

Ending the myth of presentation in digital editions

In digital editions the encoded texts are the most important long-term outcome of the project – presentation within some application being only a (albeit most desirable) side effect that is bound to be modified over time or multiplied in other scenarios. But many digital editions are created by people with strong textual editing background, and some editors view it very differently – encoding being only the necessary step towards the real goal: the published edition, be it printed or presented otherwise.

Developers tend to think that after the encoding is completed, the most important and resource-hungry work is done and the rest is almost trivial. At the same time editors brace themselves for the long fight to get endless visual details and automatically generated views just right. The question one hears most often during the encoding stage is: “What is it going to look like”? And somehow the answer “Any way you like” just doesn’t seem to get through or satisfy people.

But it is not that hard to see why. Humanities departments don’t teach programming, so in most cases custom processing of encoded documents is out of reach of a typical editor and involves asking for technical help – which involves money and inevitable delays and communication problems. Supposedly, when editors are able to actually change the presentation with a degree of self-assurance resembling their skills with text processors, they will accept the point of view that good encoding is what counts the most. And only then could they think of sharing the encoded files, rather than presentation, as their goal.

We have an ever-growing number of digital editions publicly accessible. Yet a relatively small percentage of those make the encoded source files openly available too. Without the sources we cannot hope for the much anticipated re-use of this all painstakingly collected and prepared content in innovative research, visualisation and popularisation.

An essential prerequisite to encouraging more and better new editions and re-use of already existing annotated material is a strong public infrastructure – not only open, but with minimal learning curve and strong, lasting, community support. Some initiatives are already in place

providing pieces of software to perform some of the transformation and publishing tasks, and there is room for more and better tools, but there is also a constant need of examples, sharing of success stories and user training.

A good start to address this need can be a repository of both TEI-encoded files and XSLT stylesheets tailored to specific tasks, to be publicly available and hosted by the TEI, to be used as examples and exit points in further specialized applications. Possibly in due course such a repository could grow and contain other materials that could be helpful in setting up working environments for projects with little or no technical help available. The TAPAS project looks set to make a good start on this sort of service.

But another repository and set of demonstration stylesheets is only part of the solution. There have been many attempts at making presentation software which does not just mimic the centuries-old methods of display, but not enough visualization mechanisms which demonstrate to the editor why the real underlying data is better and richer than mere pictures of data.

The DiXiT project and its network of researchers and supporting institutions are aiming to identify the critical missing links and develop tools for the creation and display of scholarly digital editions that will fill the gaps. If it is really just tools and training we are lacking, then we are on the verge of making this broader, more abstract understanding of what the goal of digital edition is a new standard in humanities. It seems the time is ripe to make the shift.

Bibliography

- DiXiT Project <http://dixit.uni-koeln.de/project.html>
- TAPAS Project <http://www.tapasproject.org/>