Introduction

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This special issue is one of the outcomes of a fruitful collaboration between a large group of European experts in the field of popular print. The collaboration started with a grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO) to establish the international network 'European Dimensions of Popular Print culture' (EDPOP) in 2016. This group of scholars, comprising experts from a range of European countries who until then had focused mainly on regional and national material, was intrigued by the question how 'European' popular print culture was in the period 1450–1900. Our ambition was to create a platform for the exchange of knowledge, pending projects, relevant collections and key concepts, and to set up transnational and comparative research projects.

One of the first challenges was to find a shared vocabulary for productive collaboration and discussions. We agreed that popular print should not be seen as a clearly defined product, but more as a spectrum in a dynamic popularisation process. A next step was to produce a list and a glossary of European genres and categories of popular print that we wanted to study collectively, comprising broadsheets, pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, prose novels, ballads, recipe books, penny prints, history prints, and other formats. In order to systematically collect, annotate and analyse copies of this popular material a Virtual Research Environment was developed in collaboration with CERL (the

Consortium of European Research Libraries), the University Library Utrecht and the Utrecht Digital Humanities Lab (DHLab). Currently this tool is able to harvest data from the Heritage of the Printed Book Database (HPB) of CERL, which contains the bibliographical metadata of more than 60 research libraries across the globe. Furthermore, the VRE has the capabilities to make print-specific and genre-specific collections. An annotation field in this tool gives a selected group of researchers the option to correct and enrich data with bibliographical and book historical information.

A first international EDPOP conference in Trent in 2017 resulted in an edited volume with the title *Crossing Borders, Crossing Cultures: Popular Print in Europe (1450–1900)*, edited by M. Rospocher, J. Salman and H. Salmi (De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2019). In this issue, the contributors explored the methodological possibilities and obstacles of a transnational and comparative approach of popular print culture in pre-modern Europe. The book provides useful criteria to identify bestsellers, gives methodological tools for reconstructing translation and adaptation practices, offers bibliographical search strategies for rare (ephemeral) categories of print (such as pamphlets), explores popularisation strategies and draws attention to ideological motivations for the production of specific texts.

The rationale of our second international conference in Utrecht in 2018 was to create small clusters of scholars working in similar fields, who would set up and execute concrete comparative sub-projects. The collaborative papers that were presented at Utrecht, form the basis of this special issue. Part 1 contains three articles that feature the life cycle of popular print in Europe. The authors aim to provide a summary of the current 'state of the art', as well as exploring the possibilities of large-scale comparative research in the field of production, distribution and consumption. By doing so, they provide an up-to-date framework for the articles that follow in Part 2, and for future work. Part 2 comprises four comparative case studies, covering many European countries over a long period of time, focusing on four popular genres and categories of print: penny prints, execution ballads, narrative fiction, and cheap print for children.

The transnational similarities that emerge in these essays are often striking, confirming that not only the materiality of cheap print, but also genres, contents, and reading practices were similar across linguistic and confessional traditions, and across time. The continuity and prevalence of some fictive titles across Europe suggests the existence of a collective narrative tradition. Illustrated broadsides catered for various readers' needs, from information to play, and represented what we now would call a cross-over cultural product, enjoyed by both the old and the young. Indeed, it is clear that young people constituted a significant part of the market for cheap print, at least as far as

instructional printed products were concerned. Cheap material deliberately designed to entertain children emerged very unevenly across Europe from the late eighteenth century, a process resulting in curious hybridisations, such as almanacs and chapbooks for children. This allow us to observe one of the main characteristics of cheap print: its continual ability to evolve over time. The study of shared cultural practices also sheds light on subjects that are still largely foreign to us, for example news singing about public punishment, as in the case of execution ballads.

The articles collected here also show unevenness in previous scholarship, often a result of different historiographical trends, of assumptions about literacy that have later proved incorrect, but also of conservation choices and digitisation policies. Going forward, a reconsideration from a more global perspective is needed. A number of questions remain open: would the extension of this comparative approach to other European areas lead to different conclusions? What happened outside Western Europe and indeed outside Europe entirely?

With this special issue we hope to have convincingly demonstrated the benefits of a comparative approach in the field of book history in general and of popular print in particular.

A field that examines so many rich sources, that raises so many intriguing questions, and that energises so many passionate scholars, deserves more collaborative projects such as this.