



# BESTSELLERS, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR LIMITS IN BOOK HISTORY

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The COVID-19 pandemic played havoc with the normal round of academic conferences. It brought cancellations and postponements. It brought attempts to organise virtual on-line events which could float freely in the cybersphere. But those events were, paradoxically, rooted in home soil, because colleagues in remote time zones could not all be accommodated, robbing learned societies and their meetings of some of their valued international dimensions. It has forced the scholarly community to fall back on organising ‘hybrid’ events, part real, part imaginary.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of the Historical Sciences, originally scheduled to meet in Poland in 2020, was one casualty, even though it still hopes to resurface in truncated form in 2022. The papers included here were destined to be presented at this gathering, but the hesitancy of the congress organisation, together with restrictions on international travel, made this impossible. Even as I write (September 2021), some contributors to this issue are banned from leaving their home shores.

What follows is therefore a situation worthy of Borges. One model for his *Ficciones* was the imaginary review of a non-existent book. Here we present a collection of papers prepared for conference panels which never existed, written by a group of book history scholars which never met. Together with SHARP (the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing), the sponsor of our panels, I am grateful to *Knygotyra*, and especially to Aušra Navickienė, for giving these orphan papers a good home.

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This collection presents eight very varied papers, by scholars from seven countries. Many of them present new approaches to book history based on digital resources. The papers fall into three uneven groups. The first article, unlike much of what follows, discusses book marketing on the basis of traditional sources. Kristen Highland introduces us to the world of gift-enterprise book-selling in the United States in the 1850s, focussing on Evans & Co. in New York as her chief example. ‘Gift bookselling’ offered every book purchaser a randomly selected gift, ranging in value from a pencil to a gold watch. Highland combs the provincial American press to discuss attacks on the scheme as fraudulent, and defenders who maintained it was legitimate. She then analyses Evans’ catalogue, not to add up titles and categorise them into genres, but to consider the catalogue’s role in shaping a reading community, welcoming a heterogeneous public of readers and prize-winners into the virtual bookshop.

The second group of three papers presents reflections on what, in historical terms, has constituted a ‘bestseller’. When was the bestseller invented, and how should we categorise the phenomenon in different historical contexts? What does the study of bestsellers teach us about the history of the reading public and of the publishing industry? Can we even talk usefully about the ‘bestseller’ before our contemporary period of instant successes and rapid oblivion? Fifty years ago, Robert Escarpit defined three patterns of best-selling books.<sup>1</sup> The fast seller was a brief success, reaching its sales peak very quickly, and then declining equally rapidly like a shooting star. The steady seller, in contrast, never sold in great quantities but retained a significant market perhaps for decades. In a third category of bestsellers, a small minority of titles began as fast sellers, and then became steady sellers, by breaking into new markets as time went on. The examples discussed here most resemble Escarpit’s ‘steady sellers’.

Led by Simon Burrows, these studies advocate new methods for calculating bestsellers in the past, using the resources and techniques of the digital humanities. Burrows continues his examination of the sales records of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, on which Robert Darnton based his influential interpretations of the French clandestine book trade and its alleged role in undermining the pre-revolutionary monarchy. This is a discussion of ‘big data’: Burrows and his team add enormous density to the discussion by basing it on ½ million books, almost 3000 customers and/or booksellers, and on over 70,000 transactions over 25 years. The results put Darnton’s claims

1 ESCARPIT, Robert. *La Révolution du livre*. Paris, UNESCO / Presses universitaires de France, 1965. 164 p.

into perspective, as Burrows scales down the size and lifespan of the clandestine book trade, while scaling up the importance of religious books in the age of Enlightenment. Burrows' article provides a valuable synthesis of different research projects on the European Enlightenment currently in progress, and compares the pros and cons of different methods of calculating bestsellers.

Aušra Navickienė has her own interpretation of the question: What is a bestseller? Considering nineteenth-century Lithuania, she finds the answer in counting editions of her chosen title and making an educated guess at their print runs. But first the editions have to be traced through painstaking research into publishing practices across a divided Lithuanian community – some of it in German territory, some under Tsarist rule and the rest which had emigrated to the USA. Like historians of eighteenth-century France, but for different reasons, she too is writing a history of illegal publishing and clandestine distribution across national frontiers.

Assessing the impact of any individual title or author across European space and time is within the reach of all us. So claim Finnish scholars Ilkka Mäkinen and Jukka Tyrkkö. Their wide-ranging study is based on metrics extracted from Google Books using Ngram Viewer. Google, after all, is no more than a glorified index, and it is excavated here to find mentions of literary authors in several languages since 1800. Although Mäkinen and Tyrkkö's data analysis will dazzle the statistically-challenged reader, the metrics yield results. They identify those authors whose popularity was largely confined to their own country or language area (like Enid Blyton); and they outline the changing fortunes of those who made a mark elsewhere, like William Faulkner and Milan Kundera in France, or Ernest Hemingway almost everywhere. Mentions, of course, are not the same thing as book sales, nor do they tell us whether authors are mentioned because they are popular, or just controversial. Whether titles were welcomed or attacked, however, their resonance is clearly demonstrated here.

In the third group of four papers, the digital humanities again take front of stage. These contributions demonstrate the potential of digital technologies and the manipulation of 'big data' to recalibrate traditional assumptions about book history. It is clear that new, digitally-inflected approaches, methodologies and tools are challenging accepted paradigms and providing new insights by going beyond traditional research in textual sources.

Cheryl Knott studies the evidence of 'expert reception' of a single title, in reviews and citation indexes with which academics are familiar. *The Limits to Growth* (1972) was a precursor in the field of environmental economics. Using data readily accessible via the Web of Science, Knott is able to chart and visual-

ise the fluctuating rhythm of this book's impact, as well as the disciplines which were most receptive to it (either because they endorsed it or the opposite). Knott shows what a single researcher can achieve without a research team, substantial funding and advanced computational expertise. The size of the problem, in other words, should determine the size of the budget; we do not need a sledgehammer to crack a walnut.

Courtney Jacobs and her Texan colleagues present the 'Bibliographical Maker Movement', and allied experiments in the application of 3D technologies to book studies and book creation. They stress the advantages of 3D photography over the microfilming and digitisation of texts, which flatten them and remove evidence of their material support. Emphasising the importance of hands-on experience in understanding techniques of book production in the past, they illustrate the replication of a wooden handpress by students at the Rochester Institute of Technology. They argue that the 3D techniques they present offer significant advantages to museum collections, to makers of creative art books, and to book studies pedagogy.

The history of reading is a cross-disciplinary undertaking. In their up-to-date overview of the field, Brigitte Ouvry-Vial and Nathalie Richard from the University of Le Mans make it clear that today historians of reading borrow from a wide range of fields: not only cultural history and literary theory, but also the history of the emotions, neuroscience and computer science. Their article exposes some of the scaffolding around their project, as they discuss the issues and problems involved in annotating handwritten letters in digitised form. Their work in the READ-IT project (Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool) is still incomplete, but they offer a glimpse of French nineteenth-century philosophy readers and their gendered responses to the writings of Victor Cousin.

Last but not least, Sydney Shep reflects on the Southampton Book Trades project, in which the wartime destruction of evidence posed a particular challenge to the historian, forced to fill gaps and imagine unknown encounters between books and readers. Second-hand books, for Shep, speak their own autobiographies and enter into a dialogue with their past readers. A mobile app gave access to several such staged encounters or 'object-narratives', based on verifiable books and readers, rooted in a specific time and place. In this case, original platforms were devised to disseminate imaginative reconstructions.

While several contributors explain the importance of digital humanities methods for their research, they also pose questions about their limitations. Establishing and simply encoding data for large-scale projects like the 'French

Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe' project absorbs considerable time, occupies several team members and draws on specialised technical expertise. Big data requires big money, and this can only be justified by big results. To some extent, it may be partly justified as a long-term investment: once databases are created, they are available for analysis by researchers in the future.

Nevertheless, modern reading is an intimate experience, and some aspects of reception can only be understood through a qualitative, interpretative approach, focussing on individual readers, or communities of readers, rather than an anonymous mass of computerised consumers. As with any research methodology, whether traditional or digitally based, we learn by understanding its scope and potential, and by recognising all that it cannot tell us.