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EDITORIAL

The Electronic Library

Last week, Google announced an ambitious new plan to start converting millions of books into digital files in partnership with several major libraries, including the New York Public Library and the libraries at Harvard, Stanford and Oxford. This is a logical step for Google, which says its mission "is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." The idea of making books available online is not new, but this plan represents an enormous shift in scale, so enormous that if it is carried out successfully, it may redefine the nature of the Internet and the university.

The library is the heart of every university, and one of the basic tasks a university performs is to preserve books and control access to them. No matter how liberally a university chooses to define "access," its books are restricted by geography at the very least. Google wants to make the books it scans freely available, in searchable, full-text forms, to anyone, anywhere, with an Internet connection. It will also provide information for finding the nearest copy of the real physical book.

The prospect is inherently enticing, especially to anyone who has ever worked in a major research library. Google says it will take six years to scan some 15 million books. It will take even longer to understand the cultural implications of admitting everyone with Internet access to the contents of the world's great research libraries.

But there are some serious concerns. One is about copyright. At the outset, this project will be limited to books that are old enough to no longer be under copyright. This is as it should be. It will serve as a demonstration of the immensity - and the immense cultural value - of works in the public domain, and could well kindle a new appreciation of the significance of the public

domain.

Beginning with older books will also give Google, the libraries and book publishers time to sort out the problem of creating a comprehensive digital library of books that are currently under copyright. As always in negotiations over intellectual property, the trick will be to balance public utility, corporate profits and the welfare of writers, scholars and editors, and to do so, if possible, without the intervention of Congress.

Another crucial concern is the well-being of the books themselves. Google has developed a scanning technology that the company claims is not destructive. Clearly, Google will need to work closely with libraries to ensure that no books are damaged. It is an illusion to think that the digital versions of scanned books can replace the books themselves.

A participating library will get a free digital copy of every book scanned in its collection. In other words, each library will essentially get a digital backup of a significant portion of its holdings, but it will be critical to remember that printed books are a stable medium, one that has persisted for hundreds of years.

Digital technology is only a few years old, and even in that brief time, the digital world has produced dozens of incompatible, and often unreadable, media formats. The Google project will enhance the usefulness of the books it encompasses, but it in no way will render them obsolete.