

What did we think we were doing? The origins of dictionary digitalisation

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There was a time before we expected dictionaries to be digital. Back then, dictionaries were consulted to discover information about individual words. But in the 1970s and 80s things started to change and since then English dictionaries have repurposed themselves for the digital age. The Oxford English Dictionary was in the forefront of this tide of change, but what did it mean for the editors and for the words themselves? As well as new working methods, there were new aspirations: online dictionaries could report on changing patterns of language, and hence on social and cultural change as documented by the language. But aspiration is not achievements: just how far along the line are we in the history of the digital dictionary today?