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*Online Bibliographical Tools for the Antiquarian Book Trade.
Their History, Use and Impact*

ABSTRACT

The present article examines the most important commercial database and metasearch websites used in the antiquarian book trade by dealers, customers, scholars, and institutions. Storing and listing data on millions of books (sold or still on offer), these specialized websites help create a truly international market by enabling specialists to search for titles and copies that would otherwise be untraceable and/or too far dispersed. The purpose of the present article is to describe when the most important commercial databases in the antiquarian book trade were founded, how they work, and how they have changed the market.

KEYWORDS: Antiquarian Book trade; Commercial databases; Auction sales; Metasearch; Conservation

Il presente articolo prende in esame i più importanti database e metasearch commerciali utilizzati nel mercato del libro antico da parte di commercianti, collezionisti, studiosi ed istituzioni. Conservando e mettendo a disposizione dati su milioni di libri (venduti o ancora disponibili per l'acquisto), questi siti specializzati contribuiscono a creare un vero e proprio mercato virtuale internazionale, consentendo agli specialisti di ricercare titoli ed esemplari che altrimenti sarebbero irrintracciabili ed irraggiungibili. Lo scopo del presente articolo è quello di descrivere quando sono state create le più importanti banche dati commerciali del libro antico, come funzionano e come hanno influenzato il mercato.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Commercio librario antiquario; Banche dati commerciali; Vendite all'asta; Metamotori; Conservazione

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In 2012 I paid a visit to the Bologna house of Luigi Balsamo (1926-2013), professor of bibliographical studies and director of the journal «La Bibliofilia», as he wished to sell part of his antique library, mostly composed of early printed editions of authors, especially the Jesuit Antonio Possevino, and topics to which he had devoted his career, notably the beginning of printing in Sardinia. His collection included a history of the Pomposa Abbey by Mario Salmi,¹ which he told me he had been looking for

* All websites cited in the present article were last visited on June 1st, 2022.

** I am including here a few articles specifically dealing with the antiquarian book trade and its relationship with internet that helped me frame the topics: ERIC HOLZENBERG, *Second-hand and Antiquarian Books on the Internet*, «RBM: A Journal of Rare Books Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage», II, 2001, 1, pp. 35-44; JANE A. WHEWELL-VANGELIS SOUITARIS, *The Impact of Internet Trading on the UK Antiquarian and Second-hand Bookselling Industry*, «Internet Research», XI, 2001, 4, pp. 296-309; BJÖRN FRANK-GUNTRAM HEPPELLE, *The Internet's Impact on the Market for Antiquarian Books: Some Unexpected Empirical Results*, in *Economics and the Internet II. Proceedings from the 4th Berlin Internet Economics Workshop*, herausgegeben von Thorsten Wichmann, Norderstedt 2002, pp. 59-63, available also as <<http://www.berlecon.de/services/en/iew4/papers/paper21.pdf>>; RAJENDRA KUMBHAR, *Websites of Antiquarian Books*, «DESIDOC», XXX, 2010, 4, pp. 58-64;

many years and had intended to give as a gift to his friend and colleague Giuseppe Billanovich (1913-2000). The search for that book, issued in 500 copies (a significant number for a book printed only 60 years earlier), had taken so long that by the time Balsamo was able to get his hands on a copy, Billanovich had passed away. When I returned to my bookshop after the visit, I began to catalog and price Salmi's book. I searched the title on the metasearch Vialibri² and to my astonishment immediately found 5 copies, all available for purchase with a simple click and ranging from 300 to 600 euros in price.

From the late 1990s, when Balsamo was looking for that title, to 2012, when I met him, so in just slightly more than a decade, the internet had revolutionized the trade of antiquarian books and the very meaning of collecting; not only had institutional libraries started putting their catalogues online and making available digitized copies from their collections, but also antiquarian booksellers from all over the world and, to a minor extent, private customers had begun uploading online, on a massive scale, millions of books, many of them previously considered extremely rare and almost unobtainable, and now buyable with just one click and shippable to every corner of the world. If a large part of the pleasure and meaning of collecting in a certain field is the discovery of items that slowly, over time, gather to form a new collection, what remains of that pleasure if 80% of that would-be collection can be found in one hour sitting at your desk and is immediately available for purchase? This has completely changed the psychological and cultural aspects that historically drove people towards collecting.

As a matter of fact, over the last two decades, there has been a boom in online commercial databases and metasearch websites that have revolutionized the trade both from the seller's and buyer's side.

The aforementioned Vialibri platform, founded in 2006, is by far the world's largest search engine for old, rare and second-hand books. However, it was not the first of its kind, as others previously had already existed, like AddALL,³ another metasearch that is still in use but was over the years overtaken by Vialibri in the same dramatic way as Yahoo was replaced by Google. Vialibri searches for books that are listed for sale on 147 different databases, 33 of which are multi-dealer websites world-wide,

KENNETH KARMIOLE, *Collecting the Physical Book in the Digital Age*, «Journal of the Book Club of Washington», XI, 2011, 2, retrieved 28 April 2013.

¹ MARIO SALMI, *L'Abbazia di Pomposa*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1936.

² Vialibri, <<https://www.vialibri.net/>>.

³ Addall Book Search and Price Comparison, <<https://www.addall.com/>>.

among them AbeBooks,⁴ Amazon, Biblio,⁵ eBay, ABAA,⁶ ZVAB,⁷ Maremagnum,⁸ Alibris,⁹ Antiqbook,¹⁰ Booklooker,¹¹ Bokbörsen,¹² Buchfreund,¹³ Antiquariat,¹⁴ Livre-rare-book,¹⁵ PBFA,¹⁶ NVvA,¹⁷ Antikvariat,¹⁸ Books and Collectibles,¹⁹ Bookzangle,²⁰ ChrisLandsSearch,²¹ etc. The remaining 114 databases are the stock of single independent booksellers.

The main purpose of Vialibri, according to its founder and managing director Jim Hinck, a former antiquarian bookseller for 40 years, is that of facilitating the search of antiquarian books online and comparing prices if more copies of the same title are available at that particular moment:

The main thing I wanted was to create a website that would allow you to search with one click all the old and rare books for sale anywhere on the internet. I also wanted it to be something that could focus, in particular, on early and rare books. There were already a couple of comparison-shopping sites, but these were mostly designed and used for finding the cheapest copies of specific used books. They leaned heavily on ISBN numbers, which meant that they ignored the special needs of collectors and other bibliophiles who, of course, were mostly interested in books from before 1970. In my view the most important thing that was lacking was a way to filter and sort books by publication date. It seemed to me to be the one essential tool for book hunting and we included it in our very first release. But there were other goals, all of them focused on things that would help collectors find books. Another thing I wanted to have, from the beginning, was a tool that would do daily searches for new listings of all the books that are on my permanent want list. It took a long while to build it and many of our regular users still do not know it exists, but many of those who do consider it our most valuable feature and are even willing to pay for a subscription that gives them an enhanced version of this tool.²²

⁴AbeBooks, <<https://www.abebooks.com/>>.

⁵Biblio.com, <<https://www.biblio.com/>>.

⁶ABAA-Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, <<https://www.abaa.org/>>.

⁷ZVAB-Zentrales Verzeichnis Antiquarischer Bücher, <<https://www.zvab.com/>>.

⁸Maremagnum, <<https://www.maremagnum.com/>>.

⁹Alibris, <<https://www.alibris.com/>>.

¹⁰Antiqbook, <<https://www.antiqbook.com/>>.

¹¹Booklooker, <<https://www.booklooker.de/>>.

¹²Bokbörsen, <<https://www.bokborsen.se/>>.

¹³Buchfreund, <<https://www.buchfreund.de/de/>>.

¹⁴Antiquariat, <<https://www.antiquariat.de/>>.

¹⁵LRB-Livre rare book, <<https://www.livre-rare-book.com/>>.

¹⁶Provincial Booksellers Fairs Association, <<https://www.pbfa.org/>>.

¹⁷Nederlandsche Vereeniging van Antiquaren, <<https://nvva.nl/>>.

¹⁸Antikvariat, <<https://www.antikvariat.net/sv/?currency=SEK>>.

¹⁹Books and Collectibles, <<https://booksandcollectibles.com.au>>.

²⁰Bookzangle <<https://bookzangle.com/>>.

²¹ChrisLandsSearch, <<https://www.chrislandssearch.com/>>.

²²Private email sent to me by Jim Hinck on 02.17.2022.

As of today, Vialibri estimates that it contains between 250 and 300 million books, including items that have already been sold. A precise figure is impossible to cite as many large sites like Amazon, Abebooks or ZVAB do not want to share information on the number of books they have on display in their platforms. Most of those books are, though, inexpensive, second-hand books that will never show up in searches conducted by Vialibri's users who are more interested in older books. According to Hinck, it has been roughly calculated that 9% of the books that appear in Vialibri's search results are over 100 years old, but that could be more a reflection of the tastes and interests of Vialibri's users rather than the actual percentage of all the books available for sale anywhere online.

The implications for booksellers, librarians, scholars and even the specialized law enforcement units of this gigantic storage of information on books and works on paper can be hardly underestimated. In fact, as for the sold items, Vialibri keeps records, including descriptions, of all the books that appear in the search results, with the plan of saving that data indefinitely. Unfortunately, now, the data is not accessible to users, but according to Jim Hinck it will be in the future.

Let's move now to describe the most significant players in the online antiquarian book trade. They are of two kinds. First are the databases that list and make searchable the books of all the individual professional booksellers (and in some cases also private sellers) who want to have their books displayed on them and are willing to pay a monthly fee and a commission on each sale to be allowed to participate. The most important of these are AbeBooks, Amazon, Biblio, eBay, ABAA, ZVAB, Maremagnum, Alibris, Antiqbook, and for the French-speaking world Livre-rare-book and Bibliore.²³ These are the databases metasearch sites like Vialibri draw their records from.

The other kind of online commercial databases are the auction house sale result platforms, basically metasearch websites that keep records of most of the sales from most of the major auction houses from all over Western Europe and North America and are constantly updated. Unlike the players in the previous category, to access the results of these second type of databases a subscription fee is required, and therefore their data is not openly available to everyone. Unfortunately, only very few of these sites have replied to my questions and were willing to share their data. Therefore in most cases I have had to rely on the scarce information available online (some free statistics are available at the end).

Luckily, one of the most important of these sites, Abebooks, is one of the very few which decided to share some data. Founded in British Columbia, Canada by the owners of a used bookshop to help customers find a book or specific edition of a book they needed,

²³ Bibliore, <<https://www.bibliore.com/>>.

AbeBooks.com went live in the summer of 1996 with books from three local sellers. Used and rare booksellers were recruited via visits to book fairs in the US and Canada. Essentially, the website helped customers find books that had become hard to find such as out-of-print titles, first editions or signed copies, books about specialist subjects, or antiquarian books dating back to the early days of printing or earlier. For sellers, AbeBooks provided orders from customers around the world with their books listed for sale 24 hours a day every day. In short, AbeBooks connected buyers with sellers. It still does today. The company expanded through organic growth and acquisition. In 2001, AbeBooks acquired Germany's JustBooks – another online book marketplace. This allowed AbeBooks to launch websites in Germany, France and the UK. In 2004, AbeBooks acquired the Spanish marketplace IberLibro, which became its Spanish website. A website for Italy was built and launched in 2008. In 2011, ZVAB.com was acquired to give AbeBooks a second website in Germany. AbeBooks expanded its selection by adding sellers who offered new books and university textbooks. You will also find art such as prints, maps, photographs, ephemera and other paper-based collectibles.

In 2008, AbeBooks was acquired by Amazon and it now operates as an independent subsidiary. We have customers in almost every country of the world and sellers in more than 50 countries. AbeBooks' revenue comes from a monthly subscription fee for sellers and commission charged on sales.

Today, AbeBooks' purpose remains the same as in 1996 - we want to help people find and buy the books they love. We are still a pure online marketplace, which means we hold no inventory ourselves but rely entirely on books provided by third-party sellers. These sellers cover a wide spectrum including traditional used bookshops, high-end antiquarian dealers, high volume used sellers operating from warehouses, and home-based sellers.

Booksellers from multiple antiquarian bookselling associations use AbeBooks including the Italian organization, Associazione Librai Antiquari d'Italia²⁴ [whose members are affiliates of ILAB, the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers²⁵].

We do not disclose exactly how many books are listed on for sale on our site. The number changes constantly. In terms of antiquarian books, we have hundreds of thousands of items published before 1900 with new listings being added every day. The oldest book listed for sale today²⁶ on AbeBooks may be an 11th-century manuscript.²⁷

The search function on AbeBooks is important. The advanced search includes options such as data range and publisher field, which allows customers to search for specific books. If a customer wishes to see 12th century manuscripts or books from a 19th-century publisher, they can. Customers can also set Search Preferences, which means they can search for only certain product types, or just used items, or perhaps books from sellers from a particular region.

We regularly publish pages listing most expensive sales. In 2021, our most expensive sale was a rare illustrated book about Montana, which sold for US\$

²⁴ <<https://www.abebooks.com/books/rarebooks/seller-associations>>.

²⁵ ILAB- International League of Antiquarian Booksellers, <ilab.org>.

²⁶ 01.25.2022.

²⁷ <www.abebooks.com/Liturgical-Rites-Prayers-used-Bishop-Latin/31003183771/bd>.

37,500.²⁸ AbeBooks' most expensive sale of all time²⁹ was an illustrated book about birds published in Venice in 1765, which sold for UD\$ 191,000.³⁰

It has been estimated that roughly 50%-60% of the dealers appearing on one large site like Abebooks also appear on at least one other platform, making it even more difficult to calculate the exact number of antiquarian books actually offered online. So, the total number of books that are still available and have been available online over the last 20 years cannot be calculated by simply summing up the number of records of every single database, were these numbers even readily made known.

One of the very few other databases willing to share information was Maremagnum, by far the most important Italian commercial book database. The very ambitious purpose of its founder, the antiquarian bookseller Sergio Malavasi, was to make available online all books published from any time and any country. According to Malavasi, he was moved by the same ideal that more than 300 years before had pushed the bibliophile Francesco Marucelli (1625-1703) to create the *Mare Magnum Omnium Materiarum*, a universal bibliography, arranged by subject in 111 volumes in folio, that in the end was never published.

Unlike Marucelli's project, Maremagnum.com went online in 1995 and in the following years only continued to grow in importance. Unlike some of its competitors, Maremagnum only accepts catalogs of professional bookshops associated with the international and Italian league of antiquarian bookdealers, as they provide a guarantee of quality and professionalism. In 2004 Malavasi launched Marelibrorum.com, the historical archive of bibliographic records that over the years have been displayed on the Maremagnum website (Marelibrorum today counts almost 60 million books), and in 2007 he created the metasearch engine Marelibri.com.

Today Maremagnum lists the books of more than 600 antiquarian bookshops and 100 publishers, offering a total of about 13 million titles (books, prints, postcards, periodicals, photographs, autographs, posters, etc.). The website attracts 10,000 daily visitors and the newsletter reaches about 75,000 subscribers, with an average of 300 orders per day.³¹

As for the second kind of online commercial databases, those of the auction houses, they can be divided between those which draw their records from a specific linguistic area and those which try to be as international as possible. In this second group, the main platforms that

²⁸ <<https://www.abebooks.com/books/most-expensive-sales-2021>>.

²⁹ <<https://www.abebooks.com/books/most-expensive-sales/ever.shtml>>.

³⁰ Private email sent to me by Richard Davies, Abebooks public relations manager, on 01.25.2022.

³¹ All the information on Maremagnum was given to me by Sergio Malavasi via email on 03.08.2022.

focus on international sales are Rare Book Hub,³² American Book Prices Current,³³ Invaluable,³⁴ and LiveAuctioneers.³⁵ In the first category you have JAP-Online³⁶ (Jahrbuch der Auktionspreise für Bücher, Handschriften und Autographen) for Germany, and Drouot³⁷ and Interencheres³⁸ for France. A further distinction can be drawn between the sites that are specialized only in books and works on paper like Rare Book Hub, American Book Prices Current and JAP-Online, and those, like Invaluable, LiveAuctioneers, Drouot and Interencheres, which include books and related material as one of the many collectible categories they have on offer.

Rare Book Hub Transaction History searches a database of 11,455,654 records pertaining to books and related material. The vast majority are priced records from auction houses, though some classic bookseller catalogues are included. New records are added almost daily. American Book Prices Current is a record of books, manuscripts, autographs, maps, and broadsides sold at auction.

The reference metasearch engine for the German speaking auction houses is JAP. Its database collects sale results from all major auction houses in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland dating back to 1990, and contains more than 910,000 auctioned books.

Interencheres, Drouot, Invaluable and LiveAuctioneers are more generalist platforms which also include books and works on paper but are essentially marketplaces for fine art, antiques and collectibles in general.

One important feature of auction house sale databases is that by reporting “real” results, i.e. prices actually fetched by items sold at auction, and not prices “asked” by dealers, they provide a standard reference tool for dealers, appraisers, scholars, and tax authorities.

A few remarks can be made in conclusion. The situation has dramatically changed compared to 20 years ago when the first surveys and studies of the internet’s impact on the antiquarian book trade started to appear, while many of the same drawbacks and advantages persist today.

There has certainly been an enormous increase in the online availability of both books and services compared to the beginning of the century. Some websites that were pioneers in the field don’t exist anymore or have merged with other websites to form new platforms. Others, like Bookfinder,³⁹ a leading platform in the late 1990s, have subsequently turned their attention more towards text- and second-hand books.

³² Rare Book Hub, <<https://rarebookhub.com/>>.

³³ American Book Prices Current, <<https://bookpricescurrent.com/>>.

³⁴ Invaluable, <<https://www.invaluable.com/>>.

³⁵ LiveAuctioneers, <<https://www.liveauctioneers.com/>>.

³⁶ JAP-Online, <<https://bookauctionrecords.org/>>.

³⁷ Drouot, <<https://drouot.com/>>.

³⁸ Interencheres, <<https://www.interencheres.com/>>.

³⁹ Bookfinder, <<https://www.bookfinder.com/>>.

For booksellers the benefits of having their books displayed online, today just as 20 years ago, still outweigh the drawbacks, as the internet allows for the possibility of reaching an almost infinite audience, and services aimed at improving efficiency are continuously being improved. But the costs (both financial and professional) have also significantly risen. If in the pre-internet era one of the major expenditures for an antiquarian book dealer was the printing and shipping of a catalogue (something that today has become a far less regular occurrence, reserved, say, for the promotion of a large collection whose content is considered worth publishing; only a handful of booksellers continue to publish substantial catalogues on a regular basis), now it is the fixed fees and commission percentages of online sales that mostly influence the pricing policies of dealers. Further, the possibility of instantly comparing prices across the internet has meant that prices overall have gone down, significantly reducing the value of the dealers' inventories.

Yet the most striking negative development over the last 20 years, in terms of the online marketing of antiquarian books, concerns the progressive loss of independence and freedom of booksellers, to the advantage of online platforms. With the constant threat of receiving negative feedback and being downgraded by the system, dealers are obliged to offer services or promise high levels of efficiency that can often be too difficult to maintain for small businesses generally made up of one or two persons, like answering a client's question or shipping a sold item within a few days. Moreover, because descriptions and prices are so easily accessible and remain available online, potentially forever, to be used and compared by anyone, dealers have lost the intellectual property of their descriptions and bibliographical research; what was once the exclusive domain of specialists, who were the sole repositories of certain information, has now apparently become common knowledge available to all, though not always easy to interpret without a specific preparation and therefore often misleading. Nevertheless, the benefits of the online market for the antiquarian book trade can hardly be underestimated.

In contrast to the clientele for physical bookstores, which has suffered a setback due to the pandemic, the online book market has continued to grow in the last two years and there is evidence that it will continue to do so as an increasing number of customers grow more confident at buying even very expensive books from these online platforms, showing an increasing level of trust in their reliability, a trust that is less evident for the websites of individual booksellers. This is probably due to the major sense of protection that customers perceive on the big platforms both in terms of payment safety and restitution policy. Even though this is certainly an advantage for many dealers, many of them regret about not being able to deal directly with the final customer, although a few platforms do allow for this.

It is quite clear that the online trade is experiencing the same trend as that experienced by the physical bookshop, with major chains and big stores taking over and/or englobing smaller businesses as they are much more visible and are perceived as more secure. This is having a major impact on the way booksellers are cataloguing their material, focusing more on the visual part of descriptions rather than on the bibliographic and research aspects (which means more high-definition pictures and shorter descriptions that can quickly capture the attention of an easily distracted customer), but also on the way collectors decide what to buy. With stable relationships between booksellers and collectors becoming rarer and rarer and opportunities for booksellers to advise customers likewise dwindling, online sales tend to appear more and more random, no longer guided by a defined collecting plan. While this might be advantageous to certain purchasers, it also has significant drawbacks for serious long-term collectors, especially for those just embarking on their collecting journey, an issue with clear consequences within the book world, which can be difficult for newcomers to “enter” and navigate without the sort of guidance offered by experienced and specialized dealers.

Bookfairs remain a major forum for interactions between dealers and collectors, be they private or institutional, but due to the pandemic these have largely moved online as well, and travel restrictions have severely affected the presence of an audience during the few in-person fairs that have taken place over the last two years. This is presumably temporary, but it is foreseeable that many fairs will decide to keep both options open, i.e. by offering, at different prices, and for many years to come, the possibility of exhibiting in-person or just virtually.

Dealers and collectors will have to learn to adjust in a rapidly-changing rare book world more and more influenced by technology. As physical books will continue to be appreciated and collected in different forms for a very long time, book collecting will simply take new paths that will surely have an impact on what will be preserved and what will be dispersed, as it has always been the case.

Denomination	Website ⁴⁰	Indexed pages	Global Rank ⁴¹	Users in the last 30 days	CAt Rank ⁴²
JAP-Online	www.bookauctionrecords.org	8	--	--	--
American Book Prices Current	www.bookpricescurrent.com	233	--	--	--
Rare Book Hub	www.rarebookhub.com	26000	523821	50800	2086
Bibliorare	www.bibliorare.com	39200	--	--	--
Vialibri	www.vialibri.net	119000	248324	140700	509
BookFinder	www.bookfinder.com	621000	48652	985100	34
Alibris	www.alibris.com	1200000	31639	1500000	
Antiqbook	www.antiqbook.com	1320000	331467	128200	390
AbeBooks IT	www.abebooks.it	2070000	153770	323400	36
Maremagnum	www.maremagnum.com	2390000	78885	604600	14
Biblio	www.biblio.com	2770000	29374	2000000	511
LiveAuctioneers	www.liveauctioneers.com	3920000	9200	4600000	5
IberLibro	www.iberlibro.com	4740000	28332	1900000	14
Invaluable	www.invaluable.com	4820000	12904	4100000	10
ZVAB	www.zvab.com	5650000	35033	150000	39
AbeBooks COM	www.abebooks.com	6380000	4657	9900000	14
AbeBooks DE	abebooks.de	2680000	81558	533900	78



⁴⁰ These statistics were taken on March 16th, 2002.

⁴¹ Traffic rank of site, compared to all other sites in the world.

⁴² Traffic rank of the site compared to all other sites in its main category in the top country.