

## On Promises Kept: Archives and Editions

### A personal view

Manfred Thaller, University at Cologne

Using digital technologies for editorial purposes is nothing new; indeed this is one of the very roots of the applications of information technology within historical studies and the historical branches of the philological ones.

What it means for an edition to be “digital”, or rather supported by information technology, “digital” being a rather fleeting and empty term, has changed over the years, as technical possibilities as well as the understanding of their implications developed.

From the nineteen-seventies onward we have various projects which used text-processing and computer-typesetting to produce what at first sight looks like completely traditional printed editions: Wilhelm Ott from Tübingen and his software “TUSTEP”, connected to his type-setting company, probably the most productive representative of this time. In the year 2018 at first look it seems to be a puzzle, why this could be innovative in any way – how *could you* produce an edition, or any book, without the usage of text-processing and typesetting?

I would like to point out, that a revolution lurked there already, which was a promise of things to come and had a great methodological potential. Since the very first printed editions of any kind of source one thing was clear: An edition was available; or it was not. One of the side effects of Ott's early work was that this rule broke down. In the edition of the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz<sup>1</sup> – taking much longer, than it took Leibniz to write these works – the decision was taken, to print cheap preliminary versions, which made the current stage of the editorial work available years before it was published in the final form.

This established the first principle of what differentiates a digital edition from its traditional precursor: *A digital edition is never really finished*. If it is possible to make it available in a preliminary form, it is also possible to update it, when additional insights become available *after* the *Magnum Opus* is finished in the opinion of an editor.

While this first generation of “digital” editions was still only seen as a preparatory stage for printing, a second generation started during the eighties and came to fruition in the nineties, which was targeting a new medium: CD-ROMs. Three goals are new: (a) Digital imaging allowed the inclusion of scanned images on the CD-ROM.<sup>2</sup> (b) Versions of the text directed at different groups of users can be offered side by side.<sup>3</sup> (c) If you leave the restrictions of static print, the handling of witnesses can become much more flexible.<sup>4</sup>

Both of these goals mean, that the role of the editor changes in a sense. While in the original, printed form, being the sole authorities whom a reader has to trust, editors of editions which are accompanied by high resolution images of the sources make it possible for the reader to check many decisions in cases of doubtful readings. If the text surviving in individual witnesses is available as alternative reading, rather than as an apparatus criticus which is inscrutable to the majority of the readers, an editor makes a proposal, not an authoritative decision.

Which leads to the second principle of a digital edition: *A digital edition is a possible interpretation of a source, which submits the interpreted material to the judgement of the user*.

This second generation of digital editions was impaired by one problem: If you have understood, how to read *one* book, you are in principle able to handle *all* of them. If you have become a wizard with the interface of one CD-ROM-based proprietary software, you will not have to start from

---

<sup>1</sup> On the current state see: <http://www.uni-muenster.de/Leibniz/seite2.html> (access: May 17th, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the „Electronic Beowulf“, on the current stage see: <http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/> (access: May 17th, 2018)

<sup>3</sup> E.g. „Wittgenstein’s Nachlass“, on the current stage see: <http://wab.uib.no/>

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Peter Robinson’s editions of the Canterbury Tales, on the current stage see:

<http://www.textualcommunities.usask.ca/web/canterbury-tales/home> (access: May 17th, 2018)

scratch with the next one; but nearly so. Which *is* frustrating, if you just want to use them. A problem, which up to a degree can be solved with the appearance of the internet: Most of the digital editions of the second generation have found their way into the internet sooner or later. While idiosyncrasies in their user interfaces remain, the pressure of the internet towards implicit standards for interfaces has been very strong – and while irritations about unfamiliar interfaces remain, at least you do not have to buy a completely different software, as you did with the CD-ROMs of the second generation.

So, the triumph of the internet lead to a triumph of the digital edition? Well, not really. Actually one of the most prominent advocates of digital editions of the second generation, Peter Robinson, complained at the first height of the internet hype, 2005, that “*Despite great promise ... digital editions have not been as successful with the general scholarly community as was expected by early digital theorists.*”

Very soon after the start of the internet the digitization of historical documents started. How best to use these new possibilities was far from clear, however. Quite a few scholars and librarians saw these possibilities as an extension of the logical hierarchy, were less important documents were only described in finding aids; more important ones summarized in *regesta*<sup>5</sup>; a small number becoming the object of a critical edition; and only a very few of the most central documents entering Mount Olympus as faithful pictorial representations in a facsimile.

Personally I always thought that this was a complete misunderstanding of the implications of the appearance of the internet and the spectacular decrease of the cost of high resolution photography<sup>6</sup>. Even *regesta* are orders of magnitudes more expensive than scanning the documents. In the case of historical printed books, the creation of a catalog entry according to the standards of national bibliographies is more expensive, than scanning the book. My own vision has therefore always been, that a rapid and general digitization campaign should try to make as many documents accessible as quickly as possible – even if that meant, that they would be accessible at the beginning only by browsing through shelf marks. But accessible in a way, which provided the ground for improving accessibility by considering the consequences from the two principles which the earlier generations of digital editions had established: an edition is always unfinished and it should provide access to the documents being interpreted by the editor.

In reality, however, mass digitization and the development of digital editions seemed to move away from each other. Librarians and archivists (to a much smaller degree) advanced the accessibility of whole collections<sup>7</sup>, but this was not seen as a contribution to editorial activities, but quite distinct from it. Crowdsourcing, the invitation of volunteers to contribute to the creation of metadata to a collection of digitized material from archives, libraries and museums, is almost always seen as enlisting amateurs to support specialists, different and separated from the work of the specialist<sup>8</sup>. Monasterium is a very bright exception to this rule, being dedicated from the beginning at a scholarly community.

The Naples edition within the context of Monasterium is a perfect example for what digital

---

<sup>5</sup> Apologies to readers which are native speakers of English. The Latin term is much more transparent to virtually all readers with a background in other European languages, than the correct “chancery rolls”.

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Thaller: “Digital Manuscripts as base line for dynamic editions”, in: *Digital Technology and Philological Disciplines*, ed. Andrea Bozzi, Laura Cignoni and Jean-Louis Lebrave. In *Linguistica Computazionale XX-XXI* (2004), 489- 511; Manfred Thaller: “Reproduktion, Erschließung, Edition, Interpretation: Ihre Beziehungen in einer digitalen Welt”, in: *Vom Nutzen des Edierens* ed. Brigitte Merta, Andrea Sommerlechner und Herwig Weigl, Wien, 2005 (= *MIÖG Erg. Band 47*), 205 - 227.

<sup>7</sup> For a particularly brilliant medieval example see: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch> (access: May 17th, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> For an extremely successful example of this kind of project, have a look at the Itinera Nova project of the city archive of Leuven: <http://itineranova.be> (access: May 17th, 2018).

editions of the future should be. It bases the edition upon academic *collaboration*. *That digital editions of the third generation should be collaborative*, or at least more collaborative than earlier ones, is probably almost consensual in the community. And it *embeds* the edition into an archive, which opens up completely new possibilities for the continuous extension of itself. This, the principle, *that a digital edition should be integrated into a larger framework of sources*, has in my opinion been the most important promise of the application of information technologies since at least three decades.

To see that promise kept, is immensely satisfying.