

The Open Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Malatestiana Library

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INTRODUCTION

Many experiences laying on the Internet use have been carried out in Paleography during last years and radical changes in the methods usually adopted in that discipline have been introduced. Furthermore specially planned information systems for bibliographical data management are more and more used and are influencing everyday work and study processes.

In the authors' opinion the proposal for the introduction of special information systems and especially of the Open Catalogue of manuscripts have their roots in the revision of Paleography research and study methods, in the connections the discipline will settle with other sciences (i.e., IS, IT and ICT disciplines) and in the creation of new roles for the users of the information the discipline will produce.

Is There the Need for a Revision of Paleography Research Methods and Instruments?

ICT radically changed the approach scholars had with manuscripts for at least two reasons:

a. The way manuscripts were analyzed; researchers had in fact to personally study manuscripts in archives or libraries

b. The medium the members of the scientific community adopted until now to share the results of their work; it was in fact based on a printed Catalogue (i.e., printed matter that acquires its definite form and scientific value only when it is published)

During last years the spreading of networking communication techniques produced relevant effects on the sharing of knowledge and information also within the community of the paleographers and of the scholars involved in manuscripts' analysis and study. First of all the Web was used to publish the images reproducing manuscripts pages, but there were also experiences concerning on line historical magazines, collections of bibliographies, or special databases on copyists and manuscripts (Cartelli, Miglio, & Palma, 2001).

The considerations and the proposals coming from newly defined disciplines like informing science (Cohen, 1999), led the authors to the definition of a special information system called "Open Catalogue". This system, which is described in the following section, has been adopted and carried out from the staff of the Malatestiana Library, an ancient Italian library hosting a consistent number of manuscripts.

Catalogues of Manuscripts and the Open Catalogue

The history of manuscript cataloguing began between 17th and 18th century, when some scholars (Peter Lambeck in Vienna, Bernard de Montfaucon in Paris) prepared the first printed catalogues of manuscript collections. Their example was followed in the last two centuries by many cataloguers, who described thousands of manuscripts written in ancient and modern languages stored in many big and small libraries throughout Europe and the rest of the Western world. Notwithstanding the great work paleographers made in these centuries an enormous amount of manuscripts still remains uncatalogued, if not unknown.

The main trouble with old, handwritten books is the difficulty of getting in touch with them, mostly for the following reasons:

- a. People simply do not know of manuscripts' existence in a given place (with respect to texts, where bibliographies and Internet resources make relatively easy to find a printed book, or at least a bibliographical description of its content, the same instruments are usually not available for manuscripts),
- b. Every manuscript is a unique book: there are no duplicates for it. Even if the text in two books is the same, as in the case of a model and its copy, the two books can be different in script, physical appearance and even text, because a handwritten copy always contains some changes with respect to its source. This is the main reason for an accurate description of the external and internal features of every single handwritten book: to identify and qualify it beyond its sheer shelf mark, that is, what for a human being is her or his name.

Due to the features of a manuscript (physical appearance, materials making it, number of folios, content organization, presence or not of illuminations, etc.) a catalogue of manuscripts is a really difficult task, it requires a deep competence in a lot of fields, from philology to history, from history of art to paleography, from literature to library science. A catalogue of medieval (or modern) manuscripts can then be carried out by connoisseurs who devote an enormous amount of time and work to describe some tens or hundreds of these peculiar objects which lie hidden in the shelves of

libraries, normally accessible only to the few scholars who are admitted to their direct study.

It is easily understandable how and why in the last decades many librarians or researchers liked much to write books about the theory of manuscript description than to prepare catalogues of manuscripts.

In the authors' opinion time has come for a radical change in catalogue publishing. First of all the Internet can make available great part of the manuscript heritage all over the world (i.e., a good example for the new way of catalogues' publishing can be found in what is reported from CDF and Overgaauw, 2001, in Germany); furthermore it is possible to give scholars new and more powerful tools to improve their work and let them create *Open Catalogues* (i.e., catalogues in progress, constantly changing with the continuous contribution of new information).

The Open Catalogue of Manuscripts

The project of the information system to be used for the *Open Catalogue* had to take into the right consideration the communication medium it was based on, that is, the Internet. The creation of a Web site looked very soon as the best solution for an on line community within which people could meet other people or share their researches and ideas; the site was also helped in the management of manuscripts' data by a database. The whole system looked reliable enough both on the server side and on the client side; in the first case the reliability laid on the server technical features (its fault tolerance, backup procedures, etc.) and on the Net steadiness (nowadays only seldom happen breakdowns preventing people from the use of connecting services), in the second case the clients connecting features seemed to guarantee a good and easy access to Web resources. In both cases the property rights of the information made available on the Net was reasonably guaranteed.

While planning the structure of the Open Catalogue the following environments were kept apart (Cartelli & Palma, 2002): a former one where researchers and scholars had the scientific liability of the materials to be published and a latter one people could use occasionally or systematically to obtain information (i.e., not to produce them).

The separation affected the way users could access the system and led to three different and separated access levels:

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