Passing a judgement on the completeness of national bibliographies is possible in two ways. One would be to compile a competing bibliography of one's own. This would, however, take very many years to achieve. A single scholar therefore has to resort to another method: working by samples. This article looks at the problem by examining a geographical sample and a genre sample. Geographically, it concentrates on the production of some printers in Lübeck and one in Riga – two major trading centres at opposite ends of the Baltic Sea. This choice of examples has the advantage of illustrating how the German national bibliographies are defined geographically. In terms of genre, I considered where official publications from the period are preserved today and to what degree these institutions are covered by the bibliographies.

**VD16 and VD17**

It is necessary to begin by presenting the German national bibliographies for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are two distinct bibliographies, one for each of the centuries. Both of them are generally known by their abbreviation, *VD16* and *VD17*, in full *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* and *Das Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachraum erschienenen Drucke des 17. Jahrhunderts*. These are bibliographies of the imprints published in the German language area in the sixteenth and seventeenth century respectively. The definite article used in the bibliographies’ title (*Verzeichnis der ... Drucke*) signals, as readers will have noticed, completeness.
VD16 was first published in print in 25 volumes between 1983 and 2000.\(^1\) VD17 has been published on the internet right from the beginning in 1996.\(^2\) In recent years, the VD16 data have been transferred to an internet edition to which further titles and holdings are continually being added.\(^3\) Unfortunately, the VD16 internet edition does not yet work perfectly. The two bibliographies differ somewhat in the way they describe the titles. Without going into any great detail, it is worth mentioning that VD17 – unlike VD16 – offers on-line facsimiles of the title-pages and of a few other significant pages of most books.\(^4\)

Both bibliographies do not contain sheet music and maps while VD16 also excludes broadsheets. The decision to exclude broadsheets is somewhat odd. Possibly it was occasioned by the fact that several reprint editions of illustrated broadsheets were available or planned, but no such editions exist for the large number of non-illustrated broadsheets.\(^5\) VD16 thus omits, for instance, some of the first editions of a seminal Latin text, Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. Fortunately, VD17

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\(^1\) Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts, 25 vols. (Stuttgart, 1983–2000). The author’s research was supported by the research programme SF0180040s08 at Tartu University Library.


\(^4\) In recent years, some links to online facsimiles have been added in both bibliographies, and it is planned to enlarge this service.