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The Blessings and Burdens of the Internet

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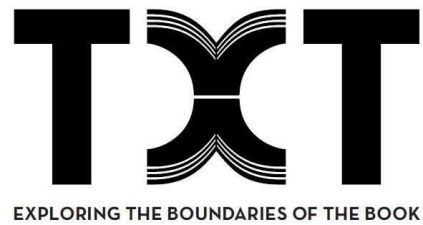
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The Blessings and Burdens of the Internet



DAPHNE WOUTS

A lot is changing for the antiquarian bookseller. Internet seems to have taken over the market completely which leads to gloomy discussions. But what's changing exactly and what does it mean for the physical antiquarian bookshop?

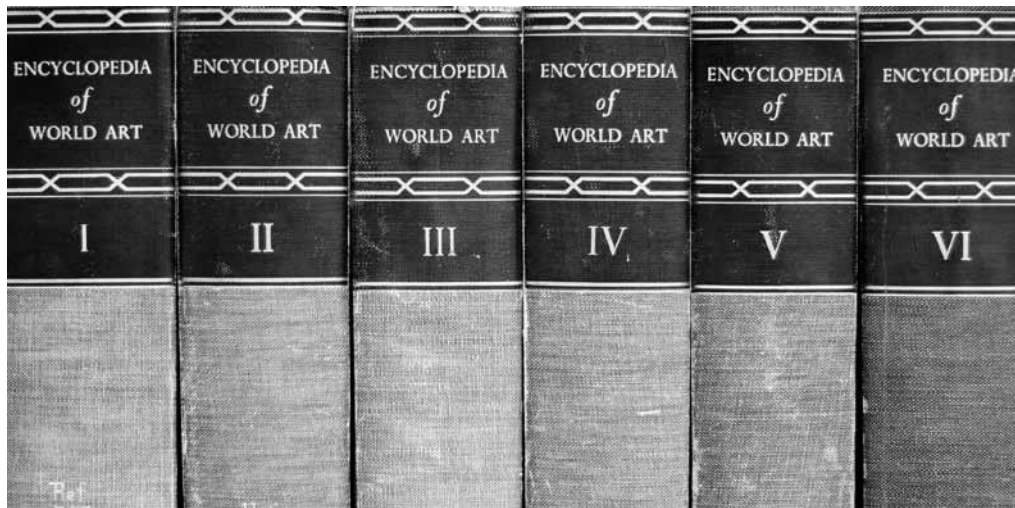
Mr. Kok is still wrapping up a deal when I arrive at Antiquarian A. Kok & Zoon, which gives me the opportunity to check out the shop. Ton Kok (61) continued his father's antiquarian bookshop exactly fifteen years ago in the Oude Hoogstraat, Amsterdam. Furthermore, he is the chairman of the Dutch Association of Antiquarians (NVvA). It is an enormous building with five floors in which books, maps, and prints are scattered around. Kok has eight people working for him, which is, in this respect, unique in the Netherlands. Kok offers a broad assortment of books and prints, but

some specializations developed over the course of time, among which are classical archaeology and art.

Ton Kok, the cornerstone of the shop, welcomes me enthusiastically in his office. "We purchase more than we sell," Kok describes, which explains the piles of books against the walls of his office. "We cannot continue to do so," he adds. The difference between purchase and sales has grown enormously for many physical antiquarian bookshops. Some shops have quit purchasing altogether, but not Kok. He still visits fairs and auctions,

although the Internet slowly takes over the function of buying on location. Kok explains his urge to buy: "every time people walk into the shop they want to find something new," which translates into the second building he owns and uses primarily as storage.

Certain parts of the market for special books have disappeared, which explains the decrease in sales. Schools that Kok once provided books for have now established their own central buying association or they receive direct discounts from publishers. The biggest



'villain', however, is the Internet, which snatches away customers en masse. "The number of customers in the shop is cut in half," Kok informs me. He passionately tells an anecdote about his father's antiquarian bookshop, established in 1945, where on Saturdays a doorman had to be posted to only let new customers in when others left. "But now..." Kok sighs, looking around the nearly empty shop. Kok especially misses adolescents in his shop. Marga, Kok's wife, who also works in the shop, confirms that this is a large part of the problem. The market for antiquarian books is drying up, because there are few adolescents who are still interested in buying them. After having asked the children of a visiting primary school, Marga found that around 80 percent of these children did not have any books in their homes. "That truly astonished me," she says. Students only show up when Kok buys up a number of study books from a publisher. Kok blames the problem of the ease in which students are able to copy books or look up their content online.

Kok's success depends on the core of book collectors who appreciate the antiquarian bookshop as a physical place to drop by. They like to 'sniff around' and make discoveries. "A bookshop is an adventure," Kok explains with a smile. "Every day I discover books I've never seen before." The physical bookshop 'wins' in this respect from the Internet. Kok also notices that information provided on the Internet is not always accurate, which he blames on the speed in which special books are described. "Everything should be fast online," Kok grumbles. He shows me a book he bought online because of the foldout

map that should be in it according to the description. The map is nowhere to be seen. "This is useless," Kok snorts. "Now I have to return it and pay postage for nothing." The Internet is not always to be trusted as it turns out, leaving a future for a limited number of physical antiquarian bookshops. "Internet targets the bottom and middle segment of the market whilst the physical antiquarians are still on top," Kok explains.

The physical shops, however, have to deal with high rental prices, along with travel and accommodation expenses abroad. Kok jokes, aiming at the many coffeeshops in Amsterdam: "you should sell drugs to overcome these costs, but with our supply it is a big problem. You must find books with which you can make a lot of money." The economic crisis also leaves its trails in the business. "When you watch television, nothing is to be trusted," Kok says, pointing to customers who are too afraid to spend their money on special books.

But the Internet means more than trouble and competition to Kok; it also helps to save his business. Kok sells fifty percent of his stock online and the other fifty percent in the shop. It is a consolation, with regard to his large stock, that the sales always continue online. Internet is also a clever way of determining book prices. Internet offers more than the catalogues and sole experience Kok had to work with before its existence. Internet is the perfect way to keep track of the market and to play into it. A lot of physical antiquarian bookshops loathe the Internet, because they feel nostalgic towards their historical tradition. This nostalgia is a big mistake,

according to Kok. "The market is subject to changes and we have to respond to it, whether we like it or not. If you don't, you hang." Sometimes Kok needs to keep prices low to sell the books in store: "we sell some first editions below ten euros, but otherwise they do not sell at all," Kok illustrates this point.

Kok clearly values an optimistic attitude, contrary to the predominant pessimism of his colleagues. "They work with long faces, losing their passion. When I see this I think: 'guys, what are we doing?'" Kok sees plenty of opportunities, for example targeting new markets in China and the Middle East. "You have to approach these countries at the right time, make an effort and work hard." You have to have an 'antiquarian's eye' though, Kok admits. And that is something you cannot find online.

Kok does not fear the future, but he does realize the challenge lying ahead for his children who will take over the business. The optimism that characterizes Kok, however, shines through even in the worst-case scenario. "If everything fails I will just quit and take up gardening," he says. "However, I will always be involved. I do not think I want to garden seven days a week..."

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