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Redefining Responsibility

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The goal of the FRRICT project is an admirable one: to collect insights in ICT practices and facilitate a discussion in which researchers share their experiences. The subjects of the contributions indicate that this goal finds a hearing among a variety of research fields. The accounts are all concerned with ethics, morals and responsibility in different ways. However, most, if not all, relate to research involving participants. Subsequently, they focus on evaluating the risks involved in handling and publishing the data obtained, mostly in terms of privacy. In this sense, although the research domains vary from social sciences to the medical field, the studies have only been carried out in a relative small number of areas.

With contributions from different disciplines, the suggestion of an interdisciplinary discussion is raised. However, an important discipline appears to be underrepresented: the humanities. More specifically: a contribution that offers a humanistic perspective. That is, most contributions are case studies, not theoretical or conceptual reflections. Nevertheless, especially when discussing an intangible subject like changes that occur after the addition of a digital component, a humanistic approach can be valuable.

Traditionally, humanist scholars are able to provide an alternative perspective on various phenomena that occur in a society. Historians can for example use their knowledge from the past to reflect on current developments and place them subsequently in a broader framework. Besides promoting our understanding of the present, historical research can also draw our attention to certain seemingly unimportant elements. Another example of the value of a humanistic perspective is a literary scholar focussing on the semantics of a text and noting that, although a certain word has multiple meanings, it is used only in one sense.

This essay sets out to establish a more productive collaboration between humanist scholars and the ICT community by considering some current developments from a humanistic perspective. It suggests that the phrase 'responsibility in ICT research' used in the FRRICT call for contributions is presently interpreted too narrow, and offers a broader definition. This point is then illustrated by reflecting upon several problems that occur in the daily practice of developing a digital scholarly edition.

Responsible research refers to dealing with the (ethical) issues that arise when applying information technologies in academic research. By describing these issues, the FRRICT aims to raise awareness and incorporate critical reflection¹ in future research. However, there is a risk that the current approach will lead to a relatively limited and unilateral understanding of these issues. This risk is caused by the interpretation of the word 'responsibility'. By understanding 'responsibility' solely in the sense of conducting ethical research, the burden of responsibility is placed with the scholars. In this sense, the discussion is actually about the question: how can *scholars* apply the current digital technologies in their research in an ethical way?

A discussion on applying digital technologies in research will be more productive if it takes into account the perspectives of ICT technologists. Without dismissing in any way the value of the present case studies, they do not come from the designers of the technologies used. Software developers, web designers, front - and back end developers,

¹ Call for contributions on responsible-innovation.org.uk/frriict/call-for-contributions (accessed on April 18th,2013)

IT specialists: their voice seems to be missing. However, no actual progress can be made without the ICT community actively participating in any discussion. This becomes clear when taking a closer look at the field of digital humanities and in particular textual scholarship.

The digital humanities (or: e-humanities) is a relatively young field that thrives by the combination of ICT knowledge and humaniora expertise. It is difficult to give a satisfactory definition of the discipline. For now, the definition provided by Katheen Fitzpatrick suffices: 'a nexus of fields within which scholars use computing technologies to investigate the kinds of questions that are traditional to the humanities'.² In many cases, the combination of ICT and humanistic sciences opens up numerous possibilities for research. Of this, the scholarly edition is a good illustration.

A great part of the early projects in the digital humanities had to do with (mass) digitization and making digital reproductions of books and manuscripts. The main purpose of these projects was to preserve the cultural (or literary) heritage. For one, this could be achieved by building digital repositories, some for institutional use, others accessible for a larger public. In the case of textual scholarship, a field that is traditionally more focused on a text than on its various carriers, these digital developments took the form of digital scholarly editions, available on CD ROM.³

In recent years, there has been an increase in more complex projects such as online scholarly editions. These editions combine knowledge from different domains in the humanities, such as textual, historical or literary studies. The information can be displayed in different forms depending on the preferences of the user.⁴

This type of projects and the larger research programs they are part of, are usually described in lyrical phrases. They 'set the tone' for the future, combine 'in-depth knowledge and specialized skills', 'unite disciplines', are 'interdisciplinary' and 'groundbreaking'.⁵ In theory, they absolutely are. Some of the projects that were developed can justly be described in such terms.⁶ However, there is a risk that in the near future we will experience a discrepancy between theory and reality.

Traditionally, the designated audience of scholarly editions is quite small, specific and mainly academic. Professor Fabian Stolk describes textual scholars as having 'a fondness for forgotten and mistreated texts. They can be considered purists, focused as they are on commas and spelling, or archaeologists of texts. By mapping varieties different versions of the same text, they try to establish intangible concepts such as the author's intention.'⁷ Textual scholars consider themselves proud warriors in the fight against the mistreatment of texts. After years of research, these textual varieties are recorded in a so-called critical apparatus: a vast work that will probably be read only by

² Fitzpatrick, Kate, 'Reporting from the Digital Humanities 2010 Conference', on *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13th, 2010 (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/reporting-from-the-digital-humanities-2010-conference/25473>, accessed on May 24th 2013)

³ An example of an early project is the English Poetry Full-Text Database (<http://www.tei-c.org/Activities/Projects/ch01.xml>, accessed on May 24th, 2013)

⁴ See for example the Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/>); the Online Froissart (<http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/>); the Walt Whitman Archive (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>); the or the project on Carolingian Scholarship (<http://martianus.huygensinstituut.nl/path>) (all websites last accessed on May 24th, 2013).

⁵ Similar words are used in the description of the research program of the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, available on <http://www.huygens.knaw.nl/en/nieuw-onderzoeksprogramma-2012-2017/> (accessed on May 24th, 2013)

⁶ Projects described in such terms: the Visionary Cross Project (<http://visionarycross.org/news/>), the Mark Twain Project (<http://www.marktwainproject.org/>); the Willa Cather Archive (<http://cather.unl.edu/>); the Letters of Van Gogh (<http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/>) (all websites last accessed on May 24th, 2013).

⁷ Stolk, Fabian, 'Voor het volk?' on <http://www.textualscholarship.nl/?p=5985> (accessed on April 18th, 2013).

a handful of like-minded scholars. In short, there is sometimes a painfully large discrepancy between the amounts of research and the public attention and interest it gets.

Textual scholarship can profit extremely well from the collaboration between humanities and ICT. In print form, the text-related research of textual scholars can only have one outcome, quite inaccessible for non-specialists. That is, readers interested in the variations between versions of a text have to consult an extensive schema. Notes and background texts are tucked away in specific chapters. In short, working with scholarly editions requires some effort and persistence from the reader. In a digital form, a scholarly edition can present all this information in any way convenient to its readers. Illustrative examples are the online edition of Van Gogh's letters and the Mark Twain Project Online.⁸ These digital editions contain largely the same information as their printed counterparts. Nevertheless, they are consulted by a much larger audience, for the simple reason that the form in which the information is presented is more accessible. Since they are examples of what a digital component can do for humanities research, they are often used as representatives of the fruitful collaboration between ICT and humanities. However, these projects date from a couple of years ago. Digital developments go fast and the projects will have to keep up. If they don't, they risk being out-dated minutes after their launch and losing the interest of this recently discovered larger audience.

Digital scholarly editions that are currently created should meet the requirements of both modern and future academics. This can partly be achieved by registering the research practices and work flow of modern scholars and thus establishing their possible future needs and demands. However, modern scholars currently stand on the bridge between tradition and invention. Despite their frequent and increasing use of a digital medium, their workflow is mostly based on analogue media.⁹ How are they to foresee the changes in the research practices of future scholars? As a contemporary of any development, it is nearly impossible to predict in what impact a development will have and whether it is of a technical, psychological or social nature.¹⁰ Moreover, humanist scholars are not trained to estimate the value of every new digital development. This is where the responsibility of the ICT community comes in. The diversity of knowledge present in the ICT community is indispensable for the creation of digital editions that are both scholarly responsible as well as interesting for a large public.

The focus of humanist scholars should not shift from detailed and in-depth research to making a fancy website that can keep a modern, easily distracted audience interested. The meticulous research that lies at the base of scholarly editions remains important. Moreover, scholars usually do not possess the required knowledge to create such web editions, nor are they used to keep up with developments in the digital world. They depend on the ICT-sector for the groundbreaking, boundary-crossing ideas the digital scholarly editions need in order to hold the attention of every type of reader. However, the collaboration between humanist scholars and the ICT community is complicated.

⁸ The Letters of Vincent van Gogh can be accessed on <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/>, the Mark Twain Project on <http://www.marktwainproject.org/>

⁹ Hillesund, T., 'Digital Reading Spaces: How Expert Readers handle Books, the Web, and Electronic Paper', in: *First Monday*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (April 2010).

¹⁰ Weel, A. van der, *Changing our Textual Minds: Towards a Digital Order of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 10

The ICT community is used to working on an on-demand basis. In practice this usually means that scholars describe their ideas for the edition, presenting a wish list as it were. These ideas are subsequently realised by a development team, in so far as the limits of the information technologies allow. In these situations, the stereotype of the web developer trying to please his impossible client is not much beside the truth.¹¹

Textual scholars find it hard to leave the carefully formed framework of their discipline and to go further than the familiar forms that already proved to work. They are confronted with various issues, caused by the digital component that is suddenly a part of their research. These issues are quite diverse, both in subject as well as complexity. In the case of digital scholarly editions, they vary from theoretical (representing a concept as authorial intention) and juridical (copyrighted material, privacy of users) to practical matters (ensuring that the information is presented in a complete yet clear manner). The approach of textual scholars to these new issues is above all theoretical, since their experience and thus their standards are based on editions in print. These issues call for new standards, adapted to the digital era. An ICT perspective can be valuable in defining such standards and finding solutions to these issues.

There are currently several digital editions under construction, both in Europe, the UK and the US.¹² Although they are developed within small project teams, this is done with little to no mutual consultation. This way, these projects run the risk of simultaneously yet individually reinventing the same wheel. Partly this lack of communication can be explained –yet not justified- out of privacy and security concerns. However, that does not explain the absence of representatives from the ICT community at digital humanities conferences or the reason their contributions to the debates on digital developments are so limited.

If the promises of the digital edition should ever be realised, the traditional perspective of humanity scholars does not suffice. Neither do calls for action, for change, for new paradigms or for collaboration ‘across disciplines, across boundaries’,¹³ however well meant they may be. It is time to go beyond the theory. A bottom-up approach such as initiated by the FRRICT is a good start, for it tries to construct a responsible framework by mapping different practices. However, until now only researchers *working with* ICT technologies are appealed by the call. It is essential that both definitions of the word ‘responsibility’ be respected. The ICT-sector should take on their responsibility by actively participating in discussions, offering their perspective and providing alternative solutions. Their contributions might be the key in breaking through certain deadlocks in the development of digital humanities. Only then can we truly speak of groundbreaking projects that cross boundaries.

¹¹ *How a Webdesign Goes Straight To Hell*, by The Oatmeal: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/design_hell

¹² See for example ‘Woolf Online’ (<http://www.woolfonline.com/>), ‘The Digital Thoreau’ (<http://www.digitalthoreau.org/>) and the previously discussed ‘Willa Cather Archive’

¹³ See the all for papers of the ESTS conference 2012 ‘Editing Fundamentals’ (<http://ests2012.huygens.knaw.nl/?p=5>, accessed on May 24th 2013)