Editorial

From codex to computer

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'What is a Book?' asked Joseph A. Dane, and he provided a relatively simple answer: '[it] is always something that exists in immediate and direct relation to a material *book*-copy', which 'is always a material object that exists in time and space and carries with it its own unique history' (2012: 7–8). Dane's definition is certainly helpful in reference to printed books of the hand-press period. Yet there are material states of the 'book' that problematize his definition: the unbound condition that most early books went through after printing but before binding; palimpsests in which a text was erased so that a new 'book' could be created; the books known only by name – such as those entered in the Stationers' Register – but never printed, or those of which no identified copy survives. Dane's definition elicits far more troubling questions in the digital age. Not only do book apps destabilize terminologies and collapse distinctions – a text can be a 'book', an 'app' or both – they also raise fundamental questions of how materiality pertains to e-books and whether they have a 'material book-copy' at all. Recognizing the different forms of e-books brings to the fore questions about how production might redefine what a book is and how it might create meanings. In short, we might ask of the digital age, as Dane fruitfully did of the hand-press period: 'What is a Book?'

This volume focuses on the materiality of the book from medieval manuscripts to contemporary apps, from the codex to the computer. The timeframe concentrates on two key moments: the hand-press period when printing challenged the hegemony of manuscript production; and our own age when the arrival of the computer and the production of e-books

similarly questions *modi operandi*. It is now a commonplace to observe that the current technological revolution has many affinities with the upheaval that accompanied the arrival of the printing press. It nevertheless remains true that the parallels, continuities and differences in the material form of the book and its production, dissemination and use at these two junctures are worth exploring not least because they are both more complex and more nuanced than first appears.

Roger Chartier argued that 'the substitution of screen for codex [...] changes the methods of organization, structure, consultation, even the appearance of the written word' (1995: 15). Certainly, the way in which books were created, circulated and ultimately destroyed in the early modern period contrast significantly with the modern production of e-books. Unlike physical copies, the e-book requires no pressing onto a substrate such as paper or vellum, does not have to be physically bound and shipped, is unlikely to be gatherable in only one place and cannot readily be destroyed by fire. Marshall McLuhan may have been right to insist that the medium is the message (1964: 1–18). Yet, the picture is more complicated. There is a materiality attendant on e-books, whatever their form, because keyboards are needed to create texts, computer hardware and a power source are essential for production and a screen is required for the text to be read. The parallels in the production of a manuscript, a printed book and an e-book are striking: each depends, ultimately, on material objects and on some form of technology.

Technology underlies all forms of texts discussed in this volume and the articles make clear the differing ways technology shaped the material form of the book and the surrounding discourses. Hannah Ryley brings out the idiosyncratic nature of individual manuscripts revealing that the quality of parchment affected the ways in which it could be used and how the practices of scrapping or using chemicals on parchment affected its use. Lucy Razzall shows how a book's shape, external covering, means of closure and facility to conceal as well as reveal brought out the

similarities between books and early modern cabinets or containers. Methods of binding are at the heart of discussions by both Jason Scott-Warren and Sheena Calvert who reflect on how binding techniques and materials shaped the production and significance of texts. Uniqueness is central to Tatiani Rapatzikou's discussion of Anne Carson's *Nox* as she explores the way an individualized response can be multiplied through technology. Julie Mader-Meersman and Sarah Bodman discuss how the e-book, with its different capabilities, facilitates novel forms of the book. Indeed, it is perhaps in apps that the most interesting developments are being made with innovations significantly expanding the interactive nature of reading. As technology advances, so it enables forms to be both similar to those they originally imitated while simultaneously developing distinctive features. Yet the articles by Bodman, Mader-Meersman and Johanna Drucker also demonstrate how technology inhibits innovation. Currently in its 'incunable' period, the e-book's history may eventually, like its manuscript and printed predecessors, be critiqued both in terms of what the technology allowed, and in appreciation of the creativity of the designer.

There are, then, both similarities and differences between physical books and e-books in their dependence on other technologies: this should make us pause before dismissing them as opposites, with the latter destined to make the former obsolete.[1] Exploring these issues across material forms and different eras provides the opportunity to reflect on continuities and differences and put the flesh of practical examples on the skeleton of the intellectual concept to show how, in practice, divergent meanings are created through the manipulation of the book's material form.

It is not, however, just the underlying technology which is at stake in discussion between physical and electronic forms of the book. When John Milton observed in *Areopagitica* (1644) that 'hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe' he assumed that the physical book and its meanings were inextricably linked. Although he was writing about censorship, the implication was

that book destruction lead inevitably to loss (Luxon 1997–2017: 'The John Milton Reading Room'). Advocates of e-books echo Milton's claims when they suggest the digital form can preserve texts against such disasters as fire and flood. Indeed, there is an established rhetoric, common to both periods of technological revolution, that talk of dying ways of life, rapid obsolescence and the alleged supremacy of a new way of doing things. The products of the old technology manifested in the form of physical books will be superseded, so the argument goes, by the long-lasting products of the new technology, e-books and digital texts.

Yet the issue is more complex. The work of book-artist Egidija Čiricaitė suggests that the destruction of the material book can make new meanings. Her 'Damnatio memoriae' ('Condemnation of Memory') project involved kiln-firing discarded Soviet books from the period 1944–78, which had been found in a Lithuanian barn in 2010 (Čiricaitė 2011). The exquisitely beautiful and immensely fragile artefacts that resulted invited reflection on events in Lithuania following both World War II and the 1991 attainment of independence. The discarded books dating from a period of Soviet control had been recreated into conveyors of meaning not through their linguistic signifiers (which were destroyed) but by their newly fired condition in which fragility, elision and destruction were paramount. Similarly, in this volume Ryley reveals that medieval manuscripts were strengthened, renewed and indeed made from damaged parchments in acts of what she calls 'constructive destruction'. The physical destruction of printed books by book-worms lies at the heart of Mader-Meersman's creative enterprise that aimed both to create an engaging piece of art and to raise awareness of, and direct users towards the original physical objects held in special collection libraries. Significantly, Drucker demonstrates just how susceptible to obsolescence and destruction digital texts are themselves. Paradoxically, it seems that medieval manuscripts and early printed texts might last much longer than modern-day digital productions.

The question of survival is not the only way in which the articles in this volume speak to each other. Making things accessible is often a fundamental motivation for digital productions and is seen as a key difference between the material book and the e-book. Some articles in this volume support that contention: medieval manuscripts and early printed books are held in special collections inaccessible to the general public; e-books and apps by contrast are widely available through the ubiquity of handheld devices. Yet the comparison is unjust. As discussed by Scott-Warren, the true comparison is between the *Eikon Basilike* (which was extremely sought after in its day) and popular contemporary book apps on the one hand and, on the other, between books held in rare book collections and archived digital projects. The former comparison reveals how both physical object and electronic version could have widespread appeal; the latter, ways in which both forms could become inaccessible. While libraries and archives provide the means by which surviving copies of material forms of the book can be preserved, it is less clear how, in 500 years, surviving digital books will be accessed and made available.

Underlying both comparisons however lies the notion of the book, e-book or app as the container of meaning. Whatever their material form, books are usually conveyors of a text and in this collection Razzall explores how the book as a container was conceived, played with and exploited by the producers of books in the early modern period. The concept of books as cabinets or containers emerges from other articles and spans the medieval and modern periods. Ryley, Scott-Warren and Rapatzikou all discuss the ways in which the book acts as a container by having things added. They also examine how books expand beyond their physical limits. Calvert too highlights the differences between bound and unbound versions of texts and how binding sheets together affects their meaning, thus echoing Jeffrey Todd Knight who observed there is 'meaning in practices of textual assembly and organization' (2013: 11). Knight focuses on *Sammelbände* – renaissance collections of printed texts – and shows how modern library practices have enhanced,

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amended and sometimes destroyed the integrity of such early collections. Knight's discussion of these compilations is an important contribution to understanding how binding disparate materials together can create new meanings, as well as obviate others. In this volume, Drucker considers the implications of electronic files and their role as holders of data and text. Whether as a codex or a computer file, books differ from texts by virtue of being held together by some means and this process has rich possibilities for book producers who are able to exploit this facet of a book's form to create and multiply meanings and in some cases, to create witty play on the notion of the book as container.

Implicit in the concept of the book as container is a consideration of the use of the book. In this volume Ryley highlights the way in which materials were deployed to new purposes. Rapatzikou's article reveals recycling is essential to Anne Carson's *Nox* but it also highlights this relationship in other ways. Drawing on previously written letters, notes, fragments, dictionary definitions and a poem by Catullus, Carson's work challenges the traditional book format by using fold-out pages and adopting a box-like physicality. Its intertextuality creates new meanings that suggest both the personal and generic nature of memory and loss. Rapatzikou's article shows how *mise-en-page* discloses earlier textual history in ways both similar to and different from conventional book formats and e-books. Ryley and Rapatzikou both consider how use, or reuse, by the creator of a book can be central to production of a new work. The reclaiming of books is also fundamental to many book-arts projects that not only reuse books but repurpose them, often destroying their initial primary function in converting them from object to be read to art gallery exhibit. New technology brings new opportunities for book-artists as Bodman's survey demonstrates, highlighting intersections between digital and material forms and emphasizing artists' book projects that have turned digital material into physical objects rather than vice versa.

These rich interconnections suggest a positive collaboration rather than confrontation between digital and physical forms of the book.

It is not just creators and makers, but also owners and readers who use books. Scott-Warren considers owners' interactions with books and Calvert also explores the different experiences that users derive from encountering bound and unbound versions of a work. Drucker emphasizes the role of e-book and app users' responses in the development of new projects; and the experience of digital users is at the heart of Mader-Meersman's desire to create engaging apps. Although all the articles consider the consumers of material and digital books, it is less as readers and more as users: a subtle but significant shift in terminology.

This volume seeks to highlight important issues about the materiality of the book. Rather than suggest a confrontational relationship between manuscript, print and digital, the aim is to show how different forms intersect and yet remain *sui generis*. The articles are by professionals from different disciplines who bring varying approaches and perspectives to their consideration of the book from codex to computer. Book-historical methods derived from traditional literary or historiographical traditions sit alongside approaches from digital humanities and book arts. The volume is, we believe, a rich and enlightening juxtaposition that sheds light on both the common and individual elements of the material book over 700 years and across different formats. Cumulatively these articles show the rich diversity of work in a variety of book-related disciplines and suggest that each profession can gain valuable insights from inter-disciplinary thinking about how the form of the book matters and makes meanings. There is much to be done if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which books signify through their form and materiality and we are to record this history. Rather than replace the need for the history of the physical book, the e-Book creates the need for new histories which complement, supplement and intersect with the material history of the book, whatever its form.

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[1] The question of e-books replacing hard copies was insightfully discussed in a number of papers in Nunberg (1996). See especially, the contributions by Paul Druguid, Geoffrey Nunberg, and Umberto Eco (1996: 63–101, 103–38 and 195–206).