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The lasting indispensability of printed sources and books of reference

Contribution to:

Bibliopolis Conference 'The future history of the book'

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Thursday afternoon parallel session 2. 'Books versus hypermedia'

One of the provoking statements put forward by the organisers of this conference says that 'very soon hypermedia will take over the role of traditional books as supplier of general information'. Extrapolating this, we come close to one of the notorious utterances of well known Dutch Professor John Mackenzie Owen: that very soon traditional libraries will be replaced by digital ones. Since I have the privilege to know John, not only as a very amiable but also as an equally intelligent man, I can tell you that even he himself can not believe this enormity.

A case, just a case

In 1982 the Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, acquired by gift and purchase the Barchas Collection in the History of Science and Ideas. No less than seventeen years later, in 1999, the scholarly bibliographic description of the entire collection was finished. On that occasion Roberto Trujillo, Head Department of Special Collections, wrote a Preface to the Catalogue, from which I quote the following.

'The collection of approximately 5000 printed books, of which almost 2000 volumes are first or early editions that focus on the "greatest books" since the invention of printing, established the University among this country's leading centres for scholarly research in the history of science: a field that bridges Stanford's established strengths in the sciences and engineering to its academic programs in the humanities.

The Barchas collection is a resource of great value not only to scholars in the history of science but to faculty and students in each of the scientific disciplines it covers, and in several fields within the humanities. The Collection includes works that have never been translated from their original languages. Art historians will find a wealth of material in the illustrations; cultural historians, in the introductions and dedications to royal or aristocratic patrons; religious historians, in some author's positions on religious, theological, or philosophical controversies of their day.'

One might think that I quote this from the Stanford University Libraries online catalogue. But I don't. I quote from the printed edition of this catalogue: a book of 400 pages, hardbound in half linen, with a weight of 2 kg. The impressum says 1999.

What do we learn from this case?

1. Stanford Library, already a centre for scholarly research, became one of America's leading centres thanks to the acquisition of 5000 books – not digital books, but printed books, old books. There is no intention to digitize them.
2. The catalogue is originally digital, but was immediately converted to a printed format

as well. What could be the reasons to do so?

3. One good reason is the question of longevity. While the printed catalogue guarantees carefree consulting for the next centuries (yes, centuries), the digital one will need endless and expensive migration or emulation (free inaccuracy creeping in included).

4. Another good reason to print is that – to quote the conference organisers' text once more – 'the interface of the book allows a wealth of variation within a familiar and predictable standard'. In this case it was very appropriate, if not a necessity, after all those years (1982-'99!) to offer a 'first copy' to a representative of the Barchas family. What to offer – a view on a scrolling screen? This book may not be an object of art, but in a wider sense I'd call it an artefact, being a beautiful design by Peter Rutledge Koch of Berkeley (who, by the way, chose as typeface the Scala, designed by Dutchman Martin Majoor) and very well printed and bound. A book, 'even' a science book, can be much more than just edited information: it can be a tangible artefact of high emotional and artistic value. One who considers this aspect to be of no importance is following the way of mechanical thinking - which is a dead end.

5. The Barchas Collection and its printed catalogue, together with millions of other books, are kept in a library – not a digital one, but a brand new brick and mortar building. Seriously damaged by the most recent Bay Area earthquake of 1989, the library was rebuilt and opened again just four years ago. This new library is not an anachronism or some other oddness. As everybody knows, it's not the only new library building. In the last decade, a dozen very big and extremely expensive libraries were opened to the public: Royal Library Copenhagen, Deutsche Bibliothek Frankfurt, Bibliothèque National, British Library, Public Libraries in San Francisco, Vancouver BC et cetera. That all this happened around the millennium change may be symbolic for the fact that traditional books and libraries were the basics for research during all of the second millennium and will be so during all of the third.