Chapter 7
Between Tradition and Web 2.0:
eLaborate as a Social Experiment in Humanities Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 is characterized by values of openness of participation (unrestricted by traditional markers of expertise), collaboration across and beyond institutions, increased value of resources through distributed participation, dynamic content and context, and self-organization and scalability. These values seem to offer new possibilities for knowledge creation. They also contrast in important ways with traditional forms of knowledge creation, where expertise, institutional affiliation, and restrictions on access and circulation have been important. Yet, rather than seeing a dichotomy between Web 2.0 and non-Web 2.0 modes of working in digital humanities, the authors observe the rise of hybrid forms that combine elements of these two modes. In this chapter, the authors reflect on the reasons for such hybrids, specifically through an exploration of eLaborate. As a virtual research environment, eLaborate targets both professional scholars and volunteers working with textual resources. The environment offers tools to transcribe textual sources, to annotate these transcriptions, and to publish them as digital scholarly editions. The majority of content currently comprises texts from the cultural heritage of Dutch history and literary history, although eLaborate does not put limits on the kind of text or language. Nor does the system impose limits on the openness of contribution to any edition project. Levels of openness and access are solely determined by the groups of users working on specific texts or editions. This Web 2.0 technology-based software is now used by several groups of teachers and students, and by scholarly, educated, and interested volunteers. We conducted interviews with coordinators of and participants in

different editorial groups, and we evaluate their experiences from the point of view of the described values of Web 2.0. We investigate changes in digital humanities resulting from intermediate forms between traditional academic practices and Web 2.0 modes. Rather than claim a revolution, we show how hybrid forms can actually be very powerful sites for change, through their inclusive rather than oppositional setup in relation to traditional practices.

INTRODUCTION

When technologies are hailed as "new" or "groundbreaking," they invite attention that tends to focus on either the promises or the threats they present. Social software for scholarly research is no exception. However, rather than address the potential, positive or negative, of these new technologies here, we seek to understand how practices are transformed and how the experience of users changes in relation to new tools. In this chapter we trace the development of a particular platform, eLaborate, and analyze user experiences in order to understand how scholarly work is developing in the context of social software.

The developments we discuss in this chapter are in an area that is most commonly labeled "digital humanities," a field of research intersecting humanities and the use of digital technologies. This label addresses the use of a range of digital technologies and has a broader scope than "humanities computing," which tends to focus on data processing. Digital humanities is also posited as a scholarly enterprise, and is often explicitly contrasted with "digitization" as a technical or procedural endeavor of mediation (Schreibman & Siemens, 2001).

eLaborate: A User-Driven Innovation

eLaborate (http://www.e-laborate.nl/en/) is an online work environment for textual scholars working alone or in a group on a text edition. Textual scholars are humanities researchers who make scholarly editions. These kinds of editions have been made for centuries: they provide a trustworthy transcription of, for example, a medieval, handwritten manuscript in a form that can be used and understood by modern readers, or of printed material from the 16th century, annotated with all kinds of information and with printing errors explained and corrected. Modern material needs editions as well, such as handwritten letters (edited in correspondence editions) or novels that have been published in so many print runs that errors have crept in and now need to be weeded out by the scholarly editors.

Until quite recently, scholarly editors mostly worked alone, or occasionally in a very small group, and they published their editions in the form of books printed on paper. For the past decades, this often involved submitting digital files prepared in Word or WordPerfect to their publisher. Text editing is demanding, time-consuming work that requires a lot of expertise and knowledge of the material. Often, scholars announced the publication of a text edition they were preparing years and even decades in advance, thus explicitly claiming the edition as theirs and keeping the research community waiting for that edition—sometimes in vain.

With the rise of the Internet, a number of scholars from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences thought that a Web-based work environment for textual scholars would have several advantages. First, the transcriptions could be made from a digital scan of the material—for example, of a medieval manuscript, with zooming and panning tools that the traditional photographs or original manuscripts did not have. Second, editors could work with larger groups, sharing their knowledge in a Web-based discussion forum linked to their digital edition; this larger group need not be confined to academic participants but

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