed. Scholarly editions are expert-curated versions of a manuscript or set of documentary materials which, through the provision of critical apparatus – helpful aids such as introductions or contextual notes – allow readers to engage with and better understand a work's content and social contexts. Scholarly editions are, quite simply, the critical representation of a text or documents. Digital scholarly editions, then, are scholarly editions which have been developed and published using digital (which these days, typically means web) technologies.

Readers hoping for a more expansive definition of digital editions are fortunate, for this is a field that has been well served by excellent theory and practice (Shillingsburg 1996; Price 2008; Gabler 2010; Earhart 2012; Schreibman 2013; Driscoll and Pierazzo 2016; Pierazzo 2016; Apollon, Bélisle and Régnier 2017; Boot et al. 2017; Kelly 2017; Ohge 2021). But there is perhaps no better starting point than Patrick Sahle's definition, which reads: 'Scholarly digital editions are scholarly editions that are guided by a digital paradigm in their theory, method and practice' (2016). To be 'guided by a digital paradigm' means that there is a marked difference between that which is *digital* and that which has merely been *digitised*: a PDF-copy

of a print edition, for example, is not guided by a digital paradigm, it is a digital surrogate of an edition guided by a print paradigm. This book is about the future of editions which are digital, editions which are the critical representation of a text or documents and have been guided by a digital paradigm (or, as some may argue, have intentionally *not* been guided by a digital paradigm).

The term 'critical' in the context of scholarly editions can sometimes be ambiguous, and it is often contentious. Traditionally, 'critical' denotes historical – say, ancient or premodern – editions curated with a focus on textual authenticity, on determining 'correct' version of a text, the version most aligned with the author's 'intent'. Such editions usually become the standard reference for scholars and readers because they are reliable, compiled by experts who have dedicated considerable time and effort to resolving the many alterations that appear as texts pass through time and are repeatedly transcribed or translated or interfered with in some fashion. But the term 'critical' is increasingly being used in a broader sense to refer to any edition which offers supplementary materials designed to make its content more intellectually accessible. To avoid confusion, Frederike Neuber suggests that the term 'enriched' should be used to evoke this broader meaning, with 'critical' being reserved for its traditional meaning, but adding further to this particular debate is not the purpose of this book (Neuber 2014).

This book is intended, as noted, to explore the future of digital scholarly editions and publishing, and it does so from that broader perspective that scholarly editions are critical representations of cultural materials, really any kind of cultural material from any period (but of course, much of the emphasis will be on text, because so much of our documentary disciplines and cultures are concerned with text). Scholarly editions, critical editions – whatever you want to call them – are trustworthy primary sources that have been finessed and interpreted by experts for the benefit of researchers, students and readers. If one wants an example of what a digital edition looks like, a quick web search for the wonderful digital resource called *The Catalogue of Digital Editions* will provide just

that (Franzini, Terras and Mahony 2016). There were 323 editions listed in *The Catalogue* at the time of writing. And in this age of misinformation, they have never been more important.

But it sometimes feels as though the digital edition has given us nothing new. Despite all the affordances of computers, the making of digital editions remains a largely 'industrial craft', often 'manual and bespoke' (Whittle, O'Sullivan and Pidd 2023), often web-based recreations, rather than reincarnations, of print resources. Scholarly editions as they existed before the digital and digital scholarly editions, even those developed in recent years, often seem like almost identical modes of representation, intrinsically connected to logic of the codex. But maybe this is the way it should be, a recognition that digital scholarly editing is, in essence, an exercise in close reading. Editing, done well, should be an intimate endeavour. And the codex format, for all its limitations, has served efficient reading and referencing since the early Middle Ages. Considering the 'real continuity' between digital editing and its antecedents (Robinson 2002), it is perhaps unsurprising that we have seen such stability in the forms that editions take.

But at the very least that stability warrants problematisation, and as Peter Robinson contends, the digital 'is perfectly adapted to enactment of editions as an ever-continuing negotiation between editors, readers, documents, texts and work' (2013, 127). That negotiation still has much to reckon with: born-digital editions, digital editions as cultural analytics, the use of AI and editing, the changing nature of reading and attention, the changing nature of the word 'critical', the ways in which we publish the digital editions we craft.

The methodologies with which we approach digital editing do not seem to have kept pace with the changing nature of expression, with the desperate need for critical editions of born-digital forms which dominate the contemporary cultural conversation – for example, social media and video games.

Editorial practice has not kept pace with the affordances of Natural Language Processing and Machine Learning. Katherine Bode criticises

the digital humanities for a culture of separating those who gather and edit from those who do statistics and analyse (2019). The thoughtful craft of editing is seen as something other to the mechanical, scientific work of cultural analytics. But if we are to view digital scholarly editions as being 'guided by a digital paradigm', then it stands to reason that truly *digital* editions, rather than *digitised* editions, would make use of machine reading, of computational ways of knowing.

And how do we publish any of these new, data-driven, born-digital, experimental things that are inherently anti-infrastructure and poorly served by a publishing industry that insists on standardisation? The 'and publishing' part of this book's title is quite intentional, because 'editing is fundamentally grounded in publishing' (Ohge 2021, 16).

In all these matters, the stakes are higher than some might think. Critical editions remain central to arts and humanities research, to authoritative explorations and analysis of our past and present. If the field fails to 'implement a form of hypertext that truly represents textual fluidity and text relations in a scholarly viable and computational [sic] tractable manner', then we will get, as Joris van Zundert puts it, 'barely beyond the book'; we will 'relegate the *raison d'être* for the digital scholarly edition to that of a mere medium shift' (2016, 106), leaving us with digitised, rather than digital, editions. This book is a book that looks to a future beyond the book.

Its contributions have been divided across five sections: 'Contexts', 'Platforms and pragmatics', 'Automation and analytics', 'Possibilities' and 'Projects'. These thematic divisions are only intended to serve as the faintest of guides through the collection, as many of the chapters could easily have been situated under a few if not all these categories. It is an inherently interdisciplinary collection of essays, some of which are firmly rooted in digital scholarly editing as a discipline and existing body of knowledge, while some essays offer alternative disciplinary perspectives. Some essays are wholly pragmatic, born of the functional experience that one only gets from getting the exhausting but rewarding work of real edition making,

while some are speculative, exploring the possibilities of practices both real and imagined. There are, as with any book, certain limitations. Data ethics in the context of editing and editions, for example, might warrant greater discussion in this collection, while a greater number of perspectives from the Global South and marginalised communities would have been welcome.

Across all chapters, readers will find a deep appreciation and respect for the aforementioned continuity between digital editions and their predecessors, an acknowledgement that debates around digital editions 'must be rooted in the debates about scholarly editing which have unrolled over the last decades' (Robinson 2013, 107). Such debate is a precondition for a future in which digital editing and publishing continue to serve both scholarly and general publics.

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