# O’DONNELL —Old Familiar

<0 images>

# 

# The Old Familiar Faces: On the Consumption of (Digital) Textual Scholarship

O’Donnell, D. P., Singh, G. and Rosselli Del Turco, R.

Ten years ago, Peter Robinson reviewed the state of digital editing at the end of its first decade in the Internet era in a trio of important articles (Robinson and Taylor, 1998; Robinson 2003; 2005).

The results were not good. On the one hand, there were, by that point, a large number of digital editions and a great interest in the community of textual scholars in the possibilities of the digital edition. On the other, there was very little evidence that users were turning to digital editions: there were still many print editions being made and evidence of citations suggested that scholars preferred, on the whole, to work with familiar print editions over their newer counterparts (Robinson, 2005).

Robinson, for his part, argued that a good part of this problem lay with the lacuna in the digital editions themselves (Robinson, 2003). While it was difficult even in those days to find ‘a single large-scale editorial project in western Europe or America which does not have already have, or is not actively preparing, a digital dimension’ (Robinson, 2003), this work was itself still quite conservative in its use of the technology: there was much experimentation, but the result was very little that could not be found in print contexts (esp. Robinson, 2005)—a problem compounded by difficulties in using the technology of the day (Robinson, 2005; O’Donnell, 2010).

Ten years later, the digital is now even more firmly established as a primary method of scholarly communication and humanistic research (Robinson, 2010; Gold, 2012; Thaller, 2012). Moreover, interest in the significance and utility of the digital as a method of editing continues unabated (Mandell, 2010).

But what about Robinson’s original point about how these digital editions were being used? While textual scholars, editors, and digital humanists discuss the possibilities of the genre, and the improvements they have brought to our ability to present textual scholarship, is there any evidence that the supposed end users of these editions are recognising the benefit that digital editions offer to their research?

A review of contemporary secondary literary scholarship suggests that they are not. Despite the publication of a large number of new digital scholarly editions and great improvements in delivery methods that have all but eliminated difficulties of access experienced by scholars in the 1990s and early years of this century, bibliographic evidence suggests that digital textual editions are still passed over *in actual use* by scholars in preference for often superseded print editions. In contrast to the early years of this century, when scholars rarely cited electronic editions, scholars now frequently cite but rarely actually use their digital descendents. The actual text cited, as often as not, comes from the print editions that preceded these digital texts.

This paper presents the results of an ongoing study of this problem, based on a comparative longitudinal citation analysis of select digital and print editions of the same literary work. As part of this research, the authors have compared the rate at which citations to a ‘newer’ (approx. 10 years old) digital edition of a standard medieval vernacular poem have been disseminated through the secondary literature and compared this to the rate at which previous (print) critical editions of the same work were disseminated within a similar time frame in earlier periods. The results suggest that editorial research may simply disseminate more slowly than was previously thought: it appears to take about a decade before the text of a ‘new’ edition begins to be used as the basis of new critical arguments within the main text of secondary research (as opposed to being mentioned in passing in bibliographic notes and asides); it appears to take about two decades before a ‘new’ edition begins to become the default choice within a given research domain.

The final part of the paper turns to consider the implications of these findings for contemporary DH researchers. The first is that the slower-than-expected diffusion rate for digital scholarship places an even greater emphasis than before on issues of longevity and preservation. Ten years ago, O’Donnell demonstrated how few of the early digital editions of medieval texts had survived even a half-decade in an operational format (O’Donnell, 2004). This current research suggests that creators of digital editions need to think instead in terms of decades when it comes to preservation and longevity.

A second implication involves the question of delivery format. While this study compares the diffusion rates for digital and print editions of the same text over several decades, the editions are similar in that all were disseminated as discrete bibliographic items: as books in the case of the print editions, as a CD-ROM in the case of the digital text. Evidence from other disciplines, however, suggests that web-based open-access publications have stronger citation rates (and, possibly, quicker dissemination rates as well) than closed-access publications (see, e.g., Laakso, 2014). In this particular case, no comparable web-based editions of this text exist, and none of the few web-based critical editions of comparable texts from the same period survive in nonarchived format. This suggests that while web-based publication may speed up dissemination rates, this speed must be balanced against the evident difficulty such projects have had, historically, in ensuring their survival—especially in the case of a time frame measured in years.

And finally there is the question of training. The evidence suggesting that dissemination proceeds more slowly that has been previously anticipated suggests that digital editors also have a different type of training problem than they may have initially thought: instead of focussing on the short-term, early adopters of such technology, editors need instead to think about use cases 10 or 20 years down the road—of future scholars who have yet to begin their undergraduate careers, and current colleagues who may not see a citation to a digital edition for another 15 or 20 years.

In discussing the success (or lack thereof) of digital editions in making an impact on the larger domains to which they aim to contribute, it is common to attribute the problems they have experienced in gaining acceptance to problems with the genre, its producers, or its audience. The research in this paper, however, suggests that the real problem may be simply that digital editorial scholarship is still too recent to have had much of an impact on secondary study of the texts they mediate, as a very similar problem appears to have affected earlier print editions of such works in their first few years. But if the ‘problem’ with digital editions is simply that they are too new, then this changes our perspective on a number of other issues commonly discussed in relation to the discipline. Faced with a dissemination rate that suggests it may take 20 or more years before any edition can be considered ‘standard’, digital editors need to rethink questions of preservation, format, and training.

**References**

**Gold, M. K.** (ed.). (2012). *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

**Laakso, M.** (2014). Measuring Open Access: Studies of Web-Enabled Innovation in Scientific Journal Publishing. PhD thesis, Helsinki: Hanken School of Economics Information Systems Science, Department of Management and Organisation, https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/45238.

**Mandell, L**. (2010). Special Issue: Scholarly Editing in the Twenty-First Century—A Conclusion. *Literature Compass,* **7**(2): 120–33, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00684.x.

**O’Donnell, D. P.** (2004). The Doomsday Machine, Or, ‘If You Build It, Will They Still Come Ten Years from Now?’: What Medievalists Working in Digital Media Can Do to Ensure the Longevity of Their Research. *Heroic Age,* **7**, http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/7/odonnell.html.

**O’Donnell, D. P.** (2010). Different Strokes, Same Folk: Designing the Multi-Form Digital Edition. *Literature Compass,* **7**(2): 110–19, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00683.x.

**Robinson, P. (**2003). Where We Are with Electronic Scholarly Editions, and Where We Want to Be. *Jahrbuch Für Computerphilologie,* **5**, http://computerphilologie.uni-muenchen.de/jg03/robinson.html.

**Robinson, P. (**2005). Current Issues in Making Digital Editions of Medieval Texts—Or, Do Electronic Scholarly Editions Have a Future? *Digital Medievalist,* **1**, http://www.digitalmedievalist.org/journal/1.1/robinson/.

**Robinson, P. (**2010). Editing without Walls. *Literature Compass,* **7**(2): 57–61, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00676.x.

**Robinson, P. and Taylor, K.** (1998). Publishing an Electronic Textual Edition: The Case of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue on CD-ROM. *Computers and the Humanities,* **32**(4): 271–84, doi:10.1023/A:1000943530396.

**Thaller, M.** (ed.). (2012). Controversies around the Digital Humanities. Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung, **37**(1). Köln: Published jointly by QUANTUM [and] Zentrum für Historische Sozialforschung.