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# Morreale, Laura K., and Benjamin Albritton, project dirs. The Transcription Challenge Framework. Other

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See table of contents

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**Morreale, Laura K., and Benjamin Albritton, project dirs.**
**The Transcription Challenge Framework. Other.**
Independent. Accessed 2 February 2022.
tcf.lauramorreale.com.

The unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its ebbs and flows of risks, waves, and ensuing limitations, has imposed several constraints upon scholarly work worldwide, regardless of field and period of specialization. For one extended period of time, scholars experienced—and are continuing to experience—barriers to access and research opportunities that used to affect only those members within the scholarly community who were less privileged and most vulnerable. This shared experience has undoubtedly been transformative in ways that we are only partially able to grapple at the time in which this review is being written. In several felicitous cases, barriers have been turned into bridges and opportunities to develop digital tools to collaborate, produce knowledge, and foster creativity and passion for the medieval and early modern period. The Transcription Challenge Framework (henceforth TCF) is one of the best results of this push towards digital-born interconnectedness and collaboration.

TCF was developed by Laura Morreale and Benjamin Albritton as a community-driven initiative with the goal of facilitating collaborative transcription scholarship through a workflow to transcribe textual artifacts within a virtual-only environment and a specific timeframe. Scholars are increasingly relying on automated text-recognition software for the transcription of manuscripts or early printed sources, mainly because the precision of handwritten text recognition (HTR) has improved dramatically in the past couple of years. However, despite these technological advancements, encounters between the human eye and a primary source are—and will always be—a crucial fixture of historical research and critical interpretation. The slow reading afforded by the transcription of a manuscript source is the most immediate and layered way to experience a close encounter with the past; not to mention, it is an opportunity to learn, interpret, and discover.

TCF taps into this potential to build online scholarly communities around texts that are deserving of critical attention while producing sustainable and citable digital research outputs. This framework consists of a set of detailed guidelines, best practices, and solutions to carry out successfully digital-born transcribeathons of medieval and Renaissance texts from the inception stage to

the concluding archiving of research outputs. The infrastructure on which this model is developed is entirely open source. TCF is supported by FromThePage (fromthepage.org), an online software explicitly designed for crowdsourced transcription projects that has steadfastly grown into an accessible digital platform supporting annotated editions and translations, with a lean mark-up system and several visualization features.[1] Finally, TCF relies on open repositories such as BodoArXiv (osf.io/preprints/bodoarxiv) for permanent archiving purposes.

The 2021 CARMEN Project Prize winner, TCF was first developed during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns worldwide forced scholars to pivot their work, research goals, and networking activities away from physical archives or special collections and in-person conferences. Around that time, Morreale and Albritton called on a group of over seventy scholars to collaboratively transcribe eight witnesses of Goro Dati's fifteenth-century poem about the known world, *La Sfera*. The ensuing transcription competitions, La Sfera Challenge and La Sfera Challenge II, took place over two installments in May and July 2020, respectively.

Few pedagogical texts written in fifteenth-century Tuscany are as infuriatingly fascinating as Dati's *La Sfera*. Designed as a textbook in poetry for the entrepreneurial merchant who wished to know about the world with its natural laws, diverse people, and hidden riches, *La Sfera* was copied far and wide in Renaissance Italy. Over 130 copies of the poem are extant, the majority of which are accompanied by diagrams, maps, and illustrations that function as critical visual aids to support the poem's content and pedagogical goals. The poem itself works as a poetic portolan chart. It situates the merchant reader of fifteenth-century Tuscany at the centre of an interconnected world fully within his reach, thanks to the poem's carefully listed ports and its heaps of practical information about weather, customs, and business opportunities across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Despite these and more features, *La Sfera* has been sadly neglected by scholars, with few recent exceptions.[2] The transcription competition fostered by Morreale and Albritton has changed that in the course of a couple of months.

1. While the FromThePage software is open source and can be run by setting up an external server, the project's online interface (fromthepage.com) requires a subscription. Similar wide-reaching infrastructure for crowdsourced transcription include the Zooniverse project (zooniverse.org)

2. Clemens, "Medieval Maps"; Botana, *Learning through Images*, esp. chs. 9–10.

The two iterations of the transcription challenge have produced the complete transcriptions of eight illustrated copies of the poem, which can now be freely consulted online, together with early research outcomes produced by team members working on their assigned manuscript.[3] Following TCF's model of digital sustainability, these components are all archived according to the digital documentation process (DDP), a set of best practices to catalogue and preserve digital projects—also developed by Morreale—that entails the creation of a catalogue record, a persistent identifier (DOI), and an archiving dossier narrative documenting the scope, activities, and participants in the project.[4] However, this archived documentation is representative of just a fraction of the deliverables and initiatives produced by a large scholarly community coming together to discuss a text under the pretext of transcribing it. During and immediately after the challenges, several participants documented their work and discoveries in public-facing pieces that have further contributed to generating a debate over *La Sfera* beyond the scholarly community directly involved in the challenge.[5] Later on, several second-phase collaborative research digital projects were launched, which are currently examining the poem's diagrams, investigating its maps through geospatial analysis, and producing an annotated translation for undergraduate students.[6]

La Sfera Challenge has served as a successful pilot project. Since its completion, TCF has been adopted within increasingly flexible virtual environments and scopes. Soon after La Sfera Challenge, a similar initiative was developed to transcribe copies of another text—this time in thirteenth-century French—with a similar structure and pedagogical goals, Gossuin of Metz's *Image du monde*. Like La Sfera Challenge, this second initiative, the Image du monde Challenge, gathered around fifty scholars worldwide, who transcribed copies of the entire poem in two subsequent iterations.[7] Within these competitions, the goal of the crowdsourced transcription was to engage with a text and its manuscript witnesses, all while producing a digital diplomatic edition, stimulating scholarly debate, and fostering shared learning. In addition to these challenges, other creative applications of TCF have also been carried

3. Morreale et al., "La Sfera Challenge Project."

4. Fostano and Morreale, "Digital Documentation Process."

5. See, for example, Yavuz, "Manuscript of the Month."

6. Agostini and Beneš, "Geospatial La Sfera"; Morreale and Keane, "La Sfera Translation."

7. Keane et al., "Image du Monde."

out in different venues and with varying deliverables. For example, the challenge framework has been adopted for digital transcribeathons taking place within or around virtual scholarly events such as conferences or workshops. In March 2021, participants in the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America gathered to transcribe a medieval bestiary in French; in November 2020, participants in the Annual Schoenberg Symposium on Manuscript Studies in the Digital Age transcribed an anonymous devotional text, *Le Pelerinage de Damoiselle Sapience*.[8]

This second initiative is of particular importance because it demonstrates that, for shorter texts with a more limited manuscript transmission, TCF can be far more than a "transcription challenge framework" and can offer an efficacious framework for the completion of collaborative scholarly editions within a limited timeframe. In the course of this challenge, participants were divided into three teams: the first team transcribed the sole witness of the *Pelerinage*; the second reviewed the first team's transcription; and the third team used the previous teams' work to create a commented edition that was submitted to a scholarly journal upon the conclusion of the symposium. This impressive result demonstrates that employing a well-structured pipeline such as TCF (provided, of course, that said pipeline is tailored to the primary source at hand) can shorten the divide between the design of a collaborative project and its completion—whether by "completion" we mean concluding the shared experience of a text and manuscript or, more traditionally, shepherding a scholarly edition into print.

To conclude, TCF can be adopted and adapted as a successful model to kickstart a number of different projects focusing on premodern and early modern texts. In all the projects discussed above, the framework has been successfully tested on sources in two Romance languages, Italian and French. However, the possibilities are endless. Since the gamification process that underlies the framework generates engagement and visibility, TCF can be used to produce the first transcriptions of texts that have been so far neglected because they are challenging to engage with in a single-author research project. Texts written by marginalized groups, multilingual sources that require more than one disciplinary toolkit, and works that combine text and image in complex ways will all benefit from using TCF as a first-approach strategy. Existing initiatives

8. Morreale et al., "Archiving Dossier Narrative."

or events like workshops, symposia, and graduate or upper-level undergraduate seminars could successfully include a TCF competition for networking and pedagogical purposes, with the crucial result of providing participants and the broader scholarly community with permanent citable research output. Notably, the TCF-sponsored open calls that have been made so far testify to the diverse international community of scholars who can and are eager to participate in these projects. Premodernists and scholars of early modernity have increasingly diverse careers that go beyond what is traditionally defined as the world of academe; digital-born projects such as transcription challenges allow many voices to continue participating in scholarly conversations, foster connections, and make our field an equitable, diverse, and joyful space.

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