

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

The many shapes of the printed book

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Physical shape is very relevant for understanding the position of the printed book in this digital age. Compared to the greyish rectangle of most digital devices it offers a wealth of shapes, sizes and materials, and it actually offers something for everyone. It is this aspect that contributes to the resiliency of the printed book in a time in which many have predicted its end.

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In this digital age, it seems the printed book has to withstand the force with which digital media are invading the market of books, and dominating information culture in society in general. In every showdown, actual, fictional, or predictive, it is the printed book that gets defeated by digital media. Comparing the two seems obvious, but what is being compared exactly? Sales figures of printed books and e-readers? Or the reading experience with different types

of media, which was, also, the subject of TXT magazine in 2015? Certainly not the physical shape of both objects, which, however, could be very relevant.

This edition of TXT is about the resiliency of the printed book in a time in which many have predicted its end. Again, this asks for a comparison between the printed book and digital media, this time focussing on what the printed book has to offer that digital media lacks. Inevitably, the

physical appearance of the printed book is the first that springs to mind. Although a text can take many shapes when shown on a digital device, even each time it's being shown to its readers – especially on tablets and smartphones –, the actual device itself is rectangular, in black, white, or space grey, and with a few buttons on the side. The book, however, comes in a multitude of shapes and sizes, printed on all kinds of paper, and with many different cover designs.

The impression is that the fixity of print is an obstacle for the book in a digital age where everything is constantly changing. This fixity suggests that the printed book cannot cope with ever-changing preferences, personal tastes, and fashion trends. For television, recently, the comparison between regular broadcasting and Netflix is often made. Netflix has an ever-changing offer, always in line with your own wishes and preferences. Of course, Netflix is based on algorithms that very precisely compute what films and series match with what you've been watching earlier. We obviously do not need to expect these high-tech strategies for the printed book, but the old-fashioned "something for everyone" still applies. And with that, we come into the wonderful world of book design and publishing strategies, with paperback and deluxe editions

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and everything in between. And this, to my idea, is where the resiliency of the book is partly based on.

For example, the Harry Potter stories can be read on digital devices, such as tablets and e-readers, but they are still being published in print in many different kinds of editions. The first story, *The Philosopher's Stone*, is available as hardcover and softcover, as well as with illustrations by different artists. It is available as a single volume, but also as part of a box set with all the other stories in a similar design. Recently, celebrating the 20th anniversary of *The Philosopher's Stone*, a Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw edition appeared. Each edition features the individual house crest on the jacket and line illustrations exclusive to that house, and, also, has coloured edges in the house colours.¹

With special editions in different colours we touch upon the subject of fine printing: books in limited edition that are handprinted on paper, and sometimes even on vellum, in a special design. Some of the most famous examples are printed by The Kelmescott Press, founded by William Morris, and The Doves Press, both of which existed around 1900 in England. Both presses produced familiar texts, such as the works of Geoffrey Chaucer

and that of the Bible, but in very intricate designs and printed in the highest quality.² Although the quality of The Kelmscott Press and The Doves Press is hardly ever matched, this kind of publishing is still done today.³ Some of these books are seen as art objects. With books as art objects, it's exactly the shape that makes it stand out from everything else, such as the book designs by Dutch book artist Irma Boom.

The diversity in editions and accompanying shapes is not restricted to Harry Potter, or modern books in general. This is a characteristic that printed books have always had, from the invention of printing onwards. A diversity in editions seems obvious for a historical text, as every publisher might have had different ideas on how to market a certain text – just take a look at the publishing history of some of the classics –, but also within an edition, there may be elements that result in different appearances. An example is the Delft Bible, containing the Old Testament but excluding the Psalms, and which was printed in Delft, in

1477. The text was printed spread over several different composition-units, each consisting of a certain number of quires containing specific Bible books, which could be arranged as wished. The result was that one and the same edition could be shaped into different types of copies.⁴ Another historical example is the catalogue *Museum Catsianum*, which was first published in 1870 and was meant to describe the collections on Jacob Cats, by the collector Willem Cornelis Mary de Jonge van Ellemeet. It was published in several different bindings: paper covers, board, linen, and parchment. It was not advertised as such, but these different bindings are evident from the archival sources on the publishing history of this particular catalogue.⁵

To conclude, one of the aspects that contributes to the resiliency of the printed book in this digital age is its physical appearance, with which it beats the greyish rectangle of most digital devices, and, in this respect, offers something for everyone.



¹ To get an idea of the diversity in Harry Potter editions, just search for 'Harry Potter' on Amazon.com.

² See C. de Wolf & P. van Capelleveen, 'De opkomst van de private press', in: C. de Wolf & P. van Capelleveen (eds.), *Het ideale boek: honderd jaar private press in Nederland 1910-2010* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2010), pp. 19-43, there pp. 22-24.

³ For modern Dutch private presses see <http://drukwerkindemarge.org/drukkers/>.

⁴ M. van Duijn, 'Printing, Public, and Power: Shaping the First Printed Bible in Dutch (1477)', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 93 (2013), pp. 275-299.

⁵ M. van Duijn, 'Twee bibliofielen en een Cats Catalogus. Brieven van J.L. Beijers aan W.C.M. de Jonge van Ellemeet over *Museum Catsianum* (1870)', *Jaarboek van het Nederlands Genootschap van Bibliofielen XXXIII* (2016), pp. 171-208.