

**Media change in the humanities: the case of digital critical editions**  
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A peculiar dichotomy is visible in Digital Humanities. The number of online publications is steadily growing, but a large part of them are databases, such as collections of texts or images, catalogues, inventories, or annotated maps. They are assemblages of data, put together by a researcher or a team and published online. When it comes to publishing databases, a digital format has crucial advantages: it allows for the inclusion of more data than could be published on paper; it renders searches (including complex ones) far easier than is the case with paper-based publications; and it remains possible to correct the contents after they are published, and to add new data if necessary. These advantages are ably exploited by a growing number of online databases.

On the other hand, the traditional modes of scholarly publication—the journal article and the monograph—are notably rare in the world of Digital Humanities. Many academic journals do have an online version, but it tends to be secondary to the print version and is often hidden behind a pay-wall. The same can be said about the e-book version of many academic monographs. There do exist a number of online journals and a few digital publishing houses, but their role in the field is limited: it is hard to think of any major discovery in the humanities that was first published in one of them.

And yet the digital format has significant advantages when one is publishing an article or monograph: one can add links to relevant material, the size of the publication can be increased significantly with text, images and other material, and it can be diffused immediately via the Internet. The reasons for which these possibilities are not exploited are clearly not inherent in the media, but they appear to be practical and sociological. Traditional publishing houses and paper-based journals continue to offer convenient opportunities for publishing books and articles, controlling their quality, bringing them to the academic public, and bestowing prestige on their authors. Many of these opportunities are simply not available in a digital medium; the digital humanities have not met the challenges posed by traditional paper-based scholarship in this regard.

This can be observed well in one genre of publishing in the humanities, namely editing classical Latin and Greek texts. In print the history of this genre stretches back over half a millennium, as has been well described by E. J. Kenney in *The Classical Text* (1974). A long process of experimentation and evolution produced an ecosystem of printed editions, at the apex of which there stands the critical edition. The three essential ingredients of a critical edition, in any media, are a systematically reconstructed text; a critical apparatus consisting of variant readings that shows how the reconstructed text relates to the main surviving source(s) of the text and to alternative reconstructions that have been proposed by earlier scholars; and a survey or a list, even if very brief, of the textual sources. The key virtues of a good critical edition are the quality of its reconstruction of the text, the reliability and the judicious composition of its critical apparatus, the use of an up-to-date system of reference for the text (e.g. line or paragraph numbering), and the transparency and user-friendliness of its

presentation. Printed critical editions of classical Latin and Greek texts are often small masterpieces of typography, and they tend to be the products of years of work by a dedicated scholar. While they resemble databases in containing hundreds of data such as reported variant readings, they are arguably better classed with monographs in being the product of a major effort by a dedicated scholar.

In digital media the panorama is very different. As of February 2017, an astounding quantity of classical Latin and Greek texts is available on the Internet. This includes most of surviving Roman literature in some form or other, and much of Greek literature, which is a far broader field. But both the format and the quality of the texts vary widely. Many texts are available though printed editions that have been scanned and put online, often as images without optical character recognition (OCR), so they are not searchable. There also exist digital texts proper, in formats ranging from occasional quotes to large corpora such as [The Latin Library](#), the [Packard Humanities Institute Classical Latin Texts](#) and the [Perseus Digital Library](#). These offer the possibility of quick and convenient searches, but they do not constitute critical editions; they simply reproduce the text of an authoritative printed edition without a critical apparatus. Proper digital critical editions—texts with a digitally encoded critical apparatus—are few and far in between. One significant example is the website [Musisque Deoque](#), which aims to offer a digital critical edition of all of Latin poetry. It has an impressive technical framework and a convenient search function that takes into account critical variants, but most of its contents are based on critical editions that are no longer covered by copyright, and hence they are often dated. However, [Musisque Deoque](#) has been the place of publication for the first critical edition of a major classical Latin or Greek text that first appeared in digital format, namely Linda Spinazzè's [edition of the poems of Maximian](#) (2012). The second digital edition was [Catullus Online](#), my own edition of Catullus, which came out a year later.

This means that apart from a few exceptions, there is still no digital equivalent for the body of critical editions of classical Latin and Greek literature that are available in print. And yet such a body would bring major benefits. It would enable people based anywhere in the world, at any distance from a research library, to access classical literature in a good edition, to quote from reliable texts, and to reflect on how they have survived and how well we know them. It would also constitute a major milestone for the digital classics if it could equal paper-based scholarship in this crucial area. And it would even be possible to create better critical editions online than on paper, as one could include images of source material such as manuscripts and papyri and add links to crucial bibliography.

The most obvious way to create a corpus of digital critical editions of classical Latin and Greek literature would be to make one from scratch. But this would be an enormous task: the body of texts is large and complex; it runs to many thousands of pages and presents the editor with a broad range of problems. Today it is not possible to automatize most of the tasks of the editor, and this is not likely to change in the foreseeable future, so creating such a corpus would be extremely labour-intensive. Such a big project would require an enormous amount of funds and a large body of dedicated collaborators, and even its management would be a challenge.

It seems more advisable to follow a piecemeal approach and create conditions in which digital critical editions can grow gradually. I suggest setting up a digital critical house with the resources to bring out classical critical editions. Most importantly, it should provide potential editors with the software for publishing their work online. It should also make a robust arrangement for conserving their work and keeping it available in the future, whatever upgrades there might come to the internet. Whether it applies a rigorous process of selection or it puts its facilities at the disposal of all potential editors, it will also have to be deeply embedded in the academic community, as are today's academic publishers.

We may soon have such an academic publishing house, once the [Digital Latin Library](#) hosted by the University of Oklahoma opens the browser windows of its first Latin editions. We hope to achieve the same objectives within the project [Literatura Latina Online](#) based at the University of Barcelona. But independently from any particular venture, it seems desirable to overcome permanently at least the technical hurdles facing digital critical editions and to provide future digital editors with an environment in which they may flourish.