

From the "Gutenberg Galaxy" to Google Books

The adventure, which Google began in 2004 with the mission of digitizing all the world's books and creating, on the Internet, the largest ever channel of human knowledge, is going through its most difficult moment due to the opposition it has encountered on both sides of the Atlantic.

On the one hand, the United States – a country in which it had reached an agreement with authors and publishers in October 2008 to sell millions of out-of-print volumes through its Google Books platform – ordered, this past October 7, the company to revise the complex agreement executed with over 400 entities. This is something that seems almost impossible, especially after the antitrust investigation conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, brought on by three of the digital giant's main adversaries, Yahoo!, Microsoft and Amazon.

The major problem in this debate, aside from the books subject to rights of authors and publishers, relates to the so-called "orphan works," those out-of-print books with current copyrights where the authors cannot be identified or contacted. While U.S. law allows these works to be digitized, and this accounts for 75% of the total, in Europe we find the opposite to be true.

So, on the old continent, the opposition to Google has mainly come from Germany and France, who justify their rejection based on the fact that European works would be digitized at American universities without permission from the countries of origin, and on the danger that this agreement would legalize a de facto monopoly. European countries fear that the formidable power of Google Books would compete directly with non-commercial digital libraries such as Europeana, the great European digital library project.

Outside the context of the interests of authors, publishers, universities and other entities involved in this conflict of interest, we cannot forget the role we as readers play. Although many stories will never find a better place to be read than on paper, digitizing books will bring great opportunities to areas such as research and education. Bibliographies, citations and footnotes will become fully alive, as they will take us directly to their references with a single mouse click, saving us from physically having to go to the library to do the manual searches that involve so much effort.

Another benefit that digitizing out-of-print books would bring is the possibility of increasing the "long tail" – a term coined by the editor in chief of Wired magazine, Chris Anderson – by enabling access to out-of-print content. We are looking at a publishing industry rooted in outdated business models and unmindful of the possibility of new value creation models for all stakeholders.

While Google has laid the foundation to open up all the world's knowledge to the public, breaking open Pandora's box in the "Gutenberg Galaxy," a concept from Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, we do not know what conditions may end up being dictated in the market. The digital book has only just begun to write its first paragraphs.

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