Theorising the Minimal Digital Edition: Pragmatics and Possibilities

Daniel Powell
daniel.j.powell@kcl.ac.uk
King's College London, United Kingdom

In 2001 and again in 2009, Jerome McGann made the following claim: "In the next 50 years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. Noting the decades-old turn away from philology, editing, and the more 'objective' practices of literary scholarship he argues that now, or "the day after tomorrow," "we will be needing young people well-trained in the histories of textual transmission and the theory and practice of scholarly method and editing." Playing a part in and perhaps leading this transition from print to digital is a key role for the digital humanities in the 21st century. This is especially true because, as McGann himself notes, often this digitisation— this active shaping of culture and knowledge—is undertaken by for-profit and non-academic groups like Google or Elsevier, a state of affairs which should strike the trained humanist as deeply troubling (McGann 2009:13).

The digital humanist can actively intervene in these transitions not least of all because digital technologies can help us see always extant patterns of social production, consumption, dissemination, and re-production more clearly. The most powerful role of a digital humanities is, I believe, that it can take an active and critical role in bringing the cultural record to digital form. For the most part, however, work in this area has been most visible in the form of large, well- funded, boutique digital archives and editions focussed on canonical literary and historical figures. _The Walt Whitman Archive_, the award-winning _William Blake Archive_, _Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts Digital Edition_, the US history focused _Founders Online_, and the long-running _Internet Shakespeare Editions_ are emblematic of these types of projects. These documentary editions are often of very high quality and well used, symbolizing the powerful promise of digital access and use of traditionally inaccessible materials. They are also, however, an incredibly small portion of the manuscript and printed materials awaiting digitization. To oversee the wholesale remediation of these vast collections, other production models must be articulated.

This presentation aims to rethink this model for producing digital editions by outlining and theorising the **minimal digital edition**. The digital scholarly edition as we know it is predicated on extensive access to capital, to time, and to technological platforms that are simply infeasible in much of the world. High resolution facsimile images, bespoke TEI encoding, and unique non- replicable interface designs are an unsustainable and non-replicable way forward for the overwhelming number of individuals with access to minimal technologies, monies, and time. The work of remediating the printed cultural record is too vast; adopting current best practices for the production of digital scholarly editions means digital humanists and digital editors must face a stark realisation: editorial work in digital spaces will, by necessity, be limited to the first world and the global north, will almost certainly continue to focus on canonical literary and historical figures, and despite all of this still will face immense challenges in terms of sustainability after time spans of only a few years. Drawing especially on the work of the Global Outlook: Digital Humanities group and iterative editing projects like the Folger Shakespeare Library's _Digital Anthology of Early Modern English Drama_, this presentation will articulate a number of central tenets for the minimal scholarly edition, considering their affordances and capabilities clearly alongside established models for digital scholarly editions.

At Digital Humanities 2016 in Kraków, Susanna Allés Torrent and Alex Gil presented a short paper on creating minimal editions in the classroom. Titled "Minimal Editions in the Classroom: A Pedagogical Proposal," this short paper reported on a course designed "to introduce students to textual scholarship in general, and to digital scholarly editing in particular." The goal of this course was to produce a "TEI-to-Jekyll workflow and a simple customizable web template" and release it to editors and scholars. Drawing on XML, TEI, HTML, CSS, XSLT, Markdown, Liquid, JavaScript, Jekyll, GitHub, and Github Pages, the students in this course produced a minimal edition of the 16th century novel _The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities._ The resulting edition -- http://minilazarillo.github.io/ -- will serve as a case study for this discussion of minimal digital editions. Allés Torrent & Gil focused on the pedagogical context for collaboratively creating minimal editions; this

presentation will critique the resulting work in the context of ongoing discussions on digital scholarly editing in the service of synthesizing accepted practices for a way forward for widespread minimal digital editions (Allés Torrent and Gil, 2016).

In particular, I will draw on two discussions taking place in separate areas of the digital humanities: minimal computing and digital documentary editing. The Minimal Computing working group of Global Outlook: Digital Humanities (GO:DH) uses

> "minimal computing" to refer to computing done under some set of significant constraints of hardware, software, education, network capacity, power, or other factors. Minimal computing includes both the maintenance, refurbishing, and use of machines to do DH work out of necessity along with the use of new streamlined computing hardware like the Raspberry Pi or the Arduino micro controller to do DH work by choice.

Expanding on this thinking, Jentery Sayers has published a post on "Minimal Definitions (tl;dr version)" that succinctly and pithily encapsulates core tenets of minimal computing. These 25 "definitions/perspectives" provide a way to think through, in practice, the minimalism of any given project. "Minimal Dependencies," for example, forces us to think through "reliance on scripts, databases, libraries, versions, and software to decrease resource demands and processing time," while "Minimal Connectivity" addresses "the default assumption that internet access is evenly distributed in order to account for material and social conditions of communications and exchange." (Sayers 2016) Often, these concerns are in tension with cultural norms for digital editions, archives, and projects. There are no digital scholarly editions, for example, that I am aware of, that provide the ability to download the edition for local access without an internet connection. There may be no scholarly reason for this design decision, but it nevertheless evinces a maximalist approach towards digital scholarly editing that hinders the proliferation of digital editions of understudied and minority-authored texts. Minimal computing thus supplies a vocabulary and critical vantage point from which to begin discussing the minimal digital edition. The second aspect of discussing minimal digital editions is found in the digital scholarly editing communities' arguments over documentary editions. Elena Pierazzo defines the documentary edition as "as an edition of a text based on a single document, which at-

tempts to reproduce a certain degree of the peculiarities of the document itself, even if this may cause disruption to the normal flow of the text presented by the document" (Pierazzo 2014:2). As Pierazzo notes in this same article, documentary editing has often been derided as a "lower" form of scholarship, but it is a type of edition that has found so much success in digital spaces that editors have begun to worriedly call for a return to "critical editing." Discussions concerning the legitimacy, intellectual worth, and role of digital documentary editions is ongoing and has attracted commentary from textual editors from Peter Robinson to Elena Pierazzo to Franz Fischer. Over the last decade, documentary editions have gained legitimacy as a type of scholarship different from yet related to the traditional work of a critical textual editor. The shape of this discussion will serve as a framework for beginning a discussion of the minimal digital edition in the context of existing discourses on digital scholarly editing amongst textual scholars and digital humanists.

What might be considered minimal digital editions are found everywhere, but seldom seen. The EEBO - TCP HTML, and EPUB files could be considered minimal digital editions, as would much of the OCR text found in the Internet Archive, the collected Folger Digital Texts, the literary archive *Luminarium,* and many others. Minimal editions can surely be done well or done poorly, but as of now we have little understanding of what those terms might mean when building, evaluating, or publishing editions of this type. This presentation will elaborate upon the work of GO:DH, but also provide context for emerging discussions between and amongst those working in remediating historical materials.

Bibliography

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