Editors’ Notes as a Genre: editorsnotes.org
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Abstract
Notes are usually viewed in relation to annotation, but working notes have always been pervasive in humanities scholarship using slips of paper, cards, and now word-processing. Notes on persons, places, events, institutions, and topics are needed to understand context. Working notes ordinarily also include fragments of relevant evidence including photocopies, newspaper clippings, and quotations. Not all of this material can be included in a formal publication, so these working notes mostly remain unpublished, inaccessible, and, when a project ends, may be discarded. The 19th-century periodical Notes & Queries pioneered the sharing of notes, questions, and evidence.

Documentary editors assemble large numbers of working notes about unresolved questions, sources examined, intriguing leads, and useful explanations, which may not cite a point in the edited text. The “Editorial Practices and the Web” project examined editors’ working notes in a collaboration with three documentary editing projects with overlapping scope: The papers of Emma Goldman, of Margaret Sanger, and of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

A Web-based platform is provided for editors and their assistants to place, share, and revise their notes, often starting with a question then gradually completing an answer: editorsnotes.org. Access can be restricted note by note or project by project, but the default is to share openly on the Web and be indexed by Web search engines. Creating or modifying notes remains tightly controlled. The site has also been used for notes of archivists, library special collection curators, and a historian.

Treating working notes as a distinct genre, not exclusively tied to a literary or historical document, and allowing Web access to them enables isolated scholars to identify related material, reduces duplicative work, and greatly increases the benefit derived from the investment of funding and of effort.

The data model designed for the easy export of records opens new possibilities for low-cost, long-term digital preservation and sustainability by reducing dependence on complex service-oriented computer architecture. The software, almost entirely built using existing available open source software, is at https://github.com/editorsnotes. We seek to support other examples of humanities research notes.

Note. Example of an “open” (not yet completed) note with link to associated Topic heading and (below) list of cited sources (not all shown, some annotated).

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