Transcription of
"Next-Gen Manuscript Descriptions: A Case for the Reconsideration
of the Manuscript Description Module of the TEI Guidelines"
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[Slide 1 – Katarzyna Anna Kapitan (KAK)] Hello and welcome! Thank you for tuning in for our presentation, "Next-Gen Manuscript Descriptions: A Case for the Reconsideration of the Manuscript Description Module of the TEI Guidelines." Since the title of this conference is "Next-Gen TEI," we allowed ourselves to think big about the future of manuscript studies and the role the TEI is going to play in it. Our observations intentionally challenge the state of art in order to conceptualise future data models for manuscript descriptions. Our aim is to reach out to like-minded people in the TEI community, who would be interested in developing the "next generation" Manuscript Description Module of the TEI Guidelines. Let us first introduce ourselves briefly, so you know where we're coming from with our ideas.

[Slide 2 – KAK] We are both scholars of manuscript studies, who use the Manuscript Description Module in our daily practice as cataloguers, researchers, and teachers. My name is Katarzyna Anna Kapitan. I am a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Linacre College at the University of Oxford. Funded by the Carlsberg Foundation, my project aims to digitally reconstruct the library of the Danish Royal Historiographer Thormodus Torfæus through creating an online catalogue of the manuscripts he owned.

[Slide 3 – N. Kıvılcım Yavuz (NKY)] And, my name is Kıvılcım Yavuz. I am Ann Hyde Postdoctoral Researcher at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. I am working on enhancing access to the Library's substantial holdings of medieval and early modern European manuscripts by conducting new research and creating born-digital catalogue records for its digital repository. I am also a member of the Executive Board of the Digital Medievalist.

[Slide 4 – NKY] In this paper we are interested in reconsidering the TEI <msDesc> Module by taking into account the growing role the digital technologies play in the field of manuscript studies. From doing searches on digital catalogues to turning the virtual pages of a digital facsimile of a manuscript to writing blog posts and engaging with audiences on social media, we live in a new era and conduct research and disseminate results differently than scholars of previous generations. Manuscript scholars today need to have digital competencies and be trained not only in how to read and interpret handwritten objects but also in how to think about manuscripts as sources of data. There is an immense potential in the area of digital manuscript studies, in which the TEI has been playing an important role, not least by developing guidelines for digital editions and catalogues.

[Slide 5 – KAK] The work on developing the <msDesc> Module started over twenty years ago. Thus, the guidelines were originally written at a time when digitisation needed justification. And, although its potential for *ex novo* cataloging was acknowledged as early as 1990s, the main purpose was first and foremost to make already existing analogue knowledge available in the digital format. This is clear from the pedagogical introduction to the <msDesc>, which begins with the encoding of an existing entry from a printed catalogue into a simple XML file consisting of mainly <p> elements. Still today, the Guidelines try to make encoding look familiar to newcomers, to not discourage or scare them off with complicated encoding.

[Slide 6 – KAK] In keeping with this pedagogical and accessible approach of the Guidelines, we are interested in reshaping the <msDesc> Module for today's digital-savvy audiences. Therefore, the first thing we need to consider is who uses the Guidelines and the <msDesc> Module today and how they are using it. The use of TEI-XML in manuscript studies has increased significantly in recent years, as attested by national and international manuscript cataloguing projects. All these projects use the Manuscript Description Module as an almost stand-alone module, completely independent of, for instance, text editions. There is no interest in transcribing texts contained in these manuscripts, but only in encoding the manuscript descriptions in a structured way. Following the example of leading institutions, smaller research projects and individual researchers also are increasingly interested in using TEI-XML as they need sustainable ways of collecting and preserving data about manuscripts. In many cases, we are no longer talking about digitising existing manuscript descriptions, but creating new, born-digital records for which the Manuscript Description Module serves as a data model and the Guidelines as a cookbook on how to catalogue a manuscript. This creates a need for training on and tutorials and resources for the TEI <msDesc> module, including examples of best practices.

[Slide 7 – NKY] Of the five main components of the Manuscript Description Module, the Physical Description as well as History and Additional Information would benefit significantly from further work. Just as a simple example, recording dimensions is not even mentioned as part of Binding Descriptions of the current Guidelines. Thus, for a newcomer to the field, without more advanced knowledge of the Guidelines and TEI-customisation, there is no other way than using a <p>-like data structure to record such information that would otherwise be easily parsable. This is far from an optimal solution when it comes to automatic data extraction and computer-assisted analysis, which in recent years has seen increasing interest. By its very nature, a TEI-XML based catalogue description should allow asking and answering new research questions and this is why we believe the Guidelines should include incredibly detailed and complex encodings of manuscript descriptions as well as giving the flexibility to encode minimal information. Therefore, we would like to create a working group on the <msDesc> module which will reconsider the existing guidelines and expand them in line with recent developments in digital manuscript studies.

[Slide 8 – NKY] We see the TEI Manuscript Description Module not only continuing to play a significant role in shaping the future of digital manuscript catalogues, but also taking the lead on developing new solutions for manuscript scholars. There are already multiple excellent examples of customizations of the TEI-XML that are developed to reflect various research interests. These include, for instance, encoding information on text density, complicated collation formulas, pricking, watermarks, just to name a few. The larger TEI community also already pointed to some of the issues at hand and suggested solutions for particular cases, which to us indicates an ongoing interest in developing the <msDesc> Module further. We envisage the next-generation TEI revisiting these existing suggestions and developing new ones for the benefit of the wider community of manuscript scholars.

[Slide 9 – NKY] Therefore, we would like to establish a working group as a forum for knowledge exchange on digital manuscript cataloguing, including but not limited to manuscript scholars, text encoders and special collections librarians. We see the aim of the group as reconsidering the Manuscript Description Module, focusing in particular on chapters 10.7. Physical Description, 10.8. History and 10.9. Additional Information. We are especially interested in expanding the variety of examples contained in the Guidelines, integrating existing solutions from past and current projects, and collecting examples of best practices for manuscript cataloguing including the incorporation of recent developments regarding the Semantic Web such as Linked Open Data. If you are interested in working with us on re-envisioning the Manuscript Description Module for the Next-Gen TEI, we would like to hear from you [at manuscriptsdh@gmail.com]. Thank you for your attention and we look forward to your suggestions and ideas.