# The Textual Communities project

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The Textual Communities project  at Saskatchewan aims to establish a new model of partnership between scholars and readers everywhere in exploring texts. Increasingly, the base materials for research into texts are available on the internet, especially as images of manuscripts, books and other documents.  However, to research the huge volume of material now available even for just one work (such as the 84 manuscripts of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales) requires many people – people to identify the documents, to make copies of them, to annotate them, to make transcripts of them, and to compare and analyze them. Our aim is to will provide the infrastructure and tools to allow anyone, anywhere interested in a text to contribute to its study, and thus to become part of a community working together.

Infrastructure, communities, tools: we know these songs, we know InterEdition has been writing and singing them, teaching them to others, for years.  The core ideas of this project are directly derived from the many discussions I have had over the last five years, and longer, with many people involved in InterEdition.  Indeed, the feedback from several presentations of our developing plans at InterEdition meetings (notably in Pisa, in March 2009) has been critical in shaping Textual Communities.  So much, that one could call Textual Communities a child of InterEdition.  But this is incorrect.  Truly, Textual Communities is a grandchild, not a child, of InterEdition. We are actually a child of a second initiative, itself a child of InterEdition.  This is the Workspace for Collaborative Editing project, led by the two premier institutions for editing the Greek New Testament in Birmingham, England and Munster, Germany, with the involvement of the TextGrid project (I also had something to do with setting that up, before I left Birmingham).  Again under the benign influence of InterEdition, the Workspace partners are developing collaborating interfaces, working on a shared data model: in fact, an ontology of documents, works and texts developed by myself.  They are also developing a robust solution to sustainability, in using established Institutional Repositories to hold all production data.  It was while planning the Workspace project that I was first part of InterEdition, and many Workspace people are regulars at InterEdition bootcamps.

Now, in the Textual Communities project, we are taking the Workspace model a large step further.  We seek to create a social-network based environment, modelled on Facebook and Google Plus (and actually using Google's OpenSocial code as the base -- as does the Workspace project) in which anyone can initiate work on a document or work and then have other people join in, contributing freely as they may.  Our view of 'textual communities' advances beyond the workspace project in three directions.  First, we wish to enable the creation of textual communities for any document or work, not just for the Bible.  Second, we believe that communities need rules and leaders, and we make these explicit.  One rule is critical, in my view: that all data created as part of a community should be available to allon an attribution share-alike license, so making possible unrestricted commercial as well as non-commercial use of what we make.

Third, we are taking the fundamental documents, works and texts ontology a step further, to permit anyone, anywhere, to build their own interfaces to our data (and, in the reverse, for us to be able to include other people's data in our interface.)

The impact of these projects will be considerable.  Already, the Workspace project is revolutionising how New Testament scholars work together.  Within the first year, we will establish Textual Communities for the manuscripts and incunables of Geoffrey Chaucer's  Canterbury Tales, for the manuscripts of Dante's Commedia, for manuscripts to do with magic, for the prose of John Donne, with several others lining up to join us. We have scores, even hundreds, of people willing to join these communities and to contribute.  Further, we will make it possible for  other people to set up their own communities, based on documents or on works.  Our aim is that it should be as easy to set up a textual community, to bring other people into it, to manages it, as it is to maintain a Facebook or GooglePlus page.   The talk will show some glimpses of what we are doing, so others can see how far we have got.