

Criteria for Reviewing Scholarly Digital Editions, version 1.1

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Preliminary remarks

Scope

Definitions. This paper provides a framework for the description and evaluation of scholarly digital editions (SDE).^[1] A scholarly edition is an information resource which offers a critical representation of (normally) historical documents or texts. Scholarly digital editions are not merely publications in digital form; rather, they are information systems which follow a methodology determined by a digital paradigm, just as traditional print editions follow a methodology determined by the paradigms of print culture. Given this narrow understanding of SDEs, many digital resources can not be considered digital editions in this strict sense. Digitized printed editions or digitization projects in libraries and archives – even with their subsequent descriptive, transcriptive and indexing information – often don't live up to the concept of an SDE in the sense used here. Furthermore, if a publication does not meet certain core requirements of scholarship it cannot be labeled an SDE in the narrow sense. The question whether (and in which sense) a publication can be considered a scholarly edition should be addressed in the review. Nevertheless, the guidelines set forth in this paper are broad enough that they will often be applicable to resources that are not scholarly digital editions in the strict sense, as well.

Genres and academic schools. These guidelines are designed to be general enough to serve both the variety of documents and the variety of academic schools in scholarly editing. Any historical (maybe even contemporary) documents or texts can be the subject of an SDE. Also, any SDE can define different legitimate goals. There may be sound methodological reasons to refrain from textual reconstruction or emendation, to use no critical apparatus for the documentation of textual variance, or to select a particular perspective during the transcription. Hence, there are only three necessary conditions for an SDE:

- a justification of the editorial method adopted and a clear description of the rules that guided the edition,
- compliance with scholarly requirements towards content and quality, which includes that the self-stated rules are followed,
- and an editorial concept that is not restricted to the technological limitations of print technology but that realizes a “digital paradigm”

Best practice and open methodological questions. The evaluation of SDEs is based on the established methods of the editorial sciences of the print-era and on the experiences with digital editions in the last decades. Best practices in digital editing have been established for many editorial tasks. Reviewing SDEs will help to disseminate and canonize approved methods and approaches. These guidelines provide a basic set of requirements which should be addressed by an SDE, either by satisfying them or by justifying their non-application. However, many questions are still under discussion and, as far as these questions are concerned, necessary requirements cannot be postulated.^[2] Rather, reviews of SDEs should be seen as yet another contribution to ongoing methodological discussions. As a consequence, these guidelines should be updated continuously to reflect the results of these discussions.

Application

General and specific criteria. There are general criteria applicable to any kind of edition or similar resources. These criteria must be addressed in the review in their entirety. On the other hand, there are specific and detail-oriented criteria, which can only be applied to certain kinds of documents or to certain methods. Hence, the non-application of any of these criteria can be justified in one of two ways: either the criteria do not fit the documents of the edition or the editor chose not to conform to them for methodological reasons.^[3]

A matter of taste. Few rules and requirements for SDEs are beyond questioning. Many alternative solutions exist for common problems. The decision to use one or another of these alternatives is often a matter of taste and hence escapes scholarly discussion. Reviews can and should take a stance on these questions but should clearly state when they express personal preferences, which are not part of the general academic judgement of the edition.

Parameters. Editions should be reviewed considering their individual circumstances: goals set by the editors, financial resources, the run-time of the project and existing resources, like printed editions. It should be appraised positively when an edition is very rich in content, critical information and functionalities. But it must also be recognized when only narrower, self-defined aims are met. Where self-defined, ambitious goals are not fulfilled, the temporality of the presentation and its discussion should be taken into account. Publication and review are often valid only for a moment in an ongoing, open process of scholarly engagement. This should not be mistaken for the final state of a concluded edition. Therefore, the reviewer must examine whether the SDE has, at the point of its review, reached sufficient maturity and consistency to be a worthwhile resource for research. The review of a digital resource should also serve as a professional comment in the editorial process and a suggestion for improvement.

Qualification of the reviewer. Reviewing SDEs requires a double qualification because the reviewer has to be able to evaluate the content as well as the methodological scope and its implementation from a Digital Humanities perspective. Reviews of SDEs may only focus on one of these sides, which must be stated explicitly. Ideally, a complementary opinion by experts from fields of study in which the reviewer has less expertise should be added to the text.

1. Opening the review

1.1. The reviewer. Provide your academic background, institutional connections, prior experience, and research interests, if relevant to the review. This can be done in an extensive footnote.

1.2. Bibliographic identification of the reviewed SDE. An SDE should be identified in terms similar to traditional bibliographic descriptions: a title, the responsible editors, other responsible persons and institutions, the dates of its publication (initial, versions, last modification), and the address (in terms of web-URL or other naming conventions like DOI, URN or PURL) should all be evident. Any difficulties extracting such information from the SDE should be remarked upon in the review.

1.3. General introduction. The subject of the publication should be briefly described. What is the academic, disciplinary or interdisciplinary scope and context of the SDE? How does it relate to other printed or digital resources, to its predecessors or to similar projects? What desiderata does it address?

1.4. General parameters. Who are the editors, the participating institutions and staff? What were their responsibilities? Are they related to other projects? Are there content-related connections to other projects? What financial, personnel and time resources were available for the project? How was the project implemented?

1.5. Transparency. Are the general parameters easily accessible? Does the SDE provide an imprint? Institutional or personal contact information?

2. Subject and content of the edition

2.1. Selection. How relevant is the SDE to current and future research? What sources and documents have been selected and why? Are there principles of selection (or sampling)? Is the selection or sample complete within the context of the corpus? What is the broader topical context of the sources? Is the selection understandable?

2.2. Previous and project's achievements. What does the SDE contribute to the current state of knowledge of the topic? What has been taken from earlier works (e.g. printed editions), what is new?

2.3. Content. What does the SDE publish? Quantify and characterise the information presented (e.g. images, transcriptions, full texts, comments, context material, bibliography etc.). Is relevant content missing? Is any omission explained and/or justified?

3. Aims and methods

3.1. Documentation. Is there a description of the aims and methods of the SDE? If not, is this self-evident from the content and its presentation?

3.2. Scholarly objectives. What academic questions does the SDE address? To which fields of research does it contribute? To what extent does it support specific research interests?

3.3. Mission. What does the SDE want to accomplish? Does it achieve its objectives? What does the SDE promise explicitly? What does it merely suggest by self-classification (e.g. 'edition', 'critical edition', 'portal', 'collected works', 'digital archive', 'virtual archive' etc.)? What is the SDE's target audience?

3.4. Method. Which editorial school does the SDE follow? Which methodological approach does it take? Does it apply e.g. a materialistic or an idealistic / platonic understanding of text? Is it focussing on "works" or on "documents"? How does it assess the textual tradition: Are there preferred manuscripts or are all documents considered to be of equal value?

3.5. *Representation of documents and texts.* How does the SDE deal with the documents and the texts they bear? What is the role and quality of digital images? What perspective on the text informs the transcription rules applied? How detailed is the transcription? Where would you locate the transcribed texts on a spectrum from document-centric to interpretative representation? Does the SDE provide amendments and a reconstruction of ideal text versions?

3.6. *Text criticism, indexing and commentary.* What kind of textual criticism is documented in the SDE (e.g. a stemma, detailed description of the manuscripts)? What kinds of indexing, commentary and description of the documents and texts are applied?

3.7. *Data modelling.* How is the editorial method technically implemented? What data model is applied? Is the documentation of the data model sufficient? Which data formats are used? Does the SDE follow common standards (e.g. TEI guidelines)? If not, is the deviation from existing standards sufficiently justified? If yes, is the data modelling documented through a formal schema (like an ODD file in the case of TEI) available on the SDE's site?

4. Publication and presentation

4.1. *Technical infrastructure.* Which technologies are used for the publication of the SDE? Why are these technologies used (e.g. as decision between local conditions and best practices)?

4.2. *Interface and Usability.* Is the interface of the SDE clearly arranged and usable without much preliminary reading? Is the content effectively provided through the interface? Can the user quickly identify the purpose, the content and the main access methods of the SDE? Is the interface in line with common visual patterns? Is the user at any time made aware of what content is currently displayed, of their position in the overall architecture of the SDE, and how other content can be accessed?

4.3. *Browse.* Is it possible to browse through the entirety of the content? Is browsing access easy to understand and allow for fast access to any part of the content?

4.4. *Search.* Is there a simple and/or a complex search interface? How can you constrain your search? How does the user find information on search options and possibilities? Does the search provide feasible results when searching without specific knowledge of the content? Are there support functions, like informative help texts, indexes or auto-suggestion?

4.5. *Indices.* Is the content represented in any other formats which provide an overview of the edition and support access to the material, such as compilations, indices or registers? Are the indexes, commentary or description (as described in 3.6) used in the presentation of the content?

4.6. *Quality of the presentation.* If there are images, are they of sufficient quality for the main research interests in the material? Can you find significant errors in the transcriptions? Does the SDE contain critical commentary on the textual tradition or the interpretation of the texts? Can the user change the presentation of the material, e.g. from a diplomatic transcription to a normalized version?

4.7. *Metadata for description of and interlinkage between objects in the edition.* How are the various constituent parts and objects of the edition described? Are they described clearly and comprehensively? Are the single parts interlinked? Are different text surrogates linked (e.g. text and

image)? Are there internal links to further contextual information? Are the single parts linked to external resources?

4.8. Identification and citation. Are there persistent identifiers for the objects of the SDE? Which level of the content structure do they address? Which resolving mechanisms and naming systems are used? Does the SDE supply citation guidelines?

4.9. Technical interfaces. Are there technical interfaces like OAI-PMH, REST, APIs etc., which allow the reuse of the data of the SDE in other contexts? Can you harvest or download the data? Can you use the data with other tools useful for this kind of content? Can you integrate the content in other systems, e.g. aggregating content from several sources?

4.10. Social integration. Does the SDE integrate with social media and / or virtual research platforms, easily allowing sharing/discussion of particular parts? Does the project have a social media presence in their community?

4.11. Spin offs and export formats. Are there alternative formats available, e.g. a printable version or digital formats for specific reading devices (e-Books, mobile devices etc.)?

4.12. Access to basic data. Is the basic or underlying data of the edition accessible (e.g. in XML) and if so, how? Is it provided for each single object and/or for the whole SDE? Is the access part of the SDE's user interface or part of an external repository? If you cannot access the basic data, is a justification provided?

4.13. Rights and licences. Does the SDE provide sufficient information on rights and restrictions for the reuse of different parts of the SDE (e.g. images, transcriptions, editorial comments)? Does the SDE utilize a rights model feasible for scholarly reuse of the data? Is a specific licence model (e.g. Creative Commons) in use?

4.14. Additional features. Does the SDE provide features that merit special attention because they are particularly useful and/or unusual? Think of visualisations, interactivity, image manipulation, options for annotations, commentary notes and personalisation etc.

4.15. Documentation and associated texts. Does the SDE provide an introduction or explanatory texts? Is there a help system? Is there sufficient documentation of the project, the edition, and the technical implementation of the SDE? Are the source and the selection of the material described? Are the editorial principles extensively and clearly explained?

4.16. Long term use. What are the SDE's prospects for long term use? Is the edition complete or does it promise further modifications and additions? Is there institutional support for the curation and sustainment of the SDE? Is the basic data archived? Is there a plan to provide continuous access to the presentation?

5. Conclusion

5.1. Terminology. Can you classify the project as an "SDE", and if so, by what definition of an SDE? How would you describe the digital resource as the outcome of an editorial project briefly? If the published results do not fulfill some of the minimal requirements (such as the documentation of the textual tradition, rule based representation, transparency of the editorial decisions, scholarly quality), you should point out that the edition does not conform to scholarly standards and therefore should not be considered an SDE.

5.2. *Realisation of aims.* To what extent has the SDE successfully accomplished its original aims?

5.3. *Fulfillment of general requirements.* Does the project fulfill the requirements of a state of the art SDE? Does it fulfill the two basic requests for creators of a SDE: “1: State what you do and act accordingly. 2: Keep to the common scholarly standards.” Is the edition sufficiently documented? Is it citable and transparent? How is the quality of the content (images, texts, indexing, commentary, context information)?

5.4. *Contribution of the SDE to scholarship.* What does the SDE contribute to current scholarship in its target field? What does the SDE contribute to best practices in digital scholarly editing in general? What does the SDE accomplish which surpasses the possibilities of a printed edition?

5.5. *Particularities.* Which features merit special attention for noteworthiness and/or innovation, even if they are beyond the scope of these general criteria?

5.6. *Usability, usefulness, quality.* Is the SDE easy to use? Is it a useful contribution to a specific field of research? How would you describe its academic quality?

5.7. *Suggestions for improvement.* If the project is not complete and finished, what should be considered for further improvement? What would be nice and useful additions? What would be the most desirable steps after and outside an already terminated project?

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Review examples

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- Tonra, Justin: [\[Review on\] Vincent Van Gogh – The Letters](#), ed. by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. Jahrbuch für Computerphilologie 11 (2011).

[1] There is some debate whether “Scholarly Digital Edition” (SDE) or “Digital Scholarly Edition” (DSE) is more appropriate. There might be some minor differences between these expressions regarding the emphasis and the conceptual order of the crucial aspects. But since we believe that the final goal in both cases are editions that are scholarly and truly digital, we arbitrarily choose just one option.

[2] Candidates would be the fine granular crediting of individual editorial work, the provision of the data for the edition via technical interfaces or the semantic identification of named entities in the texts.

[3] For the former case, think of collating and documenting textual variance for a text with only one witness. For the latter, think of editing without textual emendation – e.g. to consciously not smudge the authentic reading.