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Title: What scholarly editors need to help us make sense together in the digital age

Proposer: Peter Robinson, Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing, University of Birmingham, UK

This paper will argue that the single greatest effect of the digital revolution on scholarship is not that it is giving us near-instant access to resources through multiple digital libraries, or that it offers multiple new publication possibilities, or that it supplies many new tools – databases, analytic programs, and more. Rather, the single greatest effect of the digital revolution is that it is is empowering a new model of collaboration, and hence new modes of readership and study, among scholars, and between scholars and readers. This is particularly true of scholarly editing. Through well-constructed scholarly networks over the web, scholars and readers may not only look at materials: they may make them, annotate them, correct them, draw conclusions from them and then contribute to others their conclusions. Further, this may happen near-simultaneously: a library may contribute manuscript images in the morning; by midday a scholar has identified the text; by mid-afternoon a knowledgeable reader has transcribed it; in the evening, another scholar has collated this new transcript against other versions of the text, in other manuscripts. Nor is there any need for the scholars and readers to have any formal affiliation: they may be working far apart, without any project or other framework beyond common access to the web, shared interest and expertise.

The relevance of this to any large scale editorial project – indeed, to any editorial project at all – is obvious. Imagine that all the New Testament scholars of the world work in a single online workspace. In this workspace, some transcribe manuscripts; others collate the transcripts; others analyse the results of the collation: what I have described as 'distributed, dynamic and collaborative editions'. The concept is not that there is a single system, a single set of software tools, which everybody uses. Instead, across the web we have a federation of separate but co-operating resources, all within different systems, but all interlinked so that to any user anywhere it appears as if they were all on the one server. To take the Canterbury Tales as an example: there might be transcriptions of the different manuscripts of the first line of the Tales available on different servers, made by different scholars, in New York, in Birmingham, in Utah. Any scholar can, access all these simultaneously: alongside images of the manuscripts, with collations, analyses, much else.

The paper will, firstly, explain what is needed to make this happen, and that most of the tools we need for this already exist, in the form of various metadata, encoding and web services protocols. Accordingly, we certainly have all the hardware and software we need, and more than enough people with all the skills needed to make this happen. The one crucial element we need are agreements on fundamental naming conventions and exhange protocols: so that a scholar can request 'all images of all manuscript pages containing the first verse of St John's Gospel' and servers around the world will

understand exactly what is being requested and what to return in response to the query. The Object Reuse and Exchange initiative, within OASIS, offers a promising approach to this (http://www.openarchives.org/ore/) and I have elsewhere sketched a language for unified identifiers which will permit scholars to label texts and all parts of texts, text sources and all parts of them, and to map the relations between texts, text sources, and scholarly materials built around these. The EU-funded INTEREDITION project, which aims to set out a road-map towards the creation of a supra-national infrastructure for collaborative scholarly editing, is also actively considering these matters, notably in a meeting I am convening in Birmingham in September 2008.

Most urgently, we have just commenced work on a project, recently funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee in the UK, in which we will trial a first step towards a federated, collaborative network of scholarly resources. In this first step, our institute in Birmingham will collaborate with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster, Germany, to make what we call a 'virtual manuscript room'. The Virtual Manuscript Room (VMR) will bring together digital resources related to manuscript materials (digital images, descriptions and other metadata, transcripts) in an environment which will permit libraries to add images, scholars to add and edit metadata and transcripts online, and users to access material. The Birmingham VMR will integrate with the parallel VMR in Münster with the aim that users may access material seamlessly from either VMR, as if the two were one.

Over the last fifteen years it has actually become harder for an ordinary scholar to create a high-quality scholarly edition in digital form. Indeed, it has become so much harder that a number of scholars and editorial projects have turned away from the digital medium: a development which really ought to alarm us. The answer to this flight from the digital is rather simple: we should make it as easy, or even easier, for a scholar to make a high-quality digital edition as it is to make a print edition. The digital world should provide a space where any scholar with something useful to contribute may do so; where all may gain from the wealth of information so created. We see the virtual manuscript room as a step to our larger aim: a collaborative working environment where scholars can work together to make sense of what they see, and to communicate this sense to others.

A significant difference between our proposal and earlier initiatives to create collaborative workspaces is that we do not propose to achieve this by creating a software environment or tools which scholars must use. Indeed, we intend to create no such tools at all. Rather, we will focus on naming conventions and protocols, which can be implemented locally, cheaply and efficiently. This approach is deliberately opposed to that of projects such as SEASR and BAMBOO which propose 'top-down' solutions: use our systems, these projects say, and all will be possible. This leaves out the many scholars who, for many reasons, find they cannot use these systems. We propose the opposite, 'bottom-up' approach, which says: here is a manuscript image. You, the scholar, have something to say about this: here is a space in which you can say it. In our view, this puts the emphasis of scholarship where it should be: on the scholar who makes sense, and not on the digital systems.