The Sociology of Digitisations

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Thanks to widespread efforts in digitisation, we are now able to examine unique sources of history from almost anywhere in the world. High-resolution digital images allow the brittle pages of manuscripts to be scrutinised virtually, and the texts of literary works and archival records may be perused and searched by keyword. This use of new technologies is a great boon to those the heritage sector, but the precise role of digitally-encoded materials in traditional disciplines and scholarly research remains unclear. As J.D. Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued, digitisations are remediations that harbour a significant conceptual and physical incongruity with the texts, books, documents, or objects that they imitate. Given this ontological rift, how can these emerging sources be read productively and employed for historical study?

Over the last decades, D.F. McKenzie and others have developed a rich set of methodologies for examining the sociology of books and the relationship between book-production and reception. I argue that we can similarly problematise and investigate the relationship between how a digitisation is created, what it is, and how it is understood. My paper thus explores the sociology of digitisations, specifically those of medieval texts and manuscripts. I seek to shed light on the editorial processes that are embedded in the decisions to encode books digitally, and in the algorithms underpinning the display of text with computers. The paper proposes a method of reading these complex
sources that examines how they—and the narratives built upon them—have been crucially shaped by an imbrication of editorial practices past and present.

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Currently Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto, Bonnie Mak holds a joint appointment in the Centre for Medieval Studies and the Faculty of Information Studies. She has been the recipient of grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Mak took a doctoral degree in Manuscript Studies from the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame (USA), and currently serves on the Committee for Electronic Resources of the Medieval Academy of America. In August 2008, she will join the faculty of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science and the Program for Medieval Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

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