The Books Google Could Open

By Richard Ekman

Tuesday, August 22, 2006; Page A15

The nation's colleges and universities should support Google's controversial project to digitize great libraries and offer books online. It has the potential to do a lot of good for higher education in this country.

The rapid annual increase in the number of new books and journals, coupled with far-reaching technological innovations, is changing relations between academia and the publishing industry. In the recent past, college and university libraries collaborated with publishers in creating online collections of selected published works. But now many in the publishing industry are opposing the new digital catalogue of published works created by Google -- Book Search -- even as many librarians hail it as a way to expand access to millions of published works.

Only a small fraction of the huge number of books published today are printed in editions of more than a few thousand copies. And the great works of even the recent past are quickly passing into obscurity. Google has joined with major libraries to make it possible for all titles to remain accessible to users.

Book Search is a Herculean undertaking, digitizing both new and old works housed in some of the world's top libraries -- Stanford, Harvard, the University of Michigan, the University of California System, the New York Public Library and Oxford -- and rendering them searchable through Google's powerful Web site. Book Search does not permit users to read entire copyrighted works on screen; it simply makes those works searchable through keywords, quickly and at no cost, and allows readers to view several lines from the book. Users can look at an entire page from any book not under copyright protection.

This powerful tool will make less well-known written works or hard-to-find research materials more accessible to students, teachers and others around the world. Geography will not hinder a student's quest to find relevant material. Libraries can help to revive interest in underused books. And sales of books would probably increase as a result.

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Book Search comes at a time when college and university libraries are hard-pressed to keep up with the publishing and technology revolutions. Budgets are stretched, and libraries must now specialize and rely on interlibrary loans for books in other subjects.

Student and faculty research has also been limited by what is on the shelves of campus libraries. A student can identify a book through an online library catalogue, but the book's content remains unknown. It must then be shipped -- an expense that may not be worthwhile if the book isn't what was expected.

With Book Search, it's easy to imagine a history student at a small college in Nebraska using the Internet to find an out-of-print book held only by a library in New York. Instead of requesting delivery of the book, he or she can read a snippet of it from Google's online catalogue and request it on interlibrary loan if it seems useful. Even better, the student can purchase the book in the same session at the computer.

Unfortunately, Book Search has vociferous critics. Some publishers have filed lawsuits to stop the project, alleging that Google is violating copyright law. The legal questions will eventually be settled in the courts, but those of us who are researchers and readers of books and articles ought to be disturbed by the loss of trust among publishers and libraries, which a decade ago embraced technological innovation and collaboration.

Project Muse, begun in 1993 as a pioneering joint effort of the Johns Hopkins University Press and the university's Milton S. Eisenhower Library, makes available electronic "bundles" of current issues of journals to students and teachers in scattered locations. And JSTOR -- a coalition of journal publishers and libraries formed in the mid-1990s to create a reliable online collection of hundreds of older, little-used scholarly journals -- has brought these specialized works back into common use.

Colleges and universities have conflicting interests in this dispute. Some operate their own publishing houses and hope to sell books. Some faculty members are authors and hope to earn royalties from sales. But the major interest of colleges and universities is as users of information -- helping thousands of students and teachers find what they need and making these materials available. In this regard, the advantages of Google's service are enormous, especially for smaller colleges without huge budgets for library purchases.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that publishers have resisted an important technology instead of figuring out how to use it to their advantage. Music publishers a century ago tried to stop the manufacture of player pianos because they feared that sales of sheet music would decline. In fact, player pianos helped increase the number of buyers of sheet music.

New technologies and new ways of doing business can be disruptive, but they are inevitable. The transition to new technologies can be smooth or rough, depending on the attitudes of the institutional actors. The goal is to make more of the world's
information readily available to users.

The writer is president of the Council of Independent Colleges. He is on the advisory boards of two university presses and a university library.