

Some Preliminary Thoughts on Collecting Digital Graphic Technology

The days when texts were set with lead letters and illustrations were printed using zinc printing blocks are long past. Today's printing industry is based on digital production, global production and sales as well as an increasing convergence with other media.

Hence printing museums have to take into consideration whether or how they add items from the digital age, that might be from the period after 1980 and onwards, to their collections.

The following thoughts are based on our media museum's considerations concerning a revised collections policy. As a museum of contemporary history, we are by definition obliged also to collect graphic equipment from the more recent past. However, I hope that these considerations are relevant for some of the other museums, which are represented here, as well.

In the past, printing museums have first and foremost collected materials from the period of lead types and letterpress printing. The Danish Media Museum is no exception. But it has built up a fine collection on photo type setting machines, too - a technology which I reckon belongs to the computer's pioneer era.

More recent digital equipment, e.g. PCs or Macs used in the pre press process and digital printers, however, are hardly present in the Media Museum's, nor in most of the other museums', collections. The same goes for large offset printing presses, not to mention the full arsenal of modern bookbinding machinery.

The fact that the collection of such items has largely been disregarded might be due to factors – as e.g. a lack of distance in time. We need a certain period of time in order to be able to assess whether certain new machines or other graphic equipment are just like mayflies, or have a longer lifespan that justifies recording and preserving them. Another possible explanation might be that this type of items is just not as interesting as the earlier jobbing presses, setting machines or insetter stitchers. After all, we use our PCs or Macs every day, so why should we place them in our museums? Lastly today's printing presses are not too "exciting" to look at as they are covered in insulating material and plates in order to improve operational safety and reduce noise levels, making it hard to see how they actually function. Moreover, they are usually too large to be placed in exhibitions.

However, it is of vital importance that the museums start to systematically build up relevant collections of digital equipment as long as it is still possible to acquire the objects requested. All too often we are already late.

We also need to develop specific strategies on what to collect, or else we risk collecting white elephants. All of us have experienced the lack of depot space.

Hardware: Printing museums certainly have to build up collections of digital hardware. The main focus should be on items widely used in the printing industry and on technically innovative items. However, it is crucial that the museums do not just acquire the hardware itself. e.g. present day prepress equipment, offset presses, screen printing presses and digital presses, but also spare parts, so that the computers, presses etc. can be repaired if necessary. As far as possible, things should be functioning. We are dealing with a technology, though, which is entirely different from that of the composing machines and printing presses we are used to. The question is therefore to which extent is it possible to repair the computers and who can accomplish this task?

Software: Museums have to make sure they collect programmes of the computers which have been or are being used in the printing industry. Here, I am not just thinking of software for different types of computers but also various relevant models. Those programmes that can only be obtained by downloading them online represent a particular problem. However, it is needless to say that they have to be collected too.

Another question is: Who can assess, which programmes are relevant for collection?

Presumably, we will have to consult experts from the printing industry, universities and others on

these matters.

Typefaces: There are more than 100,000 different fonts. They won't cover a lot of space physically, but collecting and preserving all of them or just a share would require a fairly large database. At this point, I shall not even mention the more general issue of preserving digital data. The main question for now is whether or not we can create a large typeface collection at all. Will, for instance, type designers allow one or several institutions to save copies of their typeface bases, even if they do not have the rights to use them? In this case we risk getting into copyright trouble.

We might buy them if we just could afford it. If we should buy widely used typefont, which might be desirable, it will cost a fortune. And new types are designed almost every day. How can we keep an eye on this development?

On the other hand: shall we be content with the fonts we can get from various printers? I think: no.

Collecting software does not necessarily have to be the sole responsibility of every single museum, however. One option would be some sort of division of labour, another, probably even easier, way would be to make a digital centre at a university or a library shoulder the task. Of course, it is the individual museums' task to collect material, e.g. typefonts, which have been produced in their respective regions.

A digital center would presumably also be able to preserve and store the collected programme disks under proper climatic conditions – much better than most museums.

Other material dealing with the digital period: In order to complete their collections on the digital period, museums should also collect manuals, archival documents, videos, films, photos, products and non-material testimonies, e.g. interviews on production processes, working conditions, the companies' struggle and challenges facing globalisation etc. At the same time, they should make video recordings of work in the respective companies.

A particular feature of present-day graphic hard- and software is that it is usually produced by large, multinational companies. Since Gutenberg, graphic equipment has been subject to import and export. This internationalisation of the means of production was fostered even further by the Industrial Revolution. However, a certain domestic production of machinery, such as printing presses, continued. In general, this is no longer the case today.

Today, the same few companies produce offsetpresses, prepress equipment etc for the graphic trade all over the world. Therefore, it may not be necessary for all museums to collect the same hardware and software, but to agree on a certain division of labour. At the same time, this requires facilitating the lending of items between museums on a common European level.

To summarise, it is high time for us to get going. But in order not to waste any resources, we have to decide what and how we are going to collect. Every museum has to determine their collection policy. However, the general lines should be directed by some broader international cooperation. Now I hope that other museums and institutions within AEPM would be willing to cooperate to find a solution how we can save the digital, graphical heritage.

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