The Heritage of Boleslas Iwinski

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ABSTRACT

In 1911, in support of Paul Otlet’s plan for a universal bibliography, Boleslas Iwinski, a Polish-born economist and labor organizer, estimated the total number of book titles that had been printed since Gutenberg’s day. His totals have been largely forgotten (except by a few scholars like W. Boyd Rayward), but his goals and methods have been accepted and modified over the past century, and are still provocative.

Around 1900 Paul Otlet was curious: how big was the world’s bibliographical record? How many book titles had been printed since Gutenberg’s day and would eventually be included in the great universal card catalogue he was assembling? He needed numbers in order to plan for space and furniture for his cards and for a staff to process the cards. To help him find an answer, he called on Boleslas Iwinski (1879–1919), a Polish-born economist and labor organizer, living in Paris. Otlet published preliminary reports in his Bulletin de l’Institut International de Bibliographie in 1896 and 1901. A 55-page report was presented at Otlet’s International Congress on Bibliography and Documentation, held in Brussels, August 25–17, 1910.

In 1911, the final results were announced in a 139-page report: 10,378,365 books and 71,248 periodicals (Iwinski, 1911). With this issue, the Bulletin ceased publication. (It is surely wrong but still tempting to imagine the journal, staggered by the thought of reporting that the world had a population problem, heroically agreeing to sacrifice itself.)

Iwinski himself is also largely forgotten, but his methods, in support of Otlet’s goals, were generally accepted. His numerical totals were updated, twice, and quite auspiciously. In 1930, the noted German bibliographer Georg Schneider (1930) calculated totals for 1909–1927, which appear
in the national sections of his *Handbuch der Bibliographie* (pp. 159–368, passim). A decade later, a group of American research libraries commissioned LeRoy C. Merritt (1942) to update Schneider’s totals. Looking for ways to cooperate and fearing another world war, the libraries were then making plans that would in time lead to the Farmington Plan—the comprehensive program for acquisition of foreign titles for American libraries, as described by Wagner (2002)—and eventual publication of the *National Union Catalog*. Merritt’s study, incidentally, is important also as a pioneering work in the study of collection overlap between major research libraries. Together, Schneider and Merritt added 3,451,629 titles, bringing the total to 14,829,994 up to 1940.

Iwinski was not the only one playing the numbers game, or even the first. As early as 1772, Johann Christoph Gatterer had proposed totals for the number of recent German books. In 1904, about the same time as Otlet and Iwinski were working, Albert Cim (1923) did guesswork that generally agrees with Iwinski. Albert Labarre (1970, p. 113) extended Cim’s totals in 1970. In 1963, John Senders estimated that the totals had grown to 100 million items. Recent totals play essentially a different numbers game. They describe library holdings: not what might be but what actually is in libraries and under bibliographical control. I have not found the source work behind a Google announcement that, as of August 28, 2009, there were 168,178,719 book titles in the world (Wimberley, 2009). Permeating all of these figures is an assumption reflected in the title of Hugh Amory’s delightful essay, “Pseudodoxia bibliographica, or When is a book not a book? When it’s a record” (Amory, 2001).

Iwinski separated books from periodicals. The *Première Partie* of his 1911 report, on *livres*, is subdivided by date (pp. 7–15), nation (*pays*, pp. 16–32), and subject (*matière*, pp. 38–54, using an early form of Universal Decimal Classification). The *Deuxième Partie* (pp. 58–99) is on *périodiques*. Thereafter follows a second *Deuxième Partie* (pp. 101–139), headed *Organisation de la statistique des imprimés: Conclusions de l’Institut International de Bibliographie*. The conclusions are predictable: the totals were very useful, but they needed to be extended, and an office needed to be established to do this important work.

The totals were assembled mostly out of the national reports, probably with the help of Otlet’s friend Henri LaFontaine, who devoted his life to international cooperation. Iwinski based his national totals on three kinds of evidence: citations in bibliographies, statistics, and expertise. By 1900, current lists, which oiled the nation’s joints of intellectual commerce, had also been established in most of Western Europe. Most of these were book-trade lists, the exception being the *Bibliographie de la France*, an official government publication based on *dépôt légal* copies catalogued at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Retrospective lists, celebrating national bibliographical heritages, were also beginning to flourish in the nineteenth century.
Current book statistics for many of the same nations were just beginning to be compiled around 1900, based mostly on the current national booktrade bibliographies. International cooperation, particularly in Western Europe, had been codified in treaties and foreign commerce, as witnessed in the institution of world’s fairs. Iwinski called extensively on several collective international statistical reports, notably Babelon (1879), Röthlisberger (1893), and Kellen (1903).

These sources never tell what exactly they include and exclude. Book-trade bibliographies, for instance, may not include nontrade publications. Nor could they be expected to cite what oppressive governments saw as not in the national interest. In order to qualify their totals—and in fact often to help turn up many sources in the first place—Otlet and Iwinski were beholden to the expert advice of respected scholars, among them M. F. A. G. Campbell for the Netherlands, Karl Dziatzko for Germany, and Hans Ostenfeld Lange for Denmark. For instance, Dziatzko, a librarian and bibliographer, reported what later scholars have amply confirmed: the landmark Leipzig and Frankfurt book-fair catalogues were very incomplete. When in doubt and when there were gaps in the time span, Iwinski several times called on his own expertise as a statistician and extrapolated mathematical growth curves.

Evaluating and extending Iwinski’s historical statistics is a testimony to the bibliographical achievements of the past century. National bibliographies, both retrospective and current, expanded many times over. Iwinski’s totals for the earlier years in Western Europe are often on the low side but not far off. For Great Britain, he had no STC, only George Bullen’s pre-1640 British Museum catalogue of 1884. He could call on the eighteenth-century “London catalogues” and the Samson and Low and the Whitaker trade lists, but when ESTC and NSTC are complete, the trade lists will no doubt prove to have a fraction of the total. For continental books, there were, and often still are, other anomalies. For instance, the Bibliographie de la France excluded titles published outside the national borders, whereas German national bibliographies cover titles for the German-language booktrade published anywhere in the world. Most continental European nations now claim retrospective lists, Nijhoff and Kronenberg for the Netherlands among the more respected of them, and Estreicher for Poland among the more celebrated. New titles show up regularly, in part no doubt because their absence from the canon is now conspicuous.

Not surprisingly, Iwinski’s greatest shortcomings involve countries and regions far from Western Europe. For the United States, Iwinski accepted Kellen’s report of a total of 1,000 titles before 1800. Around 1900, Charles Evans was just beginning his great American Bibliography, which would increase the total about thirty fold. Several Latin American totals are slightly better, thanks to the early work of José Toribio Medina and others. Iwinski
skipped Africa and Australia entirely, and his totals for Japan are sketchy. Above all, Chinese printing was not reported, although the quantity was immense. Writing in 1943, for instance, Creel proposed that “until 1750 more books had been published in Chinese than in all other languages in the world put together” (p. 15). Recent scholars, Tsien (1985) and Brokaw (2005) notable among them, agree that the quantity was stupendous, but they labor under forbidding odds: most of the evidence has been destroyed over the bloody course of Chinese history, and the difference between printed and scribal copies is often unclear because it is almost irrelevant.

Over the twentieth century, the several dozen current national bibliographies that Iwinski called on also grew many times over. Most of them are now online, and with variable completeness, they now cover the world. The most complete were probably those prepared in the closed societies of Eastern Europe during the Soviet era, their ideal being the great Russian Knizhnaia letopis (which had actually begun in Tsarist times.) The lists for other countries vary in scope and completeness depending on local conditions, and even the Eastern European lists are said to be less complete since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Book statistics were coordinated through the League of Nations beginning in 1937, from the 1950s on through the United Nations and UNESCO, and conveniently accessible in their yearbooks. Reporting practices were becoming standardized by the late 1970s. The policies are described in the footnotes in the Yearbooks, which often take up nearly as much space as the totals. Iwinski’s successors today have much better sources, but these often end up requiring ever more qualifications.

Iwinski’s main interest was in printed books. For periodicals (pp. 56–81), he needed to fall back on older works like Hatin (1866). He was fortunate to be working at a time when the precise difference between livres and périodiques was yet to be argued over. It should be noted that today’s scholarly study known as bibliometrics began not with Iwinski but with the 1922 Sandars Lectures of E. Wyndham Hulme (1923), librarian of the Patent Office in London. Hulme’s interest was in scientific periodicals, a genre that dates from the late seventeenth century and has proliferated vastly with the rise of academic science (Hulme, 1923). A cornerstone of modern information science, bibliometrics counts periodical articles rather than journal titles. Unlike Iwinski’s, Hulme’s numbers begin not with Gutenberg but with the founding of the Royal Society in 1665. The two worlds seldom meet: scholars of scientific literature and the “information explosion” seem unaware of Iwinski, nor do Schneider or Merritt seem ever to have heard of Hulme. Today’s research scientists, with timely research priorities, use periodicals more than books and rely on subject bibliography more than the author/title main entries that were Otlet’s and Iwinski’s main concern.
Still other genres function in ways that are often very different from those of printed books, and as a result are embodied in physical forms that Iwinski’s library world ignored. Pamphlets, manuals and trade literature, children’s books, textbooks, noncommercial publications, press books, printed music, maps: none of these are likely to be well represented in Iwinski’s numbers.7 This was about the time when Falconer Madan (1911–1913) was issuing his famous warning about the “duplicity of duplicates.” The concepts of edition, impression, issue, and state were just beginning to be recognized. Iwinski’s totals will include reissues when they involve updated title pages that would be relisted in current national bibliographies, but none of the other kinds of variants. Variants range in importance from the trivial to the profound, and are unknown until they are uncovered, and irrelevant even then until their relevance can be argued.

It is in the hindsight of a century of bibliographical planning that Iwinski’s role in Otlet’s grand plan comes into focus. In 1900, the concept of a “library of record” was still an article of faith. This was less true in countries like the optimistically expanding United States than in most of Europe, Paris and London in particular. Alas, the Bibliothèque Nationale and British Museum, for all their ambitions, resources, and greatness, would never be any more comprehensive than the Alexandrian library of antiquity. Besides providing data for Otlet, Iwinski in effect told why.

The goal instead needed to be institutional cooperation; and it needed to be coordinated in union catalogues. The concept had been around for centuries, the most famous realization being the late medieval Registrum for English monasteries. Otlet’s plan, in contrast, was worldwide. It was based in the appropriately named Palais Mondial in Brussels (predecessor of the Mundaneum, now in Mons). His Répertoire bibliographique universel had by 1934 accumulated sixteen million cards, many of them still extant in Mons. In comparison, the Iwinski, Schneider, and early Merritt totals would have about reached this number by this date, although the Mundaneum cards are in two files, one for author, the other for subject. It is impossible to tell how close it was to complete, but it was obviously vast.

Union catalogues, in principle, are unified wholes whose copy-specific citations are meant to be accessible through bottom-up processes of bibliographical searching and subject to verification in autopsy. Manifest in smaller regional projects at first, they are now best known in large-scale ones like the National Union Catalog, WorldCat, and the Karlsruher virtuelle Katalog. They still need to be planned from the top down, based on conceptions like Iwinski’s. The union catalogues may boast of or at least aspire to comprehensiveness, but their value lies in what they have.

Iwinski’s totals assumed completeness.8 There are still many titles in his sources that are not in any union catalogue, and vice versa. How much is still not accounted for? These are of several kinds of lacunae. There are true ghosts: books that exist only in citations, announced but never
printed, or printed under new titles, perhaps much later. As early as 1683, Van Almeloveen prepared a list of them, mostly ones that authors had announced but never managed to finish. Several later French sources of lost books, such as Quérard & Brunet and Delpy, are more in the spirit of romantic bibliophily. Other books were printed but did not survive. There are also lost variants, among them works known in first and third editions but not the second. There are titles in hiding, whether stolen and in bank vaults or in library arrearages. Some are hidden because our cataloguing codes are still less than perfect, or do not agree with each other, or are used by sleepy or uniformed cataloguers.

How can their totality even be estimated? An old bookseller’s maxim holds that for every four books in existence, a fifth is lost. Blagden (1958) has proposed a refinement—in the natural world, where “the odds against survival are heavy, the seeds . . . are proliferated; and similarly in the world of the printed word, a very high proportion of the books which are produced in great quantities are destroyed” (p. 107)—to which Barnard (1999) generally agrees. Among the models for more precise estimates is Tanselle’s formulary for estimating the number of early American titles not in Evans. (Evans’s American Bibliography, it should be noted, records announcements of unlocated books, while its updated condensation, the Shipton–Mooney Short-Title Evans, cites extant copies in the manner of a union catalogue.) In estimating the total number of lacking printed books, Euringh’s model for medieval manuscripts may prove to be useful.

There have also been searching lists, notably the Weekly List of Unlocated Research Books, sponsored by the Union Catalog Division of the Library of Congress and cumulated annually as the Select List of Unlocated Research Books (1937–1961), with upwards of 50,000 titles. The lists were circulated to libraries, where they were assigned to new reference librarians as training experience, whose work occasionally turned up copies. Thousands more titles may still be resting in Michael Krieg’s (1953–1958) stenobibliographical purgatory called Mehr nicht erschienen, in which the criteria for inclusion are ones that only Saint Peter understands and perhaps forgives.9 Iwinsky’s progeny often ended up in the search for God.

Today, Iwinski’s project may be even more useful, not to the library community, but to the scholarly communities that go under the name of book history (or histoire du livre, or historical bibliography, or the history of print culture or of material texts). Prosopographical studies of the printed word are flourishing, in their own right and in support of arguments that range from the seminal to the tautological, from the convincing to the flaky. Gatterer’s hermeneutic goals of the 1770s are reborn in annales scholarship. The field is anticipated as early as 1935, for instance, in Lenhart’s (1935) numerical data and educated guesswork on incunabula, from titles, on to the number of copies printed, and eventually to the weight of paper in tons. This is potentially important as commercial
and cultural history, even if one may not buy Father Lenhart’s conclusion that “incunabula were the best vindication of the Church’s cultural mission. . . . Pre-Reformation book-production is the grandest apology of the Catholic Church’s power of civilizing pagan nations” (p. 186). Of the many recent examples of provocative scholarship, several may be singled out. Weedon has summarized the studies of early English books. A team headed by the master annales scholar Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie has come up with nervously fine calibrations for early French books.

In overall terms, Curwen has estimated the expansion of global book production between 1955 and 1981 as follows:

- For Africa, by 4.67 times (3 to 14 thousand titles a year)
- For Asia, by 2.72 times (54 to 147 thousand)
- For Europe, 2.35 (131 to 308 thousand)
- For the USSR, 1.71 (55 to 94 thousand)
- For North America (i.e., the United States and Canada), by 8.3 times (14 to 117 thousand), with a notable increase in the early 1960s
- For Latin America, by 3.45 times (11 to 38 thousand)
- For Oceania, by 11 times (1 to 11 thousand)
- Overall, by 2.71 times (269 to 729 thousand)

All of the studies discussed above share—and one of the useful dimensions of Iwinski’s plan is—a focus on physical items. In the cause of sound scholarship, Vander Meulen’s (2004) injunctions to book historians are worth recalling: 1. Survey what exists; 2. Describe and learn from physical details; 3. Use external records; 4. Think clearly about the bibliographical evidence; 5. Define the field; 6. Interpret variant physical forms; 7. Recognize the cultural values inherent in design elements; 8. Discover the book producers’ intentions; 9. Assess the response of readers; and 10. Preserve the artifacts. Of these injunctions, the first, and most basic, has become much more convenient and meaningful, thanks to efforts over the past century that began with Otlet’s vision and were facilitated by Iwinski’s historical-geographical estimates.

Notes
1. This essay is offered in tribute to Boyd Rayward in recognition of the fact that he is, among many other things, one of the few people I have ever met who has ever heard the name of Boleslas Iwinski. Iwinski is also mentioned briefly in his 1975 Universe of Information (Rayward, 1975, p. 187). My essay is adapted from chapter 8—“Bibliography as Chronicle”—of my forthcoming book, The Anatomy of Bibliography. A selection of Otlet’s writings is available in Rayward (1990).
2. Officially, Iwinski was “licencié en Sciences Economique.”
3. The 1911 report appears under Iwinski’s name alone. The earlier reports published in the Bulletin de l’Institut International de Bibliographie name only Otlet. Was Iwinski involved in the earlier ones as well? The basic goal has all the earmarks of Otlet, Iwinski was the statistician. When did Otlet first call on the young Iwinski? Apart from Migon’s (1995) brief article, we know very little about the man.
4. The book totals in the 1772 essay in Gatterer’s *Historisches Journal* do not appear to figure prominently in his many other major writings, in which causal relationships (*nexus rerum universalis*) are basic to his “hermeneutic” approach to history.

5. Several works mentioned briefly in later discussions are cited more amply in Domay (1987), Bell (1998), and the ALA Guide to Reference.


7. The Otlet–Iwinski approach is also seen in the visionary study by Lyman and Varian (2000). Prefatory to converting the world’s written record into binary digits, it proposes that 968,735 “book items” were produced in 1996.

8. The overlap between bibliographical utilities has been often studied. Of the roughly 13 million titles in the *National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints*, for instance, Beall and Kafadar (2005) have proposed that about a quarter were not in WorldCat, a total generally confirmed by DeZelar-Tiedman (2008). There are also the titles that are catalogued but stolen or misfiled in libraries, where there is never enough time to read the shelves.


**References**


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