Google Books vs. the Library: Shaping Choice, Creating Publics

Paulina Mickiewicz (McGill University)

On December 14th, 2004, Google, the most widely used search engine on the internet, announced that it planned to undertake the extremely ambitious project of digitizing approximately 15 million books over a period of six years, essentially creating the world's largest digital library. To date, Google has managed to digitize some 10 million volumes. Google's enterprise has ignited significant debate, bringing issues of copyright, monopoly and authority over access to knowledge to the fore. Critics of Google's digitization project - specifically the recent initiative put forth by France to digitize its own national patrimony, as a way of countering Google's digitization project and maintaining control over its own cultural heritage - make the claim that cultural heritage and access to vast amounts of knowledge should not lie in the hands of a corporate media giant such as Google. Instead, this enormous responsibility should remain in the hands of libraries, the traditional upholders of the public good. This article seeks to explore the tensions that currently exist between what could be considered the traditional safeguards of a cultural heritage and the newer, even more dominant forms of preservation that are radically transforming how we perceive and understand our own culture. It proposes that both Google and the Library are cultural mediums oriented in the production of a particular sort of public sphere and, like all media, they both shape and are shaped by the subjects whose practices, encounters and interests they mediate. This paper thus seeks to question what type of "cultural" institution has the authority to participate in the preservation of cultural expression.

Le 14 décembre 2004, Google, le plus important moteur de recherche en ligne, annonçait son projet très ambitieux de numériser, sur une période de 6 ans, près de 15 millions de livres, créant ainsi la plus grande bibliothèque informatique au monde. A ce jour, Google a déjà numérisé une dizaine de millions de livres. Le projet Google a lancé un débat important qui met en relief les questions de droits d'auteur, de monopole et de pouvoir liées à l'accès au savoir. Comme le montre la récente initiative française qui, pour contrer Google, procède à la numérisation de son propre patrimoine national, les détracteurs du projet Google maintiennent que l'héritage culturel et l'accès à de grandes quantités de savoir ne devraient pas être aux mains d'un géant médiatique et économique tel que Google. Au contraire, il incomberait aux bibliothèques, les gardiennes traditionnelles de l'intérêt public, de prendre sur elles cette énorme responsabilité. Cet article se propose d'explorer les tensions qui existent actuellement entre ce qui peut être considéré comme des mesures de sauvegarde traditionnelles de l'héritage culturel d'un côté, et d'autre part de nouvelles formes de plus en plus dominantes de conservation, qui sont en train de transformer radicalement notre façon de percevoir et de comprendre notre culture. L'article montre comment Google et la Bibliothèque sont des médias culturels orientés vers la création d'une sphère publique particulière. Comme tous les médias, ils influent sur les pratiques, rencontres et intérêts des sujets au profit desquels ils exercent leur médiation, en même temps que ces sujets influent en retour sur eux. Ainsi, l'article pose la question de savoir quel type d'institution « culturelle » détient le pouvoir de participer à la conservation de l'expression culturelle.

Introduction: Alexandria, Egypt, 2011

The Royal Library of Alexandria was probably the largest, and certainly the most famous, of the libraries of the ancient world. Its fame was attributed to the fact that it sought to collect the entire world's knowledge and consolidate it within one unifying space. This it pursued aggressively by a well-funded royal mandate. In his book *Library: An Unquiet History*, rare books librarian for Harvard University's Widener Library Matthew Battles, writes that: "The great pile of books at Alexandria defined a newly acquisitive approach to the value of knowledge. The goal was to hold everything, from the authoritative manuscripts of the Iliad and Hesiod's *Work and Days* to the most obscure lists of secondary and fallacious commentaries on Homer, to works incorrectly attributed to Homer, the works pointing out their misattribution, and the works refuting those works"[59]. The Library of Alexandria dates back to possibly around 295BC; in 2011 we still seek to collect and consolidate the world's knowledge. The difference, however, is that now it may actually be possible, or so we think, just as the monarchs of Alexandria thought it was possible in 295BC.

*

This article touches on more than the simple human desire to collect, consolidate, and universalize knowledge, or whether this is possible or even desirable. Rather, the following seeks to explore another dimension of the collection, consolidation, and universalization of knowledge, that is, how this knowledge is translated for each nation or community into a cultural heritage

[59] Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (New York: Norton, 2003), 30.

that necessitates preservation and dissemination—and yet also raises crucial questions about access to that very knowledge. It seeks to explore the tensions that currently exist between, on the one hand, libraries, both public and national, institutions that could be considered the traditional safeguards of a cultural heritage and, on the other hand, the digitization of books, most notably the ubiquitous project known as Google Books, that could be considered newer, unanticipated forms of preservation that are radically transforming how we perceive, understand, interact with, and access "our own" culture. What follows addresses such pressing questions as who or what type of "cultural" institutions have the authority to participate in the preservation of cultural expression, what kind of cultural expressions are they preserving, and how do they shape and are they shaped by the practices of the everyday, individual citizen.

Google Books

On December 14th, 2004, Google, the most widely used search engine on the Internet, announced that it planned to undertake the extremely ambitious project of digitizing approximately 15 million books over a period of six years, essentially creating the world's largest digital library. The project that Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Google's co-founders, were proposing stemmed from their Google Print initiative, which they had announced at the Frankfurt Book Fair several months earlier, and which they now planned to extend to what they called the Google Print Library Project. At its inception, Google's digitization project could have made the claim of its being relatively altruistic. As Director of Harvard University Library (one of the first libraries that had partnered with Google), Robert Darnton notes:

> Google began digitizing books from research libraries, providing full-text searching and making books in the public domain available on the Internet at no cost to the viewer. For example, it is now possible for anyone, anywhere, to view and download a digital copy of the 1871 first edition of *Middlemarch* that is in the collection of the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Everyone profited, including Google, which collected revenue from some discreet advertising attached to the service.[60]

Through initial partnerships with prestigious universities as well as public libraries, Google, to date, has managed to digitize some 12 million volumes.[61] Co-founder and president of technology at Google, Sergey Brin, states that:

> Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. Today, together with the authors, publishers, and libraries, we have been able to make a great leap in this endeavour. [...] While this agreement is a real win-win for all of us, the real victors are all the readers. The tremendous wealth of knowledge that lies within the books of the world will now be at their fingertips.[62]

The Google Books project is divided into two distinct programs, the Partner Program and the Library Project. With the Partner Program, Google's partners, primarily publishers (over 20,000 to date, including Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, HarperCollins, Penguin, among others), give Google their books to digitize and put online. For those who use Google Books, it is quite simple. Those who search Google Books are shown a strictly limited number of book pages that are relevant to their search. This is

[60] Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 13.

[61] In fact, Google surpassed the 12 million mark in June 2010.

[62] "Google Books Settlement Agreement," *Google Books*, www.books.google.com/google books/agreement/#1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

enough to give them a rough idea of what the book is about; if it is of interest, the user can click through to the publisher's website, or an online retailer, and buy the desired book. Through the Library Project (over 29 libraries have partnered with Google to date, including Oxford University Library, Harvard University Library, the New York Public Library and most recently the National Libraries of Florence and Rome), participating libraries provide Google with their books to digitize. In other words, publications that were previously only accessible to patrons within the space of the library itself, can now be found by anyone with an Internet connection. If a library book's copyright has reverted to the public domain it is shown in its entirety. If it is still under copyright then users see only basic background, such as the book's title and the author's name, at most two or three "snippets" from the book and information about which library it is in, or where it can be purchased.

It is these snippets that prompted several lawsuits against Google in 2005. In order to provide more encompassing search services, Google also digitized snippets of library books that were still under copyright protection. In September and October of 2005, two lawsuits were filed against Google in the United States that claimed that the company had not respected copyright laws, nor adequately compensated the authors and publishers whose books they digitized. On September 20, 2005, a class action lawsuit was filed against Google on behalf of authors by the Authors Guild, and on October 19, 2005, a civil lawsuit was filed by five large publishers as well as by the Association of American Publishers. After three years of behind the scenes negotiations, on October 28, 2008, the plaintiffs and Google agreed to a settlement, an

amended version[63] of which received preliminary approval on November 19, 2009.[64]

[63] In his book *The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)*, Said Vaidhyanathan offers a useful summary of some of the most important elements of the settlement found below. Vaidhyanathan argues that this settlement "generated a new, hybrid set of rules to govern our information ecosystem and set the terms of access to our cultural heritage." Here, "our" refers to the United States in particular.

- The members of the Authors Guild and the Association of American Publishers agreed to cease pursuing damages for copyright infringement.

- Google offered to pay$125 million to publishers to settle the case.

- Google undertook plans to establish and run a not-for-profit rights registry to allow rights holders to claim or establish control over out-of-print works. This registry was intended to serve as a database through which scholars and publishers could find rights holders in order to clear rights. Because no such registry existed previously, this provision had the potential to be a boon to research and publishing. In addition, it could help rights holders accrue royalties (meager though they might be) by exploiting a market that has never worked efficiently or effectively: that for reprints or selections from out-of-print works. Google was undertaking to do what the U.S. Copyright Office should have done years ago.

- Google agreed to offer (with strict controls on the ability to print and share) full-text copies of certain out-of-print books for sale as downloads.

- Google undertook to offer much better access to many-out-of-print works still under copyright. Before the settlement, Google offered largely useless excerpts of these texts. The settlement provided for much richer and broader access.

- Google agreed to provide designated computer terminals in U.S, libraries that would offer free full-text, online viewing of millions of out-of-print books. Google would forbid printing from these terminals, but users would be able to purchase electronic copies of the books from these terminals. (161-162)

Upon approval of the settlement, however, Google Book Search will change in a number of ways. Currently, Google can only offer snippets of in-copyright[65] books that it has digitized through the Library Project, and this includes a vast majority of their holdings that are out-of-print. Once the settlement is approved, Google will be able to offer access to out-of-print but in-copyright books through what they call "preview, reading and purchase," basically mimicking the service that they offer now through the Partner Program, in which users will be able to preview the out-of-print book and decide whether or not they want to purchase the digitized copy. Similarly, the new settlement will significantly alter the extent to which users will be able to access entire books. With regards to online access, Google Books users will be able to purchase access to millions of books, which they will be able to read at their leisure and in their entirety simply by accessing their Google Books account. The book they have been reading will be waiting for them on their electronic bookshelf. Libraries and universities will also be able to purchase institutional subscriptions, which will give their patrons access to full digitized versions of millions of books, including access to an electronic library that combines the collections of numerous renowned libraries across the United States, as well as free access to millions of out-of-print books. As Darnton notes, the settlement will also "creat[e] an enterprise known as the

You can find the full version of the settlement itself here: www.books.google.com/googlebooks/agreement/#1; see Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 160.

[64] See Darnton, *The Case for Books.*

[65] Since the 1998 Copyright Term Extension Act all books copyrighted after January 1, 1923, are considered to be protected for the period of the author's life plus an additional seventy years.

Book Rights Registry to represent the interests of the copyright holders"[66]. The Book Rights Registry will be responsible for locating the authors, publishers and other rights holders under this agreement and ensuring that they receive the revenue that they are due through their partnership with Google.[67] It is important to note that because this agreement was the result of a U.S. lawsuit, this new Google Books will only be available for consumers within the United States. Internationally, Google will remain as it is now, unless similar agreements are made with rights holders in other countries. It is not entirely certain, however, that rights holders abroad will embrace Google Books as they have within the United States.

The Library: Emergent Technologies, Profit, Access

Precisely five years following Google's announcement of this ambitious project, on December 14th, 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that France would spend nearly $1.16 billion (CAD) to digitize its own national patrimony, as a way of countering Google's digitization project. France, along with several other European countries, has been wholly opposed to Google's digitization project since its inception. Sarkozy's push for a French national digitization project is a clear statement of France's wish to maintain control over its cultural heritage. In addition, it is also a strategy to keep France's National Library, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), also originally opposed to the Google Books project, from entering into any sort of agreements with Google with regards to the digitization of its own

[66] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 13.

[67] "Google will retain 37 percent, and the registry will distribute 63 percent among the rightsholders" ; Ibid., 13.

collections. But why this reticence and these strategies? We could assume that France did not want to endorse the Google Books project for political reasons. Such reasons are not difficult to deduce, seeing as France has always had a particular kind of love-hate relationship with the United States, and has always aggressively protected its cultural integrity against the ubiquity of American cultural products. However, it would appear that the Bibliothèque nationale de France, ideally would like to partner up with Google as they do not have the funds to digitize by themselves and alternative projects to Google Books like Europeana do not have enough fast cash. As a result, the charge of preserving cultural expression is placed in the hands of those who hold the funds to do so, and in this instance it belongs to a corporate institution such as Google. In his book *The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)*, Said Vaidhyanathan argues that this situation, at least in the ways in which it has presented itself in the United States, and to some extent in Europe as well, is an instance of what he calls "public failure." Vaidhyanathan writes that "Google has deftly capitalized on a thirty-year tradition of 'public failure,' chiefly in the United States but in much of the rest of the world as well."[68] From its very early beginnings, the regulation of the Internet was a touchy subject, one which governments were hesitant to take a clear position on, and consequently, almost by default, Google stepped in to solve many of those sticky issues. The same argument can be made with regards to the digitization of books. Government programs such as Sarkozy's were launched almost as an afterthought, a counter measure against a corporate institution's problematic claim to knowledge and culture; however, in hindsight, government programs such as a potential national digitization project, should no doubt have been initiated long before Google had the

[68] Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*, 40.

chance to take the reins. Google merely stepped in, both faster and more effectively, where governments failed to. As Vaidhyanathan explains:

> Public failure [...] occurs when instruments of the state cannot satisfy public needs to deliver service effectively. This failure occurs not necessarily because the state is the inappropriate agent to solve a particular problem (although there are plenty of areas in which state service is inefficient and counterproductive); it may occur when the public sector has been intentionally dismantled, degraded, or underfunded, while expectations for its performance remain high.[69]

And in these cases the market usually steps in to fill the void.

*

Nonetheless, the debate underway is not only between that which is private or corporate and profit-driven versus that which is free and in the interest of the public, between Google and the institution of the library, for example. France's opposition to the Google Books project highlights a tension that lies in the uncertainty of new and emergent media technologies that hold so much promise in preserving cultural expression and democratizing access to it, while simultaneously challenging the usefulness or necessity of traditional institutions such as libraries, which over centuries have been entrusted with this very same task. In his book *Making Digital Cultures*, Martin Hand writes that what we have seen over recent years is a "technologization of the public library." He writes that

> the public library has continually been at the forefront of information technology implementation. This has most often been associated with improvements in service and efficiency. However the relationships between public libraries and new technologies have always produced more dystopian speculations concerning the inevitable obsolescence of

[69] Ibid., 41.

> the traditional library as a public space, and most importantly, the demise of specific practices of learning 'about culture.'[70]

As Hand points out, an overarching concern seems to exist over the future of libraries as not only frequented public spaces, but of how the diminishment of their role as traditional safeguards of culture might undermine how an individual comes into contact with culture in his or her everyday realities. But why have we come to trust the library as the traditional safeguard of culture? An answer to this question would require more than simply tracing the history of libraries, but also an assessment of our relationship to culture when it is expressed in material forms such as books and the institution that has historically been the custodian of literary or book culture. In other words, this is a broader question of mediation and the materiality of culture and its dynamism both on account of and in the face of technological change.

*

If one were to visit the website of any public library in Canada today, very similar mission statements about the democratic mandate of the library, and its role in providing access to knowledge for the good of the public, are apparent. The website of the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec in Montreal, for example, states the following:

> [The Grande Bibliothèque] has as part of its mission to assemble, preserve permanently and disseminate Québec's published documentary heritage together with any related document of cultural interest, and documents relating to Québec that are published outside Québec, as part of its mission, to provide democratic access to the documentary heritage constituted by its collections, and to culture and knowledge in general, and to act, in this regard, as a catalyst among

[70] Martin Hand, *Making Digital Cultures: Access, Interactivity, and Authenticity* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 10-11.

> Québec documentary institutions, thereby contributing to the personal development of Quebecers.[71]

Vancouver's Public Library similarly states that its mission is: "To enrich all, to reach all." They write:

> We strive to enrich the life of our community by providing access to the world's ideas and information. We offer the finest possible collections, services, and technology. We provide caring and expert service supportive of human differences. We promote lifelong learning, the love of reading and exploration of ideas, culture, and knowledge in a welcoming, lively atmosphere. [72]

These mission statements can be compared to Google Books' expression of its own mandate: "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." And more specifically:

> The Google Book Search service is part of our efforts to help organise the world's information, making it universally accessible and useful. By making it possible to search the millions of books that exist in the world today, we hope to expand the frontiers of human knowledge—enabling more people to find more books in more languages.[73]

The similarities are striking: information, democratic access, and universal knowledge, seem to be the common goals of both public libraries and Google. Why then should we not embrace Google Books, as many, libraries even, are doing already?

*

[71] *Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec*, www.banq.qc.ca/aide/faq/index.html?language_id=1#what1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

[72] Vancouver Public Library, www.vpl.ca/about/cat/C445/(accessed September 8, 2011).

[73] Google, www.books.google.com/intl/en/googlebooks/history.html (accessed September 8, 2011).

Some answers would appear to be obvious. As was noted above, for one, there is no question that the ultimate goals of a profit-driven corporation such as Google are very different from that of a public library. As Darnton writes:

> When businesses like Google look at libraries, they do not merely see temples of learning. They see potential assets or what they call "content," ready to be mined. Built up over centuries at an enormous expenditure of money and labour, library collections can be digitized en masse at relatively little cost—millions of dollars, certainly, but little compared to the investment that went into them.[74]

This is echoed by Said Vaidyanathan when he argues that the latest technology that search engine companies (both big and small) are working on, is an algorithm that would provide for a "semantic search," one that could read "the contextual meaning of the search terms"[75] rather than being purely navigational. In order to come up with such an algorithm, Vaidyanathan claims that search engine companies need two things, a brilliant work force and access to a "massive collection[] of human-produced language on which computers can conduct complex statistical analysis."[76] In other words, what search engine companies like Google need to even hope to come up with a new semantic search engine, is a vast collection of books. "It's no accident" then, as Vaidyanathan writes "that Google has enthusiastically scanned and 'read' millions of books from some of the world's largest libraries. It wants to collect enough examples of

[74] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 11.
[75] Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*, 22.
[76] Ibid., 23

grammar and diction in enough languages from enough places to generate the algorithms that can conduct natural language searches."[77]

Darnton also notes the irony that libraries initially offered their collections for Google to digitize free of charge, and are now being asked to pay institutional subscription fees for what was theirs in the first place. Such financial requirements could cause future problems for libraries whose patrons will come to expect certain online services for free, notably Google's service, forcing libraries to potentially "cut back on other services, including the acquisition of books, just as they did when publishers ratcheted up the price of periodicals."[78] Who can say that Google will not increase charges for access to knowledge as its "universality" grows? One could argue that Google will keep its prices competitive, but as Darnton additionally points out, Google essentially holds a monopoly when it comes to the world's largest digital library.

> As an unintended consequence, Google will enjoy what can only be called a monopoly—a monopoly of a new kind, not of railroads or steel but of access to information. Google has no serious competitors. Microsoft dropped its major program to digitize books several months ago, and other enterprises like the Open Knowledge Commons (formerly the Open Content Alliance) and the Internet Archive are minute and ineffective in comparison with Google.[79]

Furthermore, the two aforementioned lawsuits that were brought against Google in 2005, benefited the company in the sense that any competitor will now have to go through similar negotiations with rights holders. These negotiations and the preliminary settlements that they resulted in

[77] Ibid.
[78] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 19.
[79] Ibid., 17.

are specific to Google and the rights holders with whom Google has negotiated with. It does not pertain to Google and other potential plaintiffs anymore than it does to Microsoft if it chose to embark on its own digitization project. Microsoft, for example, would have to face the possibility of similar negotiations; negotiations that, in the Google Books case, have now taken more than five years to be approved.

Shaping Choice, Creating Publics

Google's seemingly free and benevolent presence on the Web, an organizational saviour in a sea of what would otherwise be informational chaos has been hailed by most and criticized by few, a fact that can be added to Google's list of many accomplishments. However, Google's seamlessness and the ease with which it has entered our everyday lives, is precisely the reason we should be concerned. This is not to say that we should abandon Google's services and not give the company credit where credit is due. But it is to say that we should be more sceptical and more demanding as users. In a way, we are Google's real, profit-driving creditors. "Google," I'm tempted to say, "in practice, the Internet's large We makes you." Vaidhyanathan argues that Google's omnipresence and almost imperceptible rise to that position of power in the sphere of the virtual is something that is unprecedented and needs to be critically assessed, particularly because of Google's very particular "universal" ambitions. As Vaidhyanathan writes:

> [T]here were search-engine companies before Google, and several competitors still do just as good a job linking people to information as Google does. And there were Web advertising companies before Google, just as there are now other firms, such as Facebook, that try to link a user's expressed interest in subjects to potential vendors of goods and services that reflect those tastes. But there has never been a

> company with explicit ambitions to connect individual minds with information on a global – in fact universal – scale. The scope of Google's mission sets it apart from any company that has ever existed in any medium. This fact alone means that we must take it seriously.[80]

Google thus seemingly proposes the same mandates as the public library, for example, but the terms of its mission are not – although they may be presented as such - necessarily free. In fact Google's services are associated with a cost, and this cost goes beyond the monetary. Although Google's mandate is strikingly similar in wording to those of the libraries that were mentioned earlier, Google does seem to omit one important aspect: culture. Google seeks to organize the world's "knowledge," to make it universally accessible, but it does not mention how culture might relate to this, whereas culture is included in both the mandates of the Grande Bibliothèque and Vancouver's Public Library. This is an important distinction to make, for books *translate* culture, and by digitizing them and making them accessible in the millions, firstly, presupposes the transmission of a certain kind of culture, secondly, the construction of a definite and delimited idea of culture, and, finally, also works to privilege certain cultures over others (those who have partnered with Google, for example). The intention here is not to debate the pros and cons of Google Books, but rather to emphasize that the seemingly mundane and everyday implications raised by the debate as to whether a corporate institution should have authority over the preservation of cultural expression—precisely because its forms of access and preservation seem so democratic, public, universal, and, well, "free"—highlight how we as everyday, "ordinary," citizens interact with knowledge preservation, production, and dissemination.

[80] Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*, 16.

*

The former president of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, author of *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge*, and one of the primary leaders in this debate, Jean-Noël Jeanneney writes that:

> In spite of what nineteenth-century publishers sometimes imagined, there can be no universal library, only specific ways of looking at what is universal. Choices are always made, and must be made. Since the time of Gutenberg, the books produced by the human race (and I am speaking only of those printed in the West) amount to more than one hundred million. The quantity promised by Google, so impressive in absolute terms, corresponds to only a small percentage of this huge total. So we must wonder what books will be chosen, what criteria will determine the list.[81]

Choice is a crucial category here. From its inception, the genius behind Google as a search engine has been that it seemingly gave consumers everything they wanted for free. It is now common knowledge that this is a transparent illusion, and that Google sustains itself through advertising dollars. However, Google does something more, it makes millions of things available to its consumers so that they have as much as possible to choose from. With Google Books, users have access to over 12 million books. In this sea of information, however, out of 12 million books, how does one choose only 1 or even 5 books? Fortunately, Google can help with that too, because it does not only allow its users to access information, but organizes it for them as well. It helps people access what they want. How does Google know what they want? Their users told them. That seemingly free service that individuals have been getting from Google, has in fact not been free at all. Google users

[81] Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge: A View From Europe*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6.

have been paying for it, with their own personal information, with their likes and dislikes, their curiosities and desires. Furthermore, offering individuals a selection of 12 million books ends up not expanding the selection but rather reducing it, for when faced with overwhelming choice, people tend to choose what they already know. By helping people choose what they already know and want, Google not only determines what books make that so-called list that was highlighted earlier by Jeanneney, but it also pre-selects what books people will most likely choose themselves, therefore offering them something before they even knew they wanted it. In an eye-opening documentary about the endless promises of the Internet entitled *The Virtual Revolution: The Cost of Free*, David Rushkoff concludes that this process of recommendation employed by Google and by other similar companies on the Internet, reduces the individual to a commodity, or as he terms it "a demographic type." Rushkoff says that: "Recommendation engines, by telling me what people like me do, and encouraging me to be like a person like me, they help me to become more prototypically one of my kind of person, and the more like one of my kind of person I become, the less me I am, and the more I am a demographic type."[82]

*

But why, apart from the obvious criticisms, is any of this truly problematic? After all, Google is, to be fair, making our lives just that little bit easier. Its service provides us with a faster, easier, approachable Internet, a simpler, almost magical way of accessing information, and it could be argued that although it might make decisions for us, ones that are almost imperceptible, we are willing to accept those in exchange for simplicity and smoothness, we

[82] BBC Documentary, *The Virtual Revolution*, Programme 3: The Cost of Free, 2010.

are even willing to give up a glimpse of our privacy in order to have ease of access, which has become so dear to us. After all, most services and institutions make decisions on our behalf everyday in order to make our daily lives a little less chaotic - subway systems do it, universities do it, even libraries do it - all in the name of the public good. Google, however, as much as it would like us to believe it is (and most of us do), is not a public service. Google's universal mandate is problematic because it has contextualized what might be the public good in the language of capitalism. In her article entitled "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," Jodi Dean argues this very point when she analyzes how through emergent media the languages of democracy and capitalism have become almost indistinguishable. For Dean "[t]he notion of communicative capitalism conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations, indeed, the mechanism by which the will of *demos* manifests itself." And ironically, "[c]hanging the system – organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism – seems to require strengthening the system: how else can one organize and get the message across? Doesn't it require raising the money, buying the television time, registering the domain name, building the Web site, and making the links?"[83] The reason that Google needs to be problematized, particularly when it comes to the digitization of knowledge, is because by having made itself an unquestioning and even necessary part of our daily lives, it has made us believe that it was our only choice, that the internet without Google is both hard and unpleasant, and that an alternative, Google-less Internet is unimaginable. If we allow such

[83] Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics" in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, edited by Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 104-105.

dystopian speculations to continue, in a few years alternative digitization practices and projects will also seem beyond the scope of the everyday. In this schema of control and access, inquiry is stunted and the public domain becomes ever more privatized.

If we are to question who or what type of "cultural" institutions have the authority to participate in the preservation of cultural expression, and as has been highlighted throughout this paper, we seem to be allowing Google Books to take on an ever greater portion of this task by working with publishing companies and libraries alike, then we are also on some level allowing Google to shape the choices that we make, as to what we read, and what kinds of knowledge we come into contact with. Furthermore, if in the face of overwhelming choice we tend to gravitate towards what we already know, then really that so-called wealth of knowledge has slipped through our fingertips. Google, although it is promising to do so, is not really giving individuals more access to knowledge, in fact, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Google is possibly undermining this idea of widespread access to knowledge, for it is privatizing that knowledge as opposed to publicizing it. Darnton highlights this point well when he writes that

> if we permit the commercialization of the content of our libraries, there is no getting around a fundamental contradiction. To digitize collections and sell the product in ways that fail to guarantee wide access would be to repeat the mistake that was made when publishers exploited the market for scholarly journals, but on a much greater scale, for it would turn the Internet into an instrument for privatizing knowledge that belongs in the public sphere.[84]

[84] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 11.

It is not my intention to romanticize the library and to argue that we should remain faithful to our traditional safeguards of cultural expression, for both public and national libraries alike make decisions for us about what we should or should not have access to as well. However, as opposed to Google, although libraries may push to preserve one culture over another, the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec a Quebecois one, the Bibliothèque nationale de France a French one, for example, this decision is made public. What had been noted earlier in this paper is that the negotiations that took place with regards to the lawsuits brought against Google were negotiations that were private. They were not open to public debate, and yet Google's mission one could argue, is to, in one way or another, provide a de facto public service. Google's goal is to transcend both the spaces of the public and the national by making access to knowledge universal, but this process is hidden from the public and rests in the hands and interests of a few.

*

Although we might conclude that an ever-expanding digital library, such as Google Books purports to be, could render the library as an actual space, obsolete, I would argue that libraries are institutions that are much more stable than we might think. This is not to say that they are unchanging. On the contrary, the survival of the library as such has relied heavily on the fact that it has readily adapted to the new and ever-changing environment in which it finds itself, and most importantly has proved itself indispensable as a sort of central nervous system to new and emergent technologies. Shannon Mattern, in her book entitled *The New Downtown Library: Designing With Communities* writes:

> It is important to remember that even immaterial media has a material dimension; we need servers for the electronic databases, we need

> playback devices to access our storage media in their rapidly evolving physical forms, and we need management systems to control the mass of wires that links everything together. And despite the fact that we *could* simply turn to Google to teach us everything we need to know, libraries do serve as reliable navigators in this ever-widening, and still haphazardly mapped, sea of information.[85]

Moreover, the idea of making things public and in the interest of the public is something that ultimately Google will not be able to compete with. For instance, at least in modern library design, the process of the building of the physical library is opened up (for the most part) to public consultation and participation, making it so that the knowledge that ends up being built into the very architecture of the library itself becomes visible. Similarly, the digitization (no one could deny its necessity) and preservation of a cultural heritage, should also be opened to public consultation and participation. As Darnton writes, "[y]es, we must digitize. But more important, we must democratize. We must open access to our cultural heritage. How? By rewriting the rules of the game, by subordinating private interests to the public good, and by taking inspiration from the early republic in order to create a Digital Republic of Learning"[86].

The Grande Bibliothèque: Public Digitization

These are not merely utopian claims, there are libraries that are taking on the initiative with regards to the digitization of national patrimony rather than

[85] Shannon Mattern, *The New Downtown Library: Designing With Communities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), ix.

[86] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 13.

leaving this task to Google. The Grande Bibliothèque du Québec in Montreal is an excellent example of this. In April of 2005, the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec opened in Montreal, a library project of unprecedented scale in the city. The Grande Bibliothèque (GB) project unfolded during a significant moment in the cultural history of Quebec, in which contemporary technological changes were and are still exerting transformative pressures on traditional models of the library. These same technologies have come to play an increasingly important role in the formation, circulation and reproduction of cultural practices and identities more broadly. One of the main reasons for the creation of the Grande Bibliothèque was to offer Montreal citizens a public library that was capable of not only hosting and managing emergent media technologies but that would provide free and equal access to these new media. On December 6, 2010, the Grande Bibliothèque along with the Société des musées québécois (SMQ) and 18 other organizations launched an appeal for the digitization of Quebec's cultural heritage. The press release reads as follows: "Faced with the need to guarantee that Québec's cultural heritage be preserved, and to ensure that it is available on the Web, the multidisciplinary committee of the Réseau québécois de numérisation patrimoniale (RQNP) is inviting citizens and professionals involved in information, education and culture to support its actions by signing the Appeal for the digitization of Québec's cultural heritage."[87] The appeal is in response to an initiative that had been launched by the GB in 2006, and that was published in a final survey in 2009, which sought to look into the state of digitization of Quebec's cultural heritage. The survey reported that a mere 6 percent of Quebec's heritage

[87] "BAnQ, the SMQ and 18 organizations launch an appeal for the digitization of Québec's cultural heritage," *BanQ,* www.banq.qc.ca/a_propos_banq/salle_de_presse/communiques_de_presse/2010/com_2010_12_06.html?language_id=1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

collections had been digitized, and that 74 percent of the survey participants declared that they were "extremely interested" in participating in a networked digitization project of Quebec's national patrimony. Furthermore, the survey highlighted that 79 percent of the interested participants admitted to not having the adequate human or financial resources at their disposal in order to properly realize such a vast digitization goal. In response to these findings, in a speech delivered on November 13, 2009, Chair and Chief Executive Officer of the Grande Bibliothèque, Guy Berthiaume, asked for a collective engagement, not only from cultural institutions in Quebec, but also from the general public, in support of a national digitization project.[88] Only through a collective engagement would it be possible to hope to respond to the technological expectations of the moment, and to be somewhat competitively positioned with regards to the commercial initiatives of corporate enterprises such as Google. In the press release from 2010, Berthiaume is quoted as saying that "As has rarely happened in the past, we find that our professions are at the heart of what is truly a societal issue. With the abundance of possibilities that new technologies are opening to us, our responsibility is fundamentally engaged in the survival and the spread of our heritage."[89] As much as new and emergent technologies are facilitating the preservation as well as the dissemination of cultural heritage and broader forms of knowledge, Berthiaume makes an important point when he brings up the notion of responsibility. In calling on the support of the citizens of Quebec as well as

[88] "Discours et Allocutions," BAnQ, http://www.banq.qc.ca/a_propos_banq/sale_de_presse/discours_allocutions/2009/numerisation_patrimoniale.html?language_id=3 (accessed September 8, 2011).

[89] "BAnQ, the SMQ and 18 organizations launch an appeal for the digitization of Québec's cultural heritage," *BanQ,* www.banq.qc.ca/a_propos_banq/salle_de_presse/communiques_de_presse/2010/com_2010_12_06.html?language_id=1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

various cultural institutions in the province, one could argue that a claim is being made in support of the idea that the responsibility of preserving culture and making it more accessible, should really be the responsibility of society as a whole. Libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions could be mediators of various decision making processes, but these decisions should not only be made public but should also come from the constituent publics themselves.

Conclusion: Participation and Cultural Media

In *Designing With Communities*, Shannon Mattern writes that "[t]he shaping of a library building is, in effect, the shaping of the publics it serves and the determination of the institution's public identity."[90] Public participation in the creation of a cultural institution, as well as in the digitization and dissemination of cultural forms of expression, could be seen as an alternative form of political engagement. Both Google and the library could be seen as cultural media that are oriented in the production of a particular sort of public sphere and, like all media, shape and are shaped by the publics whose practices, encounters and interests they mediate. The question we need to ask ourselves is if we prefer to be shaped by profit-driven interests or democratic ones. In either case, when it comes to access to knowledge, whether we are dealing with corporate interests or not, someone needs to be held accountable. "Libraries say, 'Digitize we must.' But not on any terms," as Darnton writes, "[w]e must do it in the interest of the public, and that means holding the digitizers responsible to the citizenry."[91]

[90] Mattern, *The New Downtown Library*, 9.
[91] Darnton, *The Case for Books*, 12.

Paulina Mickiewicz is currently in her fifth year of a Ph.D. program in Communication Studies at McGill University in Montreal. She has a Master's degree in French Cultural Studies from Columbia University. Her dissertation research focuses on libraries in the digital age as they relate to identity, subjectivity and citizenship, particularly in the Quebec and Canadian context. Her research interests include library design and architecture, cultural institutions and urban life, and the digitization of cultural heritage and memory.

Bibliography

"BAnQ, the SMQ and 18 organizations launch an appeal for the digitization of Québec's cultural heritage,"*BanQ*,www.banq.qc.ca/a_propos_banq/salle_de_presse/communiques_de_presse/2010/com_2010_12_06.html?language_id= 1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

Battles, Matthew. *Library: An Unquiet History*. New York: Norton, 2003.

BBC Documentary, *The Virtual Revolution*, Programme 3: The Cost of Free, 2010.

Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec, www.banq.qc.ca/aide/faq/index.html?language_id=1#what1 (accessed September 8, 2011).

Darnton, Robert. *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2009.

Dean, Jodi. "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics" in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, edited by Megan Boler. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

"Discours et Allocutions," BAnQ, http://www.banq.qc.ca/a_propos_banq/salle_de_presse/discours_allocutions/2009/numerisation_patrimoniale.html?language_id=3(accessed September 8, 2011).

"Google Books Settlement Agreement," *Google Books*, www.books.google.com/googlebooks/agreement/#1 (accessed September 8, 2011)

Hand, Martin. *Making Digital Cultures: Access, Interactivity, and Authenticity*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2008.

Jeanneney, Jean-Noël. *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge: A View From Europe*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Mattern, Shannon. *The New Downtown Library: Designing With Communities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011.

Vancouver Public Library, www.vpl.ca/about/cat/C445/(accessed September 8, 2011).