Achieving a second Italian unification

Conor Fahy looks at the census of 16th-century Italian editions and its benefits to scholars worldwide

The first significant achievement of the Cinemastro was to have secured the collaboration of about a thousand public libraries in Italy — well over 90 per cent of the total — thereby assuring itself of virtually complete coverage of the nation’s patrimony of 16th-century books. The organizers have taken the trouble, too, of recent international developments in cataloguing techniques. For example, the computer-based British Library 16th Century Short-title Catalogue (1986), preparing their material in machine-readable form. Storage of the material on a computer will aid not only in eventual publication in alphabetical order of author, but also the ready presentation of a printout of all entries; and printers, the painting of catalogue cards for individual libraries, and other useful arrangements of the material.

Publication is embargoed both in book form and in microfiche. At present, there is no Italian equivalent of the British Bibliographical database BLADES (British Library Automated Information Service), but the material being prepared by the Cinemastro is capable of being developed into a database, and it is to be put on the market in some sort of digital form already within the next six to nine years. For this purpose, researchers have been working on the development of a microfiche database of many of the Cinemastro’s catalogues, which will be available for use in libraries throughout the world.

The method of compiling the census has been devised with great flexibility to take account of the differing situations in the various regions of the country, and of the contrasting needs and problems of contributing libraries, which range in size from large national libraries to small private ones. In some regions (eg Emilia-Romagna) agreement has been reached with regional authorities for the co-ordination of the work at local level. Elsewhere Libraries dealt directly with the Instituto Central. Small libraries, defined as those with less than 2,000 16th-century editions; are asked to compile a card provided by the Instituto for each Italian 16th-century edition they possess, formal small libraries have already finished this task. One consequence is that not quite apart from the Cinemastro’s efforts, there will be a complete and accurate cataloguing of all 16th-century Italian editions, in many cases for the first time in its history.

For larger libraries a different procedure has been developed which in effect avoids as far as possible the simultaneous existence of numerous copies of the same edition in libraries up and down Italy. The Instituto Cen-
trale is producing alphabetical lists derived from all available printed sources, as well as from the cards already received by the various libraries. The larger libraries begin by checking these lists, against their own, before returning any copies for ed-

Unfortunately, the organizers are bemused by the exactitude of the Italian library system, some computerized catalogues and microfiche read-
ers are far from perfect. They must produce what their contributors, who will be able to agree that libraries be done, cannot see any university library in Britain, a regional library, or a provin-
cional form, it will not list about 4,500 editions, which has more than three times as many as those listed under the letter A in the most informative work on 16th-century printing at present available, the British Library’s Italian Short-title Catalogue.

But this is for the future. According to the organizers, the Instituto deste Laboratorio per la Bibliografia Re-

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Tom Schuller argues that greater efforts should be made to get unskilled workers back on to the educational rails.