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**A database, nationalist scholarship, and materialist epistemology in Netherlandish philology:  
The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta from paper to OPAC, 1895-1995**

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# The Making of the Humanities

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### 9.3 A Database, Nationalist Scholarship, and Materialist Epistemology in Netherlandish Philology

#### *The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta from Paper to OPAC, 1895-1995*

JAN ROCK<sup>1</sup>

The history of digital humanities may seem relatively short. The study of culture, history and humanity appears to have been affected by digital culture and networked computers for only about two decades. That is why usually not the past, but the future of digital humanities is discussed, conversation being flavored with possibilities and promises: greater convenience for scholarly labor, and increased speed in the consultation of data, the massive accessibility of which would enable the humanities to deal with their scientific arrears.

Yet already in 1902, similar ideas incited the Belgian philologist Willem De Vreese to address the Royal Flemish Academy of Language and Literature in Ghent. He questioned the competence of most vernacular philologists in reading old types and hands. 'Of course I do not intend to maintain,' he said to his fellow members,

that there would be no students of Dutch who can read Middle Dutch manuscripts. Enough of them are seasoned, as we all know. But their knowledge is a personal matter, that stands or falls with them, that perishes along with them, so that the prerequisite of an established science lacks, namely the handing down of a certain amount of knowledge to a next generation, for them to build on it.<sup>2</sup>

De Vreese formulated an ambition equally simple as naïve: he wanted to transform the competence of reading old Netherlandish texts into proper scholarship, an ambition which could only be realized by an intergenerational tradition of knowledge. In order to secure such a tradition, he proposed a documentary instrument: a *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*.<sup>3</sup> He conceived it as a card file

system containing descriptions of all medieval manuscripts in Netherlandish, to be collected and indexed by himself (and his family, as became clear later on). De Vreese expected his data collection to be particularly useful for training reading skills with original excerpts, but also for writing a history of medieval scribal culture in the Low Countries. In short, just like the most renowned German historians, De Vreese was convinced that having the *Quellen* at hand in the personal, even intimate setting of a seminar would improve objectivity in philological studies.<sup>4</sup> He acknowledged the advantages of a data collection, both practical and scientific, as much as other scholars of his time<sup>5</sup> – as much as most scholars nowadays when they speak of digital data collections.

The discursive parallel between today's expectations for digital humanities and De Vreese's ideals of improved apprenticeship and assured objectivity is more than just the fiddling of some historian. There is more to say in favor of the *Bibliotheca* as a single historical case study. In his 1902 address, De Vreese referred to paleographic collections and manuals from abroad, to make clear what Netherlandish philology was missing. He mentioned publications from the 1870s onwards: those by Léopold Delisle and the *École des Chartes*, the *Facsimiles* by the Palaeographical Society (1873-1883), a *Bilderatlas* (1887) by Gustav Könnecke and *Schrifttafeln* (1874-1878) by Wilhelm Arndt, and Magda Enneccerus's glittering *Die ältesten deutschen Sprach-Denkmäler in Lichtdrucken herausgegeben* (1897). His own discipline on the contrary was served by only one 'small work' (*werkje*), dating back to 1818, and by scattered facsimiles in scholarly text editions, which were mostly 'unserviceable, because they are processed independently neither from the draughtsman's greater or lesser degree of skilfulness and from his imagination, nor from the publisher's intended purpose.'<sup>6</sup> With this enumeration, De Vreese not only pointed at a documentary gap in Netherlandish philology, he also implicitly stressed the merits of his planned *Bibliotheca*. For unlike the models from abroad, his own paleographical study instrument would not be a book, but, as a modular collection accessible through indexes, an innovation in international paleography.

Later on, the *Bibliotheca's* history appeared as no less pioneering: the data collection was digitized as early as the beginning of the 1990s and it was made accessible through a computer network in 1995. So this case began its public life in 1902 and reaches as far as the breakthrough year of multimedia in personal computing and of the Internet. That is why the last three paragraphs of this article consist of a short history of the *Bibliotheca*. It starts with De Vreese's initial collecting activity against the backdrop of major questions in the history of Netherlandish philology; it passes on to his death in 1938, after which the *Bibliotheca* was transferred to Leiden University Library and became publicly accessible; and finally, the *Bibliotheca's* digitization serves as the closing episode.

The case of the *Bibliotheca* thus proves to be more than merely a discursive parallel; it is relevant for a historical view on digital humanities because of its innovative forms. Its modular and searchable data organization in fact makes it a database, and as such an early manifestation of what would become, according to new media scholar Lev Manovich, the 'symbolic form' of computer age information culture in the late twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> That is why in the first paragraph the *Bibliotheca*, both in its paper and its numerical versions, is interpreted as a database according to the characteristics which Manovich considers distinctive for 'new media' (in *The Language of New Media* [2001], only recently confirmed as one of the 'very few books on new media worth reading').<sup>8</sup> This interpretation will provide the sightlines for the following historical paragraphs. It foregrounds the public 'narratives of value'<sup>9</sup> which De Vreese and the successive keepers of his *Bibliotheca* attributed to the collection, throughout different periods and different contexts of information culture, scholarly organization and politics. By doing so, this article illustrates that phenomena similar to new forms in digital humanities can be traced back to even before 1995, and that digital humanities can be studied from a historical perspective, by taking into account continuities as much as discontinuities and promises for the future.

### A paper database between new and old media

Willem De Vreese's *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* was innovative in three ways which Manovich in *The Language of New Media* calls distinctive for 'new media': its discrete representation of data, its multimedial character, and its random accessibility through search indexes. In this paragraph some of Manovich's insights in the functioning of 'new media' are applied to the *Bibliotheca*, in order to bring some new medial aspects of its history to the surface.

In fact, the *Bibliotheca* could have served Manovich well as an example in his study, where he chose to discuss cinema as the prehistory of 'new media'. Not only does cinema more or less fit the *Bibliotheca* chronologically, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, with the 1910s as a 'classical' decade which set its language and forms for a century to come.<sup>10</sup> The *Bibliotheca*, as a scholarship-focused piece of information technology, also fits Manovich's assertion that new media need not be studied as part of the fields of technology or economy, but as part of culture and the humanities. He describes cultural practices and patterns in new media in their relation to other manifestations of a broader 'information culture'.<sup>11</sup> He even explicitly parallels his record of the transformation of old media into new ones with Thomas Kuhn's study of scientific paradigms.<sup>12</sup> The case of the *Bibliotheca* can be studied as a cultural history of informa-

tion too, as a history not only of local productions of knowledge or as 'ways of knowing' (Pickstone), but also as a cultural history of information storage and communication.

Such a cultural-historical study of the *Bibliotheca* will also confirm Manovich's blurry distinction between 'modern media' and 'new media'.<sup>13</sup> Manovich found modern cinema to be an early form of new media, because some of its features became associated with computerized culture forms later on.<sup>14</sup> Cinematic technology translates the continuities of everyday experience into a sequence of discrete elements, i.e., each frame of the film. Cinema also merged individual media into one multimedial object – in this respect being as 'new' as medieval illuminated manuscripts – while nineteenth-century cinematic machines already provided access to the discrete and multimedial representation of reality in nonlinear ways, thus making randomized access possible. All three features – discrete representation, multimedia, and random access – apply to the *Bibliotheca* on paper, too: it reduced the continuum of culture and reality to discrete elements, not only inevitable linguistic ones such as sentences, words and sounds, but also elements from the 'bibliographic code' of medieval texts<sup>15</sup> – their authors, copyists, illuminations, bindings, and depositories. These bindings appeared in the collection in pictorial form as well: the *Bibliotheca* contained a collection of *facsimiles*, samples of copyists' hands, photographs and rubbings of bindings. All these descriptions were searchable through different indexes on authors, titles, keywords, copyists, *incipits*, owners, themes, and motives of the stamps on the bindings. It is clear that the card files of the *Bibliotheca* share their randomly accessible, multimedial, and discrete characteristics with the 'new' forms of cinema and computers, and evidently more so when the *Bibliotheca* was digitized in the early 1990s. Its data were no longer only discrete, but now also numerically represented, and hence suitable for automated handling. In short, a philological database can be considered as a partial form of new media, similar to Manovich's interpretation of cinema.

How can such an interpretation of an old paper database provide us with a meaningful account of its history? First, Manovich's opposition between the database and the narrative as cultural forms, in computerized culture as much as in the cases of cinema, the novel, and language in general, can be helpful.<sup>16</sup> Since the *Bibliotheca* was conceived as a collection of paper card files and indexes and later on was turned into a 'new' database with logarithmic retrieval options, it had no narrative form apart from the search routes of librarians and individual philologists. Yet, its conception and its later use were closely related to powerful narratives, legitimizing the data project in different scholarly and political ways. Secondly, Manovich describes (following Benjamin and Virilio) the ongoing replacement of physical objects with interchangeable and mobile signs.<sup>17</sup> This process is accompanied by efforts to create a reality effect, using virtual technologies

in such a way that they become universal conventions, obscuring the process of replacement itself. Again, this process is manifest in the case of new media, but no less in the case of the *Bibliotheca*. De Vreese's scholarly teaching and gathering of objective evidence aimed exactly at such a replacement: in order to write a history of Netherlandish paleography, he wanted to have all paleographical data collected in one room. He himself would make several philological journeys throughout Europe during his lifetime, but only in order to confine his subsequent efforts to a simple consultation of the *Bibliotheca*. However, the *Nachleben* of his *Bibliotheca* proves that De Vreese's ambition of replacing visits to libraries and archives with his own descriptions had an epistemological sting to it. Along with the *Bibliotheca*'s oppositional place between various narratives, this sting will prove to be a key issue in the history of the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*.

### The database in national thought and philological epistemology (1895-1938)

The following short history of the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* is based on existing historical accounts, most of which were published by its keepers much later, all of them specialists in bibliography, codicology and paleography and as such the database's intended users. Invariably, they identify the *Bibliotheca* as a useful instrument in philological study and as the brainchild of De Vreese. They praise its author in the most romantic ways: the database was his 'life's work' (*levenswerk*), expressing his 'grandmastership' (*grootmeesterschap*),<sup>18</sup> even proving the creator to be 'a man of genius' (*een geniaal mensch*).<sup>19</sup> The *Bibliotheca* itself has been called 'a unique collection of material' (*een unieke materiaalverzameling*), 'a true gold mine' (*een ware goudmijn*),<sup>20</sup> the merits of which become apparent when one takes into account the historical context: it was 'a documentation system which was relatively advanced in scope considering the period in which it was developed'.<sup>21</sup> Jos Biemans, curator of Western manuscripts at Leiden University Library in 1987, stressed its importance for future scholarly developments: he concluded that De Vreese 'in fact has [...] provided the study of Middle Dutch codicology with an entire new, modern foundation'.<sup>22</sup> In short, historical accounts of the *Bibliotheca* have hitherto searched for its historical significance in De Vreese's almost prophetic views on the future of academic disciplines.

It is, of course, a myth that De Vreese was able to foresee later developments in his discipline and in information culture; he only dealt with scholarly concerns of his own time and of previous decades. The historical significance of the *Bibliotheca* indeed has to be looked for in the long-term history of vernacular philology in the Low Countries. In his 1902 address to the Flemish Academy, De Vreese



made clear that his database had to attain some of the goals that Netherlandish philology had been pursuing for decades, even centuries. He too wanted philological scholarship to have societal effects within a frame of national thought, and his database too had to meet the materialist epistemological requirements which had been extant in Netherlandish vernacular philology since the late sixteenth century.

It is particularly meaningful that De Vreese presented his plans at the Royal Flemish Academy of Language and Literature in Ghent. He had participated in its establishment a few years earlier, and would later on become its director. In his view – which he expressed more than once – the Academy not only had to facilitate the work of Netherlandish philology, but also improve the status of the Dutch language, literature and culture within the Belgian state.<sup>23</sup> De Vreese indeed employed nationalistic frames to legitimize his own and his fellow members' study of old Netherlandish language and literature: the Academy had to be at the intersection of scholarly and social advancement of the Dutch language and its users. At the same time his contribution to the Academy attested his conviction that scholarship needed an infrastructure similar to that of learned societies. This ideal of nationalistic scholarship in learned societies was not new at all and not restricted to the Netherlands. The study of national literatures had always been practiced out of concern for the supposed singularity of local culture and by means of scholarly meetings and correspondence, public competitions and in closed libraries.<sup>24</sup> That was – obviously – true for the nineteenth century, with well-known national philologists like Jan Frans Willems in Belgium and Willem Jonckbloet in the Netherlands, but also in the preceding centuries, as demonstrated by the Society of Dutch Literature in Leiden, established in 1766, and the Royal Academy in Brussels, established in 1772.<sup>25</sup> Before these, in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, individual scholars had defended the vernacular language and literature along with the Dutch Republic. One can think of Balthasar Huydecoper and Jan Wagenaar, but also of Hugo Grotius, and Petrus Scriverius and Janus Dousa at Leiden University. From this long-term perspective, De Vreese and his plans appear as the Belgian variant of a much older alliance of philological vernacular scholarship and national ambitions. Considering his plans to use the *Bibliotheca* for writing a history of scribal culture in the Low Countries, it becomes clear that the database not only contributed to an ideal scholarly training, but also had to support a nationalist narrative of history.

The persistent influence of earlier scholarly contexts is also clear in De Vreese's concerns about the epistemological looseness of his discipline. In fact, such concerns were the *raison d'être* of his *Bibliotheca*. Its 'desirability, yes the urgent necessity' emerged in De Vreese's opinion from the lack of a trustworthy factual basis.

Literary histories had been written, according to him, on the arbitrary base of literary value. A Middle Dutch dictionary was being compiled, based on questionable text editions – although ‘it is time for us, I believe,’ as he spoke to the Academy,

to bring across to ourselves that the vast majority of our text editions is no longer of use, because they do not give us what is in the manuscripts. So-called critical editions, in which the so-called grammatical errors made by copyists are said to have been corrected, present the image of an imaginary language, just like those in which the author’s original text is said to have been determined, often do not present more than an imaginary text. All of that is nothing but aesthetic dilettantism, totally unsuitable for linguistic research.<sup>26</sup>

Serious scholarship distinguished itself from ‘aesthetic dilettantism’ in its attachment to the original manuscript, which guaranteed the original form of literary works and old words. In contrast, the philological instruments of his own time, mostly in book form, did not even meet the minimal requirements of scholarship, because the data they provided did not correspond with the sources.

Such epistemological complaints were old. Original manuscripts, with material evidence of their age, had been the sole epistemological guarantee in Netherlandish philology for decades. This had been demonstrated by some cases of forged medieval texts, in particular the supposedly thirteenth-century chronicle of Count Dirk of Holland by Klaas Kolijn, which had deceived scholars during most of the eighteenth century and which was still mentioned in philological debates during the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Only one generation before De Vreese, the supposedly early medieval Frisian chronicle *Oera Linda* had made its appearance in the circles of Eelco Verwijs, one of his teachers in lexicography.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Kolijn, the absence of an old manuscript meant the disclosure of the text as a forgery; in the case of *Oera Linda* the opposite was true: the fact that the old text showed up on parchment was puzzling. Both cases indicate how even before De Vreese’s complaints, philological knowledge could rely only on an accessible old manuscript. This simple epistemological demand was the philological equivalent of the material proof that antiquarians had been mobilizing all over Europe against historical Pyrrhonism from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>29</sup> That is why in the early nineteenth century all of the scholarly societies started setting up collections of medieval manuscripts, and libraries with trustworthy, material evidence readily accessible to their members. That is also why scholarly text editions were made: they supposedly gave access to old manuscripts through print. Again, De Vreese’s plan for the *Bibliotheca*, based on epistemological distrust, appears as

an equivalent of earlier concerns about reliable access to old texts. In short, the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* was a new stick to chase a quarreling twin from the philologist's study, the twin of accessibility and reliability of old textual material that would not leave.<sup>30</sup>

However, there *was* something new. De Vreese's *Bibliotheca* was not a collection of physical manuscripts themselves, like in the learned societies' libraries, nor of representations of only textual elements, like in previous scholarly editions. The *Bibliotheca* contained descriptions and *facsimiles*, and no material or textual objects, but mere data on such objects. It is in this way that the *Bibliotheca* indeed was a 'modern' database in Manovich's terms: it replaced objects with signs. The epistemological impact of this process did not remain unnoticed, since one of the later keepers of the *Bibliotheca* remembered that during De Vreese's life his "See my *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*" had the effect of a pronouncement.<sup>31</sup> Did the appearance of a philological database without physical links to material evidence, indeed mean an epistemological shift away from the centuries-old materialistic epistemology, toward one in which virtual collections could serve as a base for knowledge as reliable as the original material? As every shift in history, this one too was not linear and uncontested, as the vicissitudes of the *Bibliotheca* after De Vreese illustrate.

### The database in Leiden, a scholarly metropolis (1939)

In 1939, the *Bibliotheca* was sold by De Vreese's widow to the state of the Netherlands, which deposited it at the University Library in Leiden, to be taken care of by the curator of manuscripts and his assistants. The first one was Gerard Isaïc Lieftinck, appointed curator shortly after the acquisition of the *Bibliotheca*. Lieftinck recognized its value and shared some ideals with De Vreese, although he had seen that during the last years of his life De Vreese 'actually has become a solitary man, as if entrenched in his fort, his vast arsenal of data, from which he could always draw and from which he derived his great authority'.<sup>32</sup> After his death, the *Bibliotheca* revealed its 'weak side' (*zwakke zijde*).<sup>33</sup> Browsing the card files, Lieftinck discovered that some of the descriptions were not written by De Vreese himself. 'There are also many records, especially tables of contents, which are not from De Vreese's own hand, maybe from students or from officials at the libraries in question'. It gave reason for concern: 'Because one does not know who drew them up and since some of them were corrected in later times by De Vreese himself, there is every reason not to trust these data too much'.<sup>34</sup> Lieftinck, like other philologists for centuries, did not think the evident benefits of easily accessible philological data to outweigh their reliability.

Lieftinck started to select and correct descriptions in the *Bibliotheca* and he substantially enlarged its collections of photographs and copies. These were no minor interventions, but – so he assured his colleagues at a congress for librarians – history has proven that as a curator at Leiden University Library, he was in the right place to do so. ‘Owing to the rich book collection of the Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde, which the [University] Library holds within its walls and the Academy’s venerable tradition as a cradle of Netherlandish philology, Leiden actually has been a middle point already from way back’. And it was the right place too for a reordered, corrected, and expanded *Bibliotheca*, according to his own ambitions: ‘Such a valuable, internationally orientated apparatus as the [*Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*] might turn Leiden definitively into a metropolis of Middle Dutch linguistics.’<sup>35</sup> At Leiden, the *Bibliotheca* could make Netherlandish philology an international field of study. Lieftinck thus transformed De Vreese’s equally scholarly and national aspirations for the *Bibliotheca* at the Flemish Academy into an image of Leiden as a scholarly metropolis. This image did justice to both the city’s century-old philological fame the Dutch nation was proud of, and the international orientation of academic scholarship in his own time. Like other historians and intellectuals did in these decades, Lieftinck formulated a variant of the nationalist narrative to incorporate international cultural horizons.<sup>36</sup> According to him, the *Bibliotheca* would become truly metropolitan when it was accessible to scholars from the Netherlands and the rest of the world, and when its data were reliable.

### An automated database (1991-1995)

From 1991 onwards, the *Bibliotheca* was digitized at Leiden University Library. It was in particular André Bouwman who spoke in public about the plans and proceedings at conferences for medievalists. Whereas Lieftinck focused on the shortcomings of the *Bibliotheca*’s reliability, Bouwman’s discontentment concerned in the first place its accessibility. He depicted the database as a collection of ‘tens of thousands of index cards’ (*tienduizenden fiches*), ‘put away in card-index boxes’ (*weggestoken in kaartenbakken*), the consultation of which was only possible in Leiden ‘and is rather complicated’ (*en is tamelijk ingewikkeld*).<sup>37</sup> And most of all: the ‘separate card-indexes left cross-references a feature to be desired’.<sup>38</sup> Bouwman gave the impression that the database not only was hard to access itself, but that its modular structure in fact even complicated knowledge about the physical manuscripts – thus negating the creator’s intentions. But Bouwman saw new possibilities in digital times: ‘It became increasingly clear that only the computer would be able to bring relief, if at least some conditions are fulfilled’.<sup>39</sup>

These conditions exactly met the shortcomings of the paper database Bouwman himself had diagnosed: it would have to be user friendly, and 'accessible through electronic data traffic routes' (*via elektronische dataverkeerswegen toegankelijk*).<sup>40</sup> It would have to present 'better sorted information' (*beter geordende informatie*),<sup>41</sup> using standardized authority records and descriptions, and the photographs and rubbings too would have to be digitized. At the same time, an electronic system for data input would have to be implemented. In 1991, the semi-governmental Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) acknowledged the *Bibliotheca* as a 'Center of Expertise', making it possible to be subsidized for this digitizing project. The work was carried out in collaboration with PICA, a cataloguing system of Dutch scientific libraries. It became accessible in 1995 as part of the Leiden University Library's online catalogue (OPAC), which could be consulted through a Dutch library network, through a Telnet connection, or on the 'World Wide Web [...] using a WWW navigator'.<sup>42</sup> Access to the database started at a screen with seventeen search keys, such as 'HSG', 'DAT', 'HTI', 'AUT', or 'MAT', or by starting a search action 'from any screen, by filling in 'z [search key] [search term]', if necessary truncated'.<sup>43</sup> All such codes could be consulted in 'the extended helptexts'.<sup>44</sup> In short, Bouwman stressed in many ways the increased accessibility of philological data in the *Bibliotheca*, now called *e-BNM*.

Besides that, Bouwman was optimistic about the changes made to the database structure. The *Bibliotheca* would still consist of modular descriptions of medieval manuscripts with references to literature, made accessible through search indexes, but they were once more reordered, on persons, corporations, and keywords. New information was added too, based on published library catalogues. The new indexes also figured uniform descriptions, thus putting an end to the arbitrariness in the paper database ('the key words of course [have to be] edited absolutely uniformly' [*de trefwoorden [moeten] natuurlijk volstrekt uniform geredigeerd worden*]),<sup>45</sup> and they were completed with authority records and families consisting of cross-linking descriptions. Bouwman was clear about their importance: they were not just new, elaborated entries to the descriptions. The numerical uniform descriptions made the *Bibliotheca* electronic; the cross-references made the authority records 'the nervous system of the electronic database'<sup>46</sup> and each of them even a 'crystallization point of knowledge' (*kristallisatiepunt van kennis*).<sup>47</sup> Automated searches and links between numerical data on philological objects gave the *Bibliotheca* a new function: it was no longer a didactic tool for reading old texts, nor the instrument for scholars in a learned society, nor a record of the nation's forgotten scribal culture, it now renewed scholarship itself. Bouwman replaced De Vreese's and Lieftinck's narrative of national scholarship with a technical discourse on knowledge production (with by times anthropomorphic

metaphors). For him, the digitized *Bibliotheca* was in the first place exactly that: a new scholarly instrument, 'an electronic database [which] may contribute to the development of new strategies in scholarship.'<sup>48</sup>

Was there in Bouwman's computer optimism any trace left of the centuries-old materialist epistemology and the framing nationalist narrative? At least in his public statements, Bouwman remained remarkably silent on both subjects. The Netherlands and Leiden appear to be nothing more than the accidental setting for scholarly innovations, not to be mentioned explicitly, not even in Lieftinck's metropolitan way. For the *Bibliotheca*'s reliability he did not refer to the traditional guarantees offered by physical manuscripts; he did not present the digitization as a new *reditus ad fontibus*. He seemed to consider its reliability guaranteed by the academic institutions involved. Data for input came from published library catalogues – notwithstanding Lieftinck's doubts; the work done by collaborators of the University Library was unquestioned; access to the database was guaranteed by the OPAC network; and most of all, the *Bibliotheca* as a whole was certified by NWO. One could say that the *Bibliotheca* became not only a 'new' database in the sense of a discrete and multimedial, cross-referring, automatedly and randomly accessible set of data, but also in the sense that its reliability was attested by institutions of present-day science production.

## Conclusion

What does this single history of a philological database from the Low Countries, interpreted as a discrete, multimedial and randomly accessible form of data organization, demonstrate? In the first place that the *Bibliotheca* was more than a simple instrument to hand down philological knowledge to a next generation. From its creation by De Vreese in Ghent onwards, it materialized some of his scientific and nationalistic aspirations, just as the Flemish Academy did. The *Bibliotheca* continued to materialize varying aspirations at Leiden University Library. The database thus had varying relations to successive institutional contexts and powerful narratives, which gave the database meaning and legitimized it. That was initially the case on a documentary level: the *Bibliotheca* had to serve De Vreese in writing a cultural history of the Low Countries in the Middle Ages based on the developments in scribal culture, in other words a historical narrative based on paleographical data. It was also the case on a political level, since the *Bibliotheca* had to be integrated into the Flemish Academy, established to realize equally scholarly and national progress through the study of old Netherlandish language and literature. As such, the initial organizational infrastructure for the *Bibliotheca* included it in the historical and political nar-

rative of the Flemish Movement. Yet, although the database had important relations to such narratives, it remained a genre of informational culture of its own, and because of that, it survived independently from the foundational narratives and was given a place in other wide views, such as scientific internationalism in the interwar era and optimism about the computer age at the close of the twentieth century.

Apart from a changing decor of narratives, the history of this database makes clear that the old tension between the epistemological ideals of accessible and reliable data remained high in both modern and digitized philological information cultures. De Vreese aspired to replace the physical consultation of libraries and archives all over the world with a search action in his database. Doubts about the reliability of the data arose, however. Such doubts had proven to be of great influence in the earlier history of Netherlandish philology, and had resulted in materialistic requirements for scholarly certitude. Nevertheless, the database's material base seemed to have become undiscussed in the age of its digitization at modern scientific institutions. The history of the *Bibliotheca* thus makes clear that fundamental aspects of a database in both its paper and digitized form, such as its epistemological basis or its connection to political narratives, can survive several decades and remain unchanged or can be forgotten along the way, when they are silenced permanently.

## Notes

- 1 A word of thanks to Paul Bijl for his help at the very outset of this study.
- 2 'Het is natuurlijk de bedoeling niet te beweren, dat er [...] geen Neerlandici zijn, die Middel-nederlandsche handschriften kunnen lezen. Er zijn er genoeg die daarin doorkneet zijn, we weten het allen. Maar hunne kennis is iets persoonlijks, dat met hen staat of valt, dat met hen te gronde gaat, zoodat het eerste vereischte om van een gevestigde wetenschap te kunnen spreken, ontbreekt, nl. dat een zekere hoeveelheid kennis aan een volgend geslacht wordt overgeleverd, om daarop voort te bouwen' (Willem de Vreese, *Over eene Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* [Ghent: Siffer, 1903], 209).
- 3 On the *Bibliotheca* in general, see Petrus Josephus Henricus Vermeeren, *De Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta van Willem De Vreese* (Utrecht: De Lanteern, 1953), and R. van Dijk, 'Titus Brandsma en de bestemming van de Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta van Willem De Vreese', *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 72-3 (1998), 273-292 and 73-1 (1999), 40-72.
- 4 L. Daston, 'Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective', *Social Studies of Science* 22.4 (1992), 597-618; Daston, this volume (Chap. 1.1); Tollebeek, this volume (Chap. 3.1).
- 5 Baertschi, this volume (Chap. 4.4.).
- 6 '[O]nbruikbaar, omdat ze vervaardigd zijn met procédés die niet onafhankelijk zijn van de mindere of meerdere vaardigheid van den teekenaar en van diens verbeelding, noch van het doel, door de uitgevers beoogd' (De Vreese, *Over eene Bibliotheca*, 208).



- 7 L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2001), 219, after Erwin Panofsky.
- 8 A.R. Galloway, 'What Is New Media? Ten Years after the Language of New Media', *Criticism* 53.3 (2011), 377-384, esp. 377.
- 9 As used by K.L. Rumbold, 'From Access to Creativity: Shakespeare Institutions, New Media, and the Language of Cultural Value', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010), 313-336.
- 10 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 7-8.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 10-13.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- 15 After Jerome McGann: G. Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.
- 16 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 225-233.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 173-174.
- 18 J. Biemans, 'Over de Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta van Willem De Vreese. Drie bijdragen aan de geschiedenis van de medio-neerlandistiek en de Middelnederlandse handschriftenkunde', *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 105 (1989), 249-280, esp. 249 and *passim*; J. Biemans, 'De Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta: reorganisatie en voortzetting van een documentatie-apparaat', in A.J. Geurts (ed.), *Ontsluiting van middeleeuwse handschriften in de Nederlanden. Verslag van studiedagen gehouden te Nijmegen, 30-31 maart 1984* (Nijmegen: Alfa, 1987), 47-67, esp. 53.
- 19 G. Lieftrinck, *De Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta in de Universiteits-Bibliotheek te Leiden. Voordracht, gehouden op het Bibliotheek-Congres te Rotterdam, 7 Juni 1939* (S.l.: s.n., 1939), 3.
- 20 Biemans, 'Over de Bibliotheca', 251; Lieftrinck, *Voordracht*, 5.
- 21 G. Warnar and T. Bouwman, 'The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta as an Electronic Database: Achievements and Expectations', in R. Schlusemann, J.M.M. Hermans, and M. Hoogvliet (eds.), *Sources for the History of Medieval Books and Libraries* (Groningen, 1999), 339-352, esp. 339.
- 22 'In feite heeft hij de studie van de Middelnederlandse handschriftenkunde van een geheel nieuw, modern fundament voorzien' (Biemans, 'De Bibliotheca', 53; identical in Biemans, 'Over de Bibliotheca', 251).
- 23 W. Rombauts, *De Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde (1886-1914). Haar geschiedenis en haar rol in het Vlaamse cultuurleven*, VIe reeks 110, 2 vols. (Ghent: Secretariaat van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 1979-1981).
- 24 W. Mijnhardt, *Tot heil van 't mensdom. Culturele genootschappen in Nederland, 1750-1815. Nieuwe Nederlandse bijdragen tot de geschiedenis der geneeskunde en der natuurwetenschappen* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988); and C. Singeling, *Gezellige schrijvers. Aspecten van letterkundige genootschappelijkheid in Nederland, 1750-1800* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991).
- 25 F. Kosmann, *Opkomst en voortgang van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden. Geschiedenis van een initiatief* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); and R. Honings, *Geleerdheids zetel, Hollands roem! Het literaire leven in Leiden 1760-1860* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2011); T. Verschaffel, *De hoed en de hond. Geschiedschrijving in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1715-1794* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998).
- 26 '[H]et wordt tijd, geloof ik, dat wij er ons van doordringen dat de overgrootte meerderheid onzer tekstuigen niet langer bruikbaar is, omdat ze ons niet geven wat in de hand-



- schriften staat. Zoogenaamd kritische uitgaven, waarin de zoogenaamde fouten tegen de grammatica door afschrijvers gemaakt, heeten verbeterd te zijn, geven een beeld van een denkbeeldige taal, evenals die, waarin de oorspronkelijke tekst van een schrijver heet vastgesteld te zijn, dikwijls niet veel meer geven dan een denkbeeldigen tekst. Dat alles is niet veel anders dan esthetische liefhebberij, voor het taalkundig onderzoek totaal ongechikt' (De Vreese, *Over eene Bibliotheca*, 218).
- 27 J. Burgers, 'De constructie van het verleden. De Hollandse visie op de Middeleeuwen van de zestiende tot de achttiende eeuw en de centrale plaats daarin van de *Rijmkroniek* van Melis Stoke', in Joep Leerssen and Marita Mathijssen (eds.), *Oerteksten. Nationalisme, edities en canonvorming* (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Cultuur en Geschiedenis, 2002), 59-68; R. de Bonth, 'Een oud man of een jonge bedrieger. Balthazar Huydecoper en de rijmkroniek van Klaas Kolijn'. *Madoc* 7.1 (1993), 36-46; M. van Lieburg, 'Reinier De Graaf (1674-1717) en de rijmkroniek van Klaas Kolijn', *Documentatieblad* 37 (1997), 4-25.
- 28 G. Jensma, *De gemaskerde God. François HaverSchmidt en het Oera Linda-boek* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2004).
- 29 A. Momigliani, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian', in *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 1-39; A. Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 30 More in J. Rock, *Papieren monumenten. Filologie en nationalisme in de Lage Landen, 1591-1863* (Nijmegen: Vantilt [in production]).
- 31 'Het "Zie mijne Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta" werkte als een machtspreuk' [Lief-tinck, *Voordracht*, 5].
- 32 '[T]och een eenzame is geworden, als verschanst in zijn fort, zijn enorm arsenaal van gegevens, waaruit hij steeds kon putten en waaraan hij zijn groot gezag ontleende' [*ibid.*, 4].
- 33 G.I. Lief-tinck, 'De Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta', *Het boek* 26.4 (1940/1942), 365-368, esp. 366.
- 34 'Er zijn ook vele aantekeningen, vooral inhoudsopgaven, die niet zijn van de hand van De Vreese zelf, misschien van studenten of van ambtenaren van de betreffende bibliotheken. [...] Omdat men niet weet wie ze opstelden en daar sommige ervan in later tijd door De Vreese zelf gecorrigeerd werden, is er alle reden om die gegevens niet al te zeer te vertrouwen' (*ibid.*, 366).
- 35 'Door de rijke boekerij van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde, die de Bibliotheek binnen haar muren herbergt en de eerwaardige traditie van de Academie als bakermat van de Nederlandsche philologie, is Leiden toch al van oudsher een middelpunt. [...] Een zoo rijk, international georiënteerd apparaat als de B.N.M. zou Leiden definitief kunnen maken tot metropool der Middelnederlandsche taalwetenschap' (*ibid.*, 365).
- 36 J. Tollebeek, 'The Hyphen of National Culture: The Paradox of National Distinctiveness in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1860-1918', *European Review* 18.2 (2010), 207-225.
- 37 A. Bouwman, 'De Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta: van kaartenbak tot database', in J.M.M. Hermans and K. van der Hoek (eds.), *Boeken in de late Middeleeuwen: verslag van de Groningse Codicologendagen 1992* (Groningen, 1994), 301-312, esp. 301.
- 38 Warnar/Bouwman, 'The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta', 340.
- 39 'Het werd steeds duidelijker dat alleen de computer uitkomst zou kunnen bieden, indien althans aan enkele voorwaarden wordt voldaan' (Bouwman, 'Van kaartenbak tot database', 301).
- 40 *Ibid.*, 301.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 301.
- 42 Warnar/Bouwman, 'The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta', 352.

- 43 *Ibid.*, 344.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 345.
- 45 Bouwman, 'Van kaartenbak tot database', 309.
- 46 Warnar/Bouwman, 'The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta', 343.
- 47 Bouwman, 'Van kaartenbak tot database', 307.
- 48 Warnar/Bouwman, 'The Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta', 350.