
Understanding the Social Edition Through Iterative Implementation: The Case of the Devonshire MS (BL Add MS 17492)

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Constance Crompton

University of British Columbia

Ray Siemens & Alyssa Arbuckle

University of Victoria

The Devonshire MS Editorial Group¹

Abstract

This article reports on the ongoing social edition building process. Using the social edition of the Devonshire Manuscript as a case study, the authors assess the scholarly potential of the process of editing in public, with contributions and feedback from the existing knowledge communities surrounding Wikibooks, Wikipedia, Twitter, and other social media spaces. Working at the intersection of academic and social media culture, they share the feedback of their advisory board, Twitter followers, and Wikipedia editors.

Keywords

Social edition; Collaboration; Knowledge community; Textual editing; Social media

Constance Crompton

is Assistant professor of Digital Humanities and English at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. Email: constance.crompton@ubc.ca

Alyssa Arbuckle is

Metadata Architect in the Electronics Textual Cultural Lab at the University of Victoria. Email: alyssaarbuckle@gmail.com

Raymond Siemens is a

Canada Research Chair in Humanities Computing and Distinguished Professor at the University of Victoria. Email: siemens@uvic.ca

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Introduction

At the 2011 *Birds of A Feather* gathering in Kyoto, Japan, we presented the conceptual foundation of the social edition along with the stakes inherent in the publication of scholarly material in an editable public space, such as the Wikimedia suite of projects. We, The Devonshire MS Editorial Group², had prepared a static edition of the *Devonshire Manuscript*, a sixteenth century courtly miscellany, to be reviewed by our advisory board of early modern scholars and were about to migrate the edition into Wikibooks. The preparation of a static authoritative version of the text and the migration into Wikibooks represented the first and second steps in our investigation into the scholarly potential of editing in public, with contributions and feedback from the existing knowledge communities surrounding Wikibooks, Wikipedia, Twitter, and Iter's Renaissance and Middle Ages online resource space. In short, the edition building process situated our text at the intersection of academic and social media culture. We return this year to report on our iterative building process. As we expanded the edition in Wikibooks, we received feedback from the advisory group via Skype interviews and via Iter, from the scholar and citizen community via Twitter and blogs, and from the Wikibooks community via Wikibooks itself. In addition to informing and instructing the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab ("ETCL") team on the early modern content of the edition, the various groups offered their opinions on our method. We expected, at worse, a clash of interpretation,³ but what transpired was not a clash, but a *chord* made up of the different cultures of the social media spaces that we were using — a chord that now resonates in the text of the *Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* (See Figure 1).⁴ In light of our experience of the iterative production method, we suggest that social editions take their character as much from the cultural norms of the various communities that produce them as they do from source material for the edition.

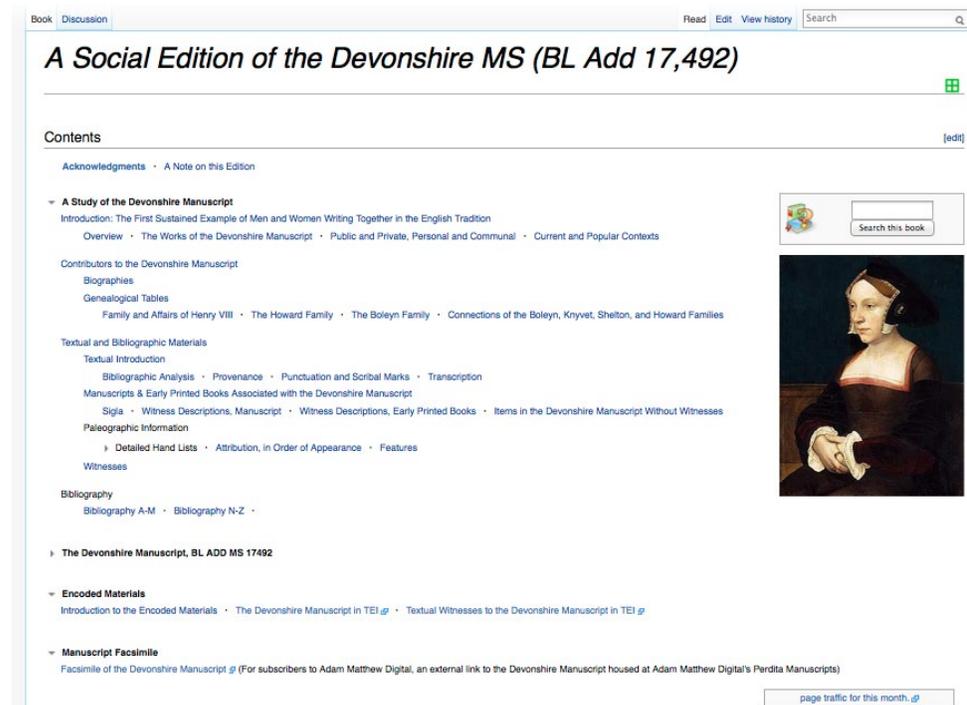


Figure 1: A Social Edition of the Devonshire MS

Discussion: Community feedback

The advisory group was nearly unanimous in their assertion that the Wikibooks platform challenges traditional means of assessing an edition's authority while facilitating the type of conversation that peer review is meant to embody. An advisor remarked, "the main advantage [of an evolving edition] is the openness to further corrections and improvements — of the introduction, the texts, and the commentary" (Advisor 7, March 3, 2012). Not all of the advisors, however, were interested in opening the edition to annotations by graduate students or interested members of the public. As one advisor claimed, "there are very few people qualified to read this manuscript and say anything I would want to read" (Advisor 8, February 29, 2012). Another advisor suggested that an evolving edition speeds up the scholarly conversation that is essentially the goal of the peer review process:

When it comes to the goals of peer review, I see it less in terms of 'grading' and evaluation — this may be more what it *should* be than what it is. It seems ultimately that it is facilitating a conversation amongst a scholarly community about a work in progress. It's done in a very abstracted way [at the moment]. (Advisor 4, March 3, 2012)

Another dissented slightly: "the Wikibooks format is going to allow for changes forever, but maybe that's perfect for an edition ... it's important to have that sense of fluidity and that potential to improve something. And yet there's a trade-off between that potential improvement and that endless tinkering, the fact that it's never done" (Advisor 7, March 3, 2012). The evolving edition does not simply raise questions about editorial authority; it also raises questions about project legacy planning and community responsibility.

Perhaps predictably, there was a culture clash between the academic and wiki-sphere. In our current academic environment, job promotion and security relies on tangible records of scholarship and service. The inability to receive credit for editing in Wikibooks deters scholars from contributing to Wikimedia projects. As one advisor noted,

perhaps some day, probably in the next generation, people ... won't be as worried about [credit] as we are. If it becomes a question [of whether] it's tenure-related, you have to prove authorship of X amount of work, ... if that suddenly is adjusted so that tenure, peer evaluation, peer review, becomes something that it isn't right now, something more reflective of the way we're doing our research work, then it may be that people are less concerned about who gets credit for what, or how you approach the idea of collaborative research. (Advisor 3, March 1, 2012).

The more fixed structure of the academic credit system may frequently seem at odds with the evolving frameworks of projects like the *Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript*. As one advisor remarked, “I think there’s way too much focus on the end product, there’s less attention paid to preserving and sharing the process that leads up to the end product. I would like to see that done a bit more often” (Advisor 4, March 3, 2012). Inherent in the ongoing nature of most digital projects is a dilemma: how do we assign and receive credit for work that may never be completed in the traditional sense? As we discuss below, the key is to devise metrics that allow us to assess non-traditional scholarly work.

Our choice of the Wikibooks environment was slightly fraught with anxiety: the platform afforded the expertise of an existing knowledge community, but that community came with certain partisanship that was not in keeping with the social edition project. Although the social circulation of knowledge that Wikimedia incites is compelling, the scarcity of female editors and the dearth of material traditionally of interest to women is troubling — the *Devonshire Manuscript*, hitherto unpublished, is the first example of men and women writing together in English (Siemens, 2009). The scarcity of information that may be of interest to women is doubly troubling to those of us invested knowledge transmission through social media forms. In a study into the gender imbalance amongst Wikipedia editors (see Lam, Uduwage, Dong, Sen, Musicant, Terveen, & Riedl, 2011), Shyong Lam, a computer scientist from the University of Minnesota, noted that the Wikipedia content that attracts male editors is of higher quality than the content that attracts female editors. (The study used length of Wikipedia content as a proxy for quality and looked at those Wikipedia editors who identified their sex). Women are more likely to contribute to Wikipedia’s People and Arts sections than they are to Geography, Health, History, Science, Philosophy, and Religion. But, due to the relatively few number of female Wikipedia editors, men still outnumber women in the Arts and People sections by a ratio of ten to one.⁵ Lam attributes the gap to the culture of Wikipedia: women do not have a critical mass on Wikipedia, and the Wikipedia community treats them with greater hostility than it does men. Only 16% of editors on Wikipedia are women and, Lam found, new female editors are more likely to have their edits reversed than new male editors. Wikipedia’s hostile reception of women has resulted in low female participation in Wikipedia editing. Their underrepresentation has skewed the content and quality of subjects about women, like the history of women’s writing.

Throughout our process it was necessary to keep in mind the gendered atmosphere of our chosen platform, especially considering the gendered elements of the *Devonshire Manuscript*. The advisory group noted the particular way in which the *Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* addresses the role of women in the production of the manuscript itself. As one advisor commented, “one of the things [I have been] thinking about [is] again bringing women writers up to the front, and showing them as a part of a network of writers who were all sort of cross-pollinating and doing all this stuff in a way that’s not ghettoizing them, which is what was happening [in scholarship in general]” (Advisor 5, March 1, 2012). The traces of the original contributors’ editorial processes are manifest on the page in the form of marginalia and in-line corrections.

In a parallel fashion, the Wikibooks platform, with its archived revision history, makes it possible for us to manifest our own editorial process and, because we are a dedicated team devoted to seeding the edition, makes the process robust enough to resist dismissal or unwarranted attacks based on the gendered content of the social edition.

Following Skype consultations, the advisory group continued the conversation in Iter's social media space — a Drupal installation that shares many features with Facebook. Users have their own profile pages, may join groups, send emails, and blog. The asynchronous nature of the posts made it difficult to sustain a conversation, but in response to our group's review, Iter is redesigning how it notifies users of new comments in its user-defined interest groups.

We furthered our social media interactions via Twitter, a platform through which we decided to twice weekly tweet poems from the *Devonshire Manuscript* Wikibook.⁵ We received feedback from various constituencies, which ranged from the ardent support of Tudor avatars to the more critical responses of academics. Where Lady Madge Shelton — a Twitter avatar of *Devonshire Manuscript* contributor Mary Shelton — may write “@Devonshire_MS You know you have my heart, love. Thou art my life's ambition. Xoxo #FOLLOWFOLLOW” (March 12, 2012), more theoretical questions are raised with tweets like Andy Fleck's question “Quoting Wyatt. In what context?” (See Figure 2) or Chris Shirley's curiosity: “By the way, would be very interested in the IP issues involved in publishing the edition online. Any notes?” (January 26, 2012). The various social interactions our Twitter presence has induced is valuable for our overall project of constructing an evolving edition. Furthermore, its social media format gave us the opportunity to iteratively interact with our advisors, our peers, and the public, and to refine the edition and reflect on our process in response to their ongoing feedback.



Figure 2: Tweet by Andy Fleck, 26 September, 2012

We embarked on a public editing process to encourage communication between editorial communities while preserving the peer review process. Regardless, there are conflicts in editorial norms across our various communities. For example, our initial vision for the Magic Circle (a visualization tool for assigning credit by showing contributions in pie chart form, see Figure 3) included contributions for the discussion pages (a space appended to each Wikibook article where users interact). Many of our advisors had professed their desire to debate the interpretation or transcription of a particular passage. As one advisor stated, in a wiki,

you don't necessarily want to go in and intrude without permission on somebody's entry proper. ... You want to actually be able to work through it in the Talk section, and then from there ... you introduce yourself into the environment, you offer suggestions, you point out where things may or may not gel with what you think ... from that point you engage with the actual editing on the page. (Advisor 3, March 1, 2012)

The other advisors offered similar sentiments: they wanted to discuss before they revised, and The Magic Circle, developed and donated by colleagues at the University of Alberta, would let us capture and credit that discussion.

The Wikibooks form gives us the opportunity to assign credit for important editorial work that extends beyond the creation of original content. Discussion and feedback are central to scholarly revision. A print edition, however, often only acknowledges these forms of labour with a line or two on the acknowledgments page.

The Devonshire Manuscript
And who that sayth that for to love ys vyce

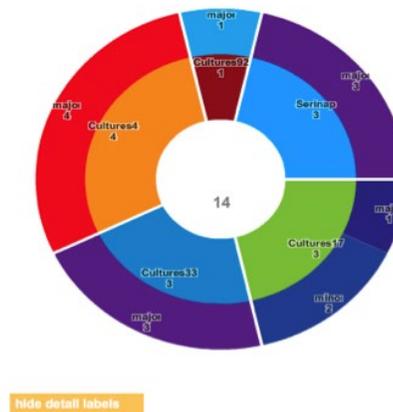


Figure 3: The Magic Circle

Our initial plan was to visualize user-defined major and minor edits, as well as contributions to the discussion pages. For example, the Magic Circle lets us include tips from our discussion pages offered by Wikipedians Panic and Jomgat. Jomgat joined in on the discussion but did not edit any of our pages directly. He offered advice on the finer points of importing content from other Wikipedia pages. In the final analysis, we decided not to import content from other pages. Jomgat's suggestions helped us to

refine our thinking, and including Jomgat's contributions in the Magic Circle added to the record of our decision-making process. Ideally, this record will assist future collaborators. Anyone who considers importing content into the edition will have access to how we have addressed the issue in the past. Jomgat's intervention and input on this topic were very helpful and, we argue, deserves credit.

Debate: Editing in cultural context

Originally, we considered the discussion pages ideal for the scholarly discussion and editorial recordkeeping preferred by our advisors. Unfortunately, we abruptly ran up against Wikibooks' existing discussion conventions. In December 2011 one of the ETCL team members was subject to sudden abuse on her personal discussion page. The content was definitely what Wikipedians call Not Safe For Work — and we will not reproduce it here. Nevertheless, although discussions in Wikibooks are occasionally fractious, the Wikibooks community is dedicated to the site's integrity: within 20 minutes of the attack, Jomgat had deleted the offending user's Wikibooks account.

Like a private wiki community, Wikibooks bears its own social conventions. We discussed the community's discussion page norms with Panic, another editor who has taken an interest in our edition. Panic claims, "People will only use (write) into talk pages to express discontent about something, clear some controversial contribution or gather support for some major change" (Panic2k4, 2012). Furthermore, he says, "One thing that I always have in mind is that we are all volunteers so I try to balance criticism with praise for work well done" (Panic2k4, 2012). In short, the Wikibooks discussion pages comprise more personal commentary than editorial suggestions. Predominantly, they are venues for editors to offer one another personal support (or abuse) rather than to discuss Wikibook content.

Thus, rather than relying on the discussion pages for editorial decisions, we made the most substantive changes in Wikibooks based on our Skype and Iter-based interactions with our advisory group. Although our hope had been to have the advisors edit directly in Wikibooks, some of our advisors found the technological threshold for contributing to Wikibooks too high. We found it more practical to have the ETCL-based team make the proposed changes in the Wikibook, which skewed the data displayed by the Magic Circle. We responded to the advisors' recommendations in near-real time, adding navigation menus and images that the advisors suggested through our ongoing consultation. We need many avenues for editorial conversation in order to foster the sense of a community that, as one of our advisors noted, is "virtually there, as if everyone is crowded around a page, putting their two cents in on matters great and small" (Advisor 7, March 5, 2012). Multiple social media platforms facilitate social editing, and relying on one single communication platform (such as Wikibooks alone) may impede the success of an evolving social edition.

Dissemination: The next steps

At the time of writing, we are exploring complimentary publishing options for the social edition that may help to ease the transition from traditional, fixed editions to more fluid, evolving editions. One of the central features of the Wikibooks version of the *Devonshire Manuscript* is the prompt to re-think authority in the context of traditional scholar and citizen scholar collaboration. In the coming year we will be

working with publishing partners at Iter and Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies and digital content partners at Adam Matthew Digital to devise the best way to take a digital and print “snapshot” of the edition. The fixed digital version will join Iter’s online publications, bringing the text into conversation with Iter’s other digital resources and the scholars who use them through groups and exhibit space in the Iter social media pages. In this way, we can integrate the *Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* with already existent digital and print publication venues.

Each social media platform attracts and enables specific types of interaction. Using social media allows us to integrate a new stage into the editorial process — a stage that fills the gap between an edition’s initial planning stages and its concluding blind peer review, which capitalizes on the engaged knowledge communities inside and outside the academy. We have found that producing an edition “live” in consultation with various groups across multiple media lets us build an edition that negotiates the boundaries between and cultural norms within those knowledge communities. In *The Social Edition of The Devonshire Manuscript* project, a process-driven social edition, the scholarly conversation and cultural norms of each social media space have helped us build an edition that strikes a chord, resonating across communities.

Notes

1. The Devonshire Manuscript Editorial Group: Raymond Siemens, Karin Armstrong, Barbara Bond, Constance Crompton, Terra Dickson, Johanne Paquette, Jonathan Podracky, Ingrid Weber, Cara Leitch, Melanie Chernyk, Brett D. Hirsch, Daniel Powell, Alyssa Anne McLeod, Alyssa Arbuckle, Jonathan Gibson, Chris Gaudet, Eric Haswell, Arianna Ciula, Daniel Starza-Smith, and James Cummings, with Martin Holmes, Greg Newton, Paul Remley, Erik Kwakkel, and Aimie Shirkie.
2. Robert E. Bjork (Director, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; Arizona State University), William R. Bowen (Chair) (Director, Iter; University of Toronto Scarborough), Michael Ullyot (University of Calgary), Diane Jakacki (Georgia Institute of Technology), Jessica Murphy (University of Texas at Dallas), Jason Boyd (Ryerson University), Elizabeth Heale (University of Reading), Steven W. May (Georgetown College), Arthur F. Marotti (Wayne State University), Jennifer Summit (Stanford University), Jonathan Gibson (Queen Mary, University of London), John Lavignino (King’s College London), and Katherine Rowe (Bryn Mawr College).
3. As one advisor warned “You’ll have people telling you, for example, the Earl of Oxford wrote all these poems... And the others will say, ‘No, it was Bacon,’ and still others will say, ‘No, Christopher Marlowe was alive then and he wrote them’” (Advisor 8, February 29, 2012).
4. See Wikibooks (2013).

5. According to Lam, who was using data from 2008, 10.7% of People and 10.4% Arts contributors are self-identified women (Lam, et al., 2011).
6. We can be found on Twitter at @Devonshire_MS.

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