

“No Slave to the Machine!”

Why Digital Scholarly Editions Ought to be Datasets, not Interfaces An Interference

Annika Rockenberger (Universitetsbiblioteket, Universitetet i Oslo)

In this intentionally provocative paper, I investigate the consequences of an ‘interface first’ approach, a strategy often observed in modern digital scholarly editions. With ‘interface first’, I mean that modes and qualities of digital visual presentation via an end-user interface dictate the choice of data format and encoding, instead of philological principles, rigorous argumentation, encoding standards and domain-specific, empirically founded user expectations. I will draw from an in-depth survey of digital scholarly editions that I conducted in 2024 and 2025 at the University of Oslo, as well as discussions of the ‘interface first’ paradigm in the international academic community. Instead of ‘interface first’, I will argue that by employing a ‘dataset first’ approach, many of the current and long-term challenges DSEs face are avoidable. While I do not pose that researchers can access, analyse and manipulate DSEs without any interface, I claim that the primacy of the end-user interface must be brought to an end. In conclusion, I will demonstrate that the preservation and archiving issues DSEs currently face can be avoided under a ‘dataset first’ paradigm, resulting in significantly lower and more sustainable maintainability and hosting demands on technical, administrative, and human infrastructure at higher education and cultural heritage institutions.