



Citation: E. Caminada (2020) Developing Digital Technology at the Husserl Archives. A Report. *Aisthesis* 13(2): 79-86. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-12161

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Developing Digital Technology at the Husserl Archives. A Report

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Abstract. After a brief introduction to the history of the Husserl Archives I focus on the methodological specificities in studying Husserl's work on the basis of his manuscripts and of his archives. In a second step I expound on the effects that the current shift from an analogous to a hybrid analogous and digital archives is producing in the self-understanding of the practices of our institution. Particularly, developing digital technology means that the Husserl Archives are entering a new phase in respect to how archival and editorial impulses will affect the presentation of Husserl's writings. Finally, I offer some perspectives about how the planned virtual platform («digital-Husserl»), which will give direct access to his manuscripts, is designed to promote a new understanding of Husserl's specific process of philosophical writing, of his unique *wording of thoughts*¹.

Keywords. Archives, digital edition, phenomenology, Husserl.

I am really grateful to speak at this university where people at the right time had the right instinct, support, the courage and the generosity to provide safe-harbor for the archives of one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th-century [...] I for the first time had the privilege of visiting this archive and it is very moving.

Jürgen Habermas (public lecture *Democracy, Solidarity and the European Union*, held in Leuven on April 26, 2013, after visiting the Husserl Archives)

¹ I would like to thank the entire team of the digitalHusserl: the director of the Husserl Archives and promotor of digitalHusserl, Julia Jansen, the co-promotor Fred Truyen, the senior editor Thomas Vongehr, our innovation manager Roxanne Wyns and business consultant Michiel De Clerck from LIBIS, as well as the head archivist of the KU Leuven Archives, Marc Nelissen.

1. SHORT INTRODUCTION ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE ARCHIVES

The Husserl Archives was established in 1938 at KU Leuven with the purpose of preserving and publishing the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, whose 40.000 pages of manuscripts were saved from Nazi Germany, and whose phenomenological thinking is widely acknowledged as one of the most significant philosophical endeavours of the 20th-century. Since it was founded, the Husserl Archives has supervised the transcription and edition of more than 50 volumes of Husserl's writings. In the so far eight decades of its existence, the Husserl Archives published not only Husserl's writings, but also several auxiliary tools for historical and theoretical research in phenomenology as well as more than 230 volumes of scholarly work in phenomenology in the book series "Phaenomenologica".

Geographically situated between Germany and France, the Husserl Archives in Leuven (Belgium), acquired a pivotal role in the European philosophical dialogue already in the 1940s, when Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schütz, Aron Gurwitsch, Paul Ricoeur, Emanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and many others came to the Archives as young visiting scholars and profited from the study of Husserl's texts. More recently, internationally renowned scholars, such as Anthony Steinbock and Dan Zahavi (to name a few), have done extensive research here. Furthermore, the Archives are also a small philosophical attraction for scholars and students from various academic disciplines as well as the interested public. Recently, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, and Carlo Ginzburg paid a visit to the Husserl Archives. Although we are aware of the risks of "heritagization", we are very glad to welcome guests in the *Husserlkamer*, a small, representative seminar room where we exhibit Husserl's philosophical library, a small picture gallery, and his private desk. However, the core mission of the Archives is the preservation and advancement of Husserl's philosophical project and ideas. Since

1938 it has made available manuscripts and their transcriptions for every interested international researcher. In this respect, the Belgian Franciscan, philosopher and founder of the Husserl Archives, Pater Herman Leo Van Breda, was proud of keeping an open-door policy: it has always been the case that scholars were given full access upon request.

Umberto Eco, fascinated by the history of the Husserl Archives (as a student he attended Enzo Paci's phenomenological seminars in Milan), confessed in 2007 during his last visit to the Husserl Archives that he dreamed to write a novel on its history. Former visiting scholar Bruce Bégout just published such a novel: *Le sauvatage* (2019) narrates the rescue of the Husserl Archives and speculates about a *Gestapo* agent who *malgré lui* would have been commissioned to arrest Van Breda, the manuscript smuggler, who was trying to take away from German control the illegible – and therefore highly suspicious – writings of a non-Aryan philosopher. As we know from the details of his biography (Horsten [2018]), he brought the manuscripts to Leuven against the more prudent advice of his supervisors, who were concerned about the financial sustainability of Van Breda's vision of founding an international research center in Phenomenology. Nevertheless, in part no doubt won over by the diplomacy and charm of the young Franciscan, they endorsed his efforts and supported his projects.

As a crowning of his endeavours, we can consider the grant that Van Breda was able to obtain from the UNESCO. After intensive networking during the war, in 1949 he prepared an application to the UNESCO with support letters by reknowned philosophers such as Jean Wahl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Helmuth Plessner, Paul Ricoeur, Alfred Schütz and Frederic J. J. Buytendijk. In contrast with Nazi ideology, they stressed Husserl's relevance for a global humanism, and for Germany's re-education and democratization. The application's success enabled the begin of the *Husserliana* and put phenomenology at the center of post-war intellectual life.

2. ON HUSSERL'S WORDING OF THOUGHTS

Considering the specificities of Husserl's working method on the basis of his manuscripts and archives, one quickly realizes that his philosophy cannot be studied without taking into account his research manuscripts or, as one of the most prominent editors of Husserl's manuscripts, Rudolf Boehm, called them, his «research reports or protocols» (*Forschungsaufzeichnungen*). The handling of Husserl's own manuscript pages is essential for gaining insights into his philosophical style, in respect to method, content, and medium of his philosophy.

The phenomenological *method* is devoted to the careful description of the differentiating structures of the acts as well as objects of experience with the help of so-called «phenomenological reductions» and thought experiments. This experimental character of phenomenological reflection is visible in Husserl's prolific writings: continuous attempts to record his mental experiments, conducted, proofed, and varied repeatedly in order to get ever clearer insights into both invariant and variable structures of experience. Husserl reported his experiments with a particular fast writing script, called *Gabelsberger* shorthand, which was at the time of his youth a common German shorthand system for about 4 millions writers. The same or similar systems were employed also by other scholars (e.g., Stumpf, Wundt, Schrödinger, Gödel and Schmitt, to name a few). Due to this long out-dated script of Husserl's writings, the main task of the Husserl Archives was, and still is, the transcription of these texts into Latin characters in order to make them accessible to a wider community of scholars.

The combination of these characteristics in *content* and *medium* distinguish the ontology and the materiality of Husserl's writing. In fact, this unique combination reflects the style and form of his thinking and shows that Husserl's phenomenological philosophy is primarily a project of research that did not have finished publications as its main vehicle of communication and visibility. Writing recorded the practice of thinking for

Husserl, and this form of writing served as an experimental laboratory of his phenomenological research. Therefore, the relevance of the archival practice for the making and for the assessment of Husserl's philosophy cannot be overstated: it is an integral part of his way of thinking.

He wrote on loose leaf papers which he collected in folders and often moved and reassembled from folders, to folders, assigning them page numbers, sometimes cryptic signatures and often adding new page numbers and new signatures. The Husserl Archives in Leuven preserves the original manuscripts in the order that Van Breda and his assistants found them when he moved the Archives from Freiburg to Leuven in 1938. After 1933, it was Husserl himself who, with the help of his personal assistants, prepared his own archives having as a model the Brentano Archives that his old friend Masaryk founded, and desperately dreaming of an international research center dedicated to the philosophical project of phenomenology (Luft 2004).

However, despite of its name and explicit mission, the focus of the Husserl Archives lay more on editing Husserl's writings than on, strictly speaking, «archiving» them. The manuscripts were usually handled carefully, but were considered more as research tools rather than as precious historical documents. From a philosophical perspective, their value consists in their ideal content, and their keepers and users at the Husserl Archives were (and still are) trained philosophers, not archivists. Hence, priority was given to editing and publishing Husserl's «plain text», with a stress on his intended meaning. Furthermore, the editors' own philosophical interests have often reached beyond Husserl's research program. For instance, the aforementioned Rudolf Boehm was leading the edition of the Husserliana as Van Breda's closest collaborator² while he also worked on the French translation of the first part of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Heidegger [1927]) and on the

² Boehm edited volumes VII, VIII and X of the Husserliana series (Husserl [1923-1924a]; Husserl [1923-1924b]; Husserl [1893-1917]).

German translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* (Merleau-Ponty [1945]). Karl Schuhmann was working on the transcription of several manuscripts and on the collection of Husserl's biographical chronicle (Schumann [1977]; Husserl [1994]) while he also published extensively on the critical role of other, at that time mostly ignored members of the phenomenological movement (Schumann [1973]; Reinach [1989]) as well as on Hobbes' political philosophy (Hobbes [1655a]; Hobbes [1655b]; Hobbes [1651]).

3. HOW GOING DIGITAL IS AFFECTING THE WORKFLOW OF THE HUSSERL ARCHIVES

In 2020 we can now finally say that the Husserl Archives is entering the 21st Century and catching up on the pace of the advancement of scholarly editing in the Digital Humanities. In this respect it is important to note that it was not solely the introduction of new technology that marked the beginning of the ongoing shift from an analogous to a hybrid analogous *and* digital archives, but rather a change of mind-set in conceiving of the work-flow of archival and editorial practices. What Patrick Sahle has said of digitization clearly holds here: «the current transformation of media is not so much a transformation of media, but rather a process of transmedialisation» (Sahle [2013]: 161; see Dillen [2019]). For many decades the Husserl Archives basically kept doing the same transcription and editorial work while gradually adopting new technologies: computers replaced type-writers, but the tasks largely remained the same, and the workflow did not change dramatically. In 2007 a first digitization project was carried on: in a big effort, JPEG scans of all the original manuscripts were created and saved both on CD-roms and on the KU Leuven server as well as printed in high-quality facsimile, which were stored and kept for research and conservation purposes at the Husserl Archives in the same way as micro-fiches were created in the fifties.

It was only when the Husserl Archives, after some initial hesitation, chose to go digital, that

new digital technologies have been having a significant impact on our workflow. More than ten years after their creation, those JPEG images are now the focus of our attention, while we are ingesting them in IIIF-compliant format in the long-term repository system of our university. Keeping to the spirit of Van Breda's original open-door policy, the Husserl Archives is now planning and gradually implementing a digital platform that will provide virtual access to Husserl's writings. In the following, I will not delve into the theoretical and technical issues related to such an endeavour from a technical and editorial perspective. Instead, I will focus on the impact that this implementation is having to the changing archival and editorial tasks at the Husserl Archives.

Generally, we can distinguish, in the history of the Husserl Archives, three different phases of thinking and practicing the relation between archival and editorial tasks: 1. The years of collaboration between Husserl and his personal assistants Edith Stein, Ludwig Landgrebe, and Eugen Fink (1916-1938); 2. the decades devoted primarily to the edition of the print version of the *Husserliana* (1950-ongoing); and finally, 3. the horizon that we can imagine now for the decades to come thanks to the upcoming launch of the digitalHusserl.

In their close collaboration with Husserl, his assistants Stein, Landgrebe and Fink transcribed, compiled, and re-arranged texts for Husserl according to clear assignments. Their editorial suggestions were then, in a second step, proofread and re-arranged by Husserl, and often re-assigned to his assistants for further revisions. Some of these collaborations ended in publications during Husserl's lifetime (e.g. *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*³) or post-humous (e.g. Stein drafted the corpus of *Ideas II*⁴, Landgrebe *Experience and Judgement*⁵). Because of their

³ Published by Martin Heidegger in 1928 without mentioning Edith Stein's editorial work in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, critically re-edited in 1966 by Rudolph Boehm.

⁴ Published by Marly Biemel in 1952 as *Husserliana* IV and V.

⁵ Published by Ludwig Landgrebe in 1939, now available as Husserl (1976).

unclear authorship, these posthumous works have often been critically assessed by scholars and thus in fact manifest different grades of fidelity to Husserl's intention according both to the actual condition of the collaboration and on the temperament of his assistants.

A second phase began when the Husserl Archives agreed in the fifties on a set of transcription and edition guidelines, according to which transcribers and editors were mainly devoted to the publication of already clear circumscribed texts and to the production of the largest possible number of transcriptions. Note that, the Husserl Archives in Leuven had in the fifties and sixties neither the competence nor the recognized authority to dare a *critical* edition. Starting from the seventies, the Husserl Archives began to edit also research manuscripts, the publication of which had not been planned by Husserl himself and thus received particular editorial intention by the respective editors instead. These later editions faced the additional task of the assessment of the philosophical quality and nature of the texts, which, according to the editorial guidelines, should be collected in groups of "main" texts and "lesser" appendices. Regardless of these difficulties and thanks to the enormous effort that had gone into producing transcriptions, this was also the time when editors were able to decide to make available texts on topics that were not yet covered by the published volumes and that were highly controversial in phenomenological debates. To name one for all: the problem of intersubjectivity, i.e., the question of how we are able to relate to other human beings and how our sociality co-constitutes our subjectivity. The three volumes of the *Husserliana* on intersubjectivity edited by Iso Kern in the seventies (Hua XIII-XV) changed completely the picture we had on Husserl's philosophy and, more radically, paved the way for new phenomenological research in phenomenology of sociality (Kjosavik, Beyer [2019]).

The protocols for transcription and editions fixed in the sixties by Iso Kern and Rudolf Boehm reflect the methodological reflections of the team of transcribers and editors in respect to the una-

voidable degree of philosophical interpretation that is needed in the editorial process. Accordingly, until the nineties, a sharp line was kept between archival tasks and edition work, between praxis of transcribing and of editing. Starting from 2001, the Archives opted for the edition of a new series of texts without a critical apparatus, the *Husserliana Materialien*, in order to finally publish texts that were already accessible to researchers in the Husserl Archives and highly valued by the scholar community but that were too demanding from a philological, editorial, and financial point of view for a critical edition.

Currently, with the planning of the digital-Husserl (i.e., the platform that will provide access to Husserl's texts), archival and editorial practices become even more entangled than they were before. It is therefore not exaggerated to see in this shift from the analogue to the digital workflow the delineation of a new phase in the methodological self-understanding of the archival and editorial practices of the Husserl Archives.

The digitalHusserl project was planned in 2015 to accomplish the transition of the Husserl Archives into the age of Digital Humanities. The vision behind this project is to make available Husserl's writings – the original stenograph manuscripts (40.000 pages) and corresponding transcriptions in an online and open access digital environment that facilitates collaboration and discussion on Husserl's work. The overall goals of the project is to preserve, organise, and present the *total archive of Husserl*, including his personal and unique philosophic research library of books and off-prints, correspondence and photographic material.

The long-term goal is to make available the following tripartite architecture:

- *The Digital Archive*: Transcriptions and stenographic manuscripts side by side (two panel presentation) organised in a fully searchable database.
- *The Library*: Dynamic bibliographical and biographical database with access to Husserl's digitised philosophical research library.

- *The Translation Room*: platform to support translation and transcriptions of Husserl's work into different languages, with establishments of lexicons for comparative translation studies in phenomenology thanks to a dynamic annotation environment.

The unique character of this project resides in its disaggregated archival format. Rather than the *linear* and highly edited print format of Husserl's writings, the digitalHusserl is planned to preserve, organize, and present to the scholar community Husserl's writings in *non-linear* manifold of searchable texts: scholars will be able to develop their own research strategies, each thus creating a virtual edition of Husserl's writings.

Since Husserl wrote in a special form of stenography, the simultaneous availability of the transcriptions in a digital and searchable form is crucial to fulfil this open access commitment. Therefore, the archival impetus of offering a complete as possible textual documentary basis of transcription is from the very beginning entangled with the interpretation of the stenographs. For these reason it is not possible to offer a transcription neutral from the editorial choices of the transcriber (note that, from a technical point of view, this excludes the possibility to work with stand-off markup).

Thus, the ambition to offer (at least exemplarily) diplomatic transcriptions of the original manuscript in a accountable and amendable manner, can in principle help also non-expert readers of Gabelsberger shorthand to follow the originals by means of reading the transcription side by side. In a further step, it will be possible to offer some tutorials and help-tools to learn and improve the reading of Husserl's shorthand. If this becomes possible, by involving an international community of researchers in this process, the knowledge on how to read Husserl's original manuscripts can be secured for future generations and will contribute to the progressive understanding of Husserl's thinking.

Further research will decide whether some sort of automated matching of the OCR results

on the original manuscript is indeed possible or, if not, what alternative options are available. It is plausible to imagine that, once we will have a good corpus of reliable digital and encoded transcription it will be possible to experiment forms of OCR recognition for Husserl's most recurrent stenographs in analogy with existent tools for the recognition of Chinese characters.

However, we do not expect a big impact from the crowdsourcing tools for the digital transcription of the originals. It is more realistic to expect collaborations from scholars in the improvement of digital transcription of not-yet textually digitized transcriptions or – more interesting from an academic point of view – in the sharing and discussion of translations. These different levels of possible collaboration will be mirrored in different users profiles that will be developed in the near future.

Honestly, the concrete work on the implementation of the first modules of this project make us aware of the enormous amount of work that would be needed to realize – even partially – the vision of a such a *total Archives*. At this stage we are more humbly concentrating on three interconnected levels: the ingest of the images of the original manuscripts in the long repository, the setting of a collection management system through a relational ontology based on the open source software Collective Access, and the realization of a public webpage to provide access to a first material pilot project that offers the first digital born edition of an unpublished lecture by Husserl (*Einleitung in die Phänomenologie*, 1912 edited by Thomas Vongehr) that will be published also in printed version in the *Husserliana Materialien* series.

The preparation of this platform over the last four years has forced us to rethink at the same time both archival and editorial practices. We are now in the very challenging phase in which the protocols that were established in the sixties must be enhanced and partially amended. I will give two examples for this: first, the new digital architecture will make possible multiple readings, by means of rearranging the pages of the manuscript according to different orders (what we call “manu-

script collection”). As we saw before, this way of reading, which is not possible in a linear printed edition, actually approximates more faithfully the way in which Husserl himself wrote, read and organized his thoughts. Second, a diplomatic edition of Husserl’s manuscript was unthinkable in print form. This will become possible by means of a TEI-encoding of the transcriptions. In a diplomatic transcription both archival and editorial impulses converge and interlock; it aims at providing a faithful documentation of the original while it also makes transparent the various editorial decisions (Dillen 2019). Furthermore, information that in a printed critical edition (due to its linearity) can be only provided in a *text critical apparatus* at the end of the respective book, can in a diplomatic transcription be shown on screen within the text, and thus used with much more efficacy.

Philosophers usually tend to focus on the content, not on the medium of their thoughts. This tendency can make these editorial advancement seem, at first glance, superficial. However, what we have been learning is that the print medium in fact distracted the readers from the way Husserl actually performed his phenomenological research. We have taken on the task of making public available, in the near future, the wording of Husserl’s thoughts and working method as he put them on paper.

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