

The dream of every reader, historian, academic – now that we have had a tantalizing glimpse of the possibilities – must be to have digital access to every book ever written, in any language. But how close are we, in Europe, to realizing that dream and what obstacles still lie in the path? The first e-book, produced back in 1971, was somewhat ahead of its time, but since 1990 there has been a proliferation of digitization projects in the US (be they federally funded, not-for-profit, or university affiliated). European projects have been a bit slower off the mark, kick-started by a burst of activity in 1997, and they have tended to operate only at national level. In 2004, Google brought its more far-reaching vision to the table and the world of commercial interest collided spectacularly with that of the digital archive. In the States, the publishing industry, anxious about scanning and copyright issues, rose up against Google, initiating a civil action which rumbles on to this day (December 2009). It was the chief librarian of France's Bibliothèque nationale who galvanized Europe into action: the continent launched its counterpoint to Google, the Bibliothèque numérique européenne, in September 2005. However, backlash reactions predicated on issues of linguistic imperialism may lead to an unnecessary raising of barriers (for example Libreka!, with its German-only interface) and a proliferation of incompatible file formats, which impede rather than facilitate global searches. It is these issues of access that are key to the debate – how to ensure compatibility and searchability, where to store digital repositories, and whether all the stakeholders can be fairly rewarded, so that the publishing industry can continue to flourish in its new incarnation.

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