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Here Comes Tomorrow—And It's Full of Challenges

DAVID R. CHESNUTT

Documentary editors have put technology to good use in the last twenty years. Technology has helped us:

- gain better intellectual control over our documents
- produce more accurate and reliable texts
- find information that enhances our annotation
- provide better intellectual access through our indexes

In spite of the wide array of software available, most projects have never gone beyond word-processing and spreadsheet programs. Here and there the landscape is dotted with a database program or two. And a few hardy souls even took on the mainframe and used it to create indexes and bibliographies, to compare texts, to provide typesetting tapes, or for other chores. But most of our work has been created in a very simple word-processing environment.

But technology hasn't always seemed simple. Establishing a word-processing environment to handle editorial chores in the late '70s or early '80s was not trivial. Documentary editors started at ground zero, and the learning curve was steep. Cursor keys, CRTs, ASCII character sets, memory, disk space—these and other terms were just as foreign then as a new language. And in fact, we were learning a new language—one that is still evolving today. But twenty years has brought some familiarity—and perhaps some contempt as well. Editors have learned through bitter experience that using technology requires constant attention. Few among

us have not suffered the loss of an hour's work (or even worse) because we failed to backup a file or because the system itself failed. And few among us have not been forced to move our work from one system to another because of the rapid shifts in technology—shifts that almost always involved weeks and weeks of work to get the new system finely tuned to our editorial tasks. But in spite of the downside of technology, we embraced it and continue to do so. No seasoned editor would think of starting a new project without a computer system to handle editorial chores.

Among the early adopters of technology in the documentary editing community, most were propelled by the idea of creating files that could be used to set type for their volumes. In other words, they saw the Wang word processors or similar machines as a way of improving the publication process. When IBM introduced the desktop PC in 1981 and the PC revolution began to take off, others joined in for the same reason: to improve the publication process. One twist in this story was the initial resistance publishers displayed when editors approached them about providing files for typesetting. The concept of "electronic manuscripts" was as foreign to them as computer systems were to the editing community. Few of the typesetting houses they used were equipped to handle electronic manuscripts, a situation that changed radically in the mid to late '80s. And in the last decade, publishers have routinely come to expect that editors—and authors as well—will furnish them with the files used for typesetting. And with the development of more sophisticated desktop publishing systems, publishers are only too happy to accept those files. Moreover, many university presses now do their own desktop publishing in order to bring down their production costs.

Although the world seems agog because of the explosion of the Internet and the World Wide Web, you may have noticed that publishers are not rush-

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ing out new electronic versions of our editions. Nor are they rushing them onto CDs. Why not? The short answer is money. In some cases, publishers fear electronic publication would adversely affect sales of the print versions. In other cases, publishers feel that a CD version would not sell as well as the printed volumes. And in most cases, publishers view documentary editions as complex and therefore costly to produce. The hallway estimate at an Association of American University Presses meeting two years ago on the cost of producing an electronic version of the *I Ching* was \$100,000. Even if publishers could bring production costs down to the \$10,000 range, most would not be willing to publish an electronic version. They do not believe it would be profitable. Revenue is a critical issue today in the university press community. Small booksellers, the mainstay of university press sales, are rapidly being forced out by the megastores in the malls and the Internet sellers like Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Returns of unsold books to university presses typically ran 10–15% five years ago; today, they run as high as 30–40%. The demise of small presses has already begun, and mid-sized presses have their backs to the wall too. The bottom line: don't expect your publisher to bring out an electronic version of your edition.

And into this situation boldly rode the editors in the Model Editions Partnership with visions of EEs dancing in their heads. As my colleague Michael Sperberg-McQueen is fond of saying, the pioneers are the ones with arrows in their back. And if funding continues, another group of editors will take the plunge next year. The Partnership was designed to serve many purposes. Not the least of these is to demonstrate that documentary editions can and will appeal to a broad range of audiences. Inquiry-based education is a buzzword among educators today. In our community, that translates into "documents in the classroom." And what better way to deliver those documents in high schools,

community colleges, public libraries, and other forums than through editions on the World Wide Web? But can we do it? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes!" "How?" you say.

The key ingredients are the three communities of editors, publishers, and libraries. Each community has a stake, and we need a partnership that draws them together. Editors need a venue for electronic editions; publishers need to find a way to generate revenue; libraries need to serve their readers. One solution would be to create a self-sustaining, national database for documentary editions. Collectively, we have a pool of more than a million documents which could provide one of the greatest resources for research and teaching ever built. Imagine what it would be like to be able to search those editions collectively or singularly . . . to have texts that are reliable . . . to have reliable annotation and commentary . . . to have access to them from anywhere in the world. Charlene Bickford is fond of saying that while there are probably seventy-five copies of the Constitution on the Web, she would rather rely on the version printed and distributed by the Bicentennial Commission. That the Library of Congress has to base transcriptions of their collection on an earlier edition of Washington's writings instead of the modern edi-

tion is a disgrace. If we are to serve the public interest well, we must have the texts that represent the best possible scholarship.

But let me return to the concept of a self-sustaining database. Would publishers be willing to participate in return for modest royalties? More than a year ago, I polled a representative group of university presses. And I have since talked personally with several presses. Most of them were receptive—including Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, LSU, North Carolina, and others. A few were lukewarm, but only one was absolutely negative at that time. If we get the major players on board, the rest will probably follow. In the prospectus we sent the publishers, we projected a three- to five-year lag behind



David Chesnutt at the 1998 ADE annual conference. Photo by Sharon Ritenour Stevens.

print publication in order to give the publishers time to maximize their print sales.

Would the libraries come on board? Again I think the answer is yes—if we set a modest sliding scale that made the material affordable. I have not polled the library community, but I have talked with a number of librarians. The figures I used were subscription rates starting at \$100 a year for small libraries and high schools and going up to \$3,000 a year for large university research libraries. Those I talked with felt the scale was reasonable, but we undoubtedly need more input from the libraries.

If we can convince the publishers and librarians to become partners in the enterprise, can we count on the editors to come on board? Frankly, I think that depends on what editors are asked to do. As most of you know, SGML markup has become the de facto standard for scholarly projects on the Web and for major digital library resources. And as those of you who participated in the ADE workshops know, creating an SGML environment would almost be the equivalent of creating a word-processing environment twenty years ago. Those of us in ongoing projects can ill afford to convert our WP shops into SGML shops. We barely have the resources necessary to continue producing our printed volumes. Conversion would require training, developing new work procedures, acquiring new software, and in some cases, new hardware. And it would take time—probably at least three months if not more—to establish a smoothly functioning editorial flow.

The simplest solution to transforming the files now used to publish volumes would be to develop tools that can be used to mechanically embed the markup required for electronic publication. The development of these transformation tools is one of the goals in the second phase of the Model Editions Partnership. The only requirement this would place on the editorial projects is this: files used to create the volumes would have to be updated to reflect the changes made during the production process. Given the care that goes into those files before they are turned over to publishers, this should not be a burdensome requirement. The new tools would work the same way as the generic markup system we developed at Laurens to embed typesetting codes. Every project I've worked with has its own word-processing format for documents. By creating a profile of a particular project, we

believe that 90–95% of the markup can be automated. The rest could be handled by trained specialists at the database site.

You may have noticed that I keep talking about partnerships. I'm going to continue to do so. Working with the editors and others in the Model Editions Partnership has convinced me that collaboration in this digital age is critical. We are at the beginning of a new era that demands cooperation in order to succeed. Our editing community has been singular in that we have always been willing to share and to help others. My colleague John Bryan, who worked on the Robert Mills project, was absolutely dumbfounded by the attitudes that generally prevail among members of the documentary editing community. John could not say enough about the openness and the lack of self-centeredness he found when he attended one of the Association's annual meetings. And those are the kinds of attitudes that we need to extend to the librarians and the publishers who can help us build a national treasure. We must respect their concerns and we must make them full participants if we are to build successful and lasting partnerships.

Let me turn now to the broader world of the digital library community. As those of you who surf the Net know, the Web is currently a hodgepodge of information with varying degrees of reliability. But within that hodgepodge, there are a handful of very serious scholars, librarians, archivists, and others who are dedicated to building reliable and lasting contributions to the content of tomorrow's digital libraries. And behind the scenes are the computer scientists who grapple with the problems of large-scale information delivery and retrieval. Still another layer is provided by those who study how people use the resources on the Web. All in all, despite their visibility in the press, the digital library community is relatively small, but it keeps growing and will continue to do so. What makes it a community is a common interest in creating intellectual frameworks for resources and enhancing intellectual access to resources. At the simplest level, it may be a concern with markup; at a more complex level, it may be a concern with developing linguistically based retrieval systems.

By and large, documentary editors are content builders who have relied on annotation to provide one form of intellectual access and on indexes to provide another form of intellectual access. Or, if

you consider indexing as a form of annotation, you might argue that they are just different forms of the same type of intellectual access. Either way, annotation and indexing are the principal ways editors provide intellectual access. For ongoing text-based editions, that probably will not change. For new editions designed for electronic publication, it probably will change. For example, we typically identify people the first time they appear in a printed edition. In an electronic edition, it may be more effective to have a biographical section. Or, if the National Biography of America ever comes on-line, we may have a series of links that supplements the edition's own biography section. As for the index, one could imagine a proper name index as simply a list of names. Then when the user clicked on a name, a list of documents in which that name appears would pop up. Two more mouse clicks would then bring you to a highlighted reference point within a particular document. You could do the same with a subject index. Having the list of documents as the initial reference point would tell you a lot more than page references do now. The point to be made is that electronic editions do not need to resemble book editions. We should think about functionality when we begin designing new editions and when we begin to think about making electronic supplements to our printed editions. It's the old "form follows function" argument.

But back to the digital library community. I noted earlier that archivists and librarians are beginning to move into the digital library world. And they are beginning to grapple with the problems inherent in providing a reliable text for a handwritten document. The basic issue they face boils down to this: "If you provide an image of the document, how many of the details of the inscription do you have to render in the transcription?" Do you retain spelling, capitalization, and original punctuation? Do you expand the abbreviations? What do you do about superscripts, cancellations, emendations, etc.? These are questions most of us have faced, even though we normally do not include images of the source texts. In the two library projects I am familiar with,¹ the librarians have recognized the issue and are taking their cues from scholarly practices among documentary editors. What's really happening in these two cases is that they are creating what might be called a "bare bones" edition. And I think we are going to see

many more projects like these as time goes on. Incidentally, one is already using MEP markup and the other project is planning to use it.

So what we have here is a new kind of edition coming from what once was a source for traditional editions: libraries. And the archivists are not far behind. Archivists are already beginning to use SGML markup in their collection guides and finding aids. It seems only a matter of time before they graduate from the limitations of HTML. Several points are worth noting here. First, the seemingly low cost of Web publication is luring archivists and librarians back into the world of editing. (Many had abandoned their publication projects as costs rose and funding became tight.) Second, as editors who care about reliable texts, we should make an effort to bring these new editors into our world. For example, having a group of archivists and librarians do a panel for ADE would be interesting and informative. And finally, we need to consider whether or not some of these bare bones editions could or should be turned into more robust editions. The St. George Tucker collection that William and Mary plans to digitize might be a good candidate. Tucker was almost as important in the Revolutionary period as Henry Laurens. Once the documents are in place, creating a full-blown edition comparable to one or two volumes could be done quickly.

The idea of collaborating with librarians and archivists in making our documentary heritage available to a larger public is one I personally find appealing. They have been and, in many cases, continue to be our traditional allies. Without their help and support, most of our editions would never have come into being. And we share common values: the preservation and publication of the American record. In a sense, technology has created a new playing field that calls for collaboration and cooperation. I think we should make the most of it.

Note

1. Elizabeth H. Dow is the director of the George P. Marsh project located in the Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont and John D. Haskell, Jr., heads the St. George Tucker project in the Swem Library at the University of William and Mary. Both projects will combine document images with full-text transcriptions for delivery on the Internet.