

Managing Media Production in the Age of Convergence

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A hegemonic Western narrative of the history of media technology suggests that since the Gutenberg Press, every technology invented brought a sweeping change to society. The Gutenberg Press made print culture in Europe flourish; photography and film popularised methods of documentation; radio allowed amateurs to spread their messages; television united American popular culture; and finally, the Internet. Although every new medium may have brought specific changes, the storyline can be boiled down to: “innovative inventors (accidentally) discovered new technology, which helped the small people to challenge the powerful”. The powerful are the church, the monarchy, government, military, and media conglomerates.

One recent protagonist in the narrative is Google. Since its inception in 1998, Google has been seen as a friend of Internet users—it is free of charge, it separates search results from advertisements, and it is easy to use. Media conglomerates are wary of Google because it delivers organised (and often free) information to users, from videos to newspaper headlines, from maps to scanned books.

The lawsuit that five biggest US publishers and the Authors Guild of US brought to Google is the latest episode of how new technology disrupts society. The publishers and authors accused Google of infringing copyrights by scanning copyrighted books. The little people—librarians, academics, and civil rights advocates—on the other hand supported Google. The little people argued that Google Books offers an unprecedented chance to tilt the unequal power relations for the poor, the visually impaired, the rural populations, and the Third World. It may take years to assess if Google Books would increase knowledge access to the little people, but in the process of scanning books, Google is reinforcing the unequal relation between workers and owners at the micro level, and between developed countries and developing countries at the macro level.

Who are the ones who scan books for Google? We may have seen images of fingers in scanned books and laughed at the anonymous fingers. But whose fingers are those? How much are workers paid? What is the gender and race of the workers? There is hardly any information about the labour who does the manual work. Google is secretive about book scanning because the technology is patented. It is only known that humans are used to turn pages because machines may damage fragile papers. A professor at Carnegie Mellon University outsourced book scanning to China because it only costs one-third of the cost in the US. Google employment page does not advertise any book scanning positions. It is possible that book scanning is contracted so that the workers do not enjoy the excellent benefits that Google employees are entitled to. The tedious, low-paying, unskilled book scanning workers may share more similarities to factory workers than those in hi-tech industry.

Contrary to the promise made about Google Books, knowledge disparity between developed countries and developing countries increases. Google CEO Eric Schmidt said that a high-school student from Bangladesh will have the same access to books to an university student in an US elite colleges. However, he seems to have neglected that a Bangladeshi student may prefer local materials written in Bengali. Knowledge is not universal—we can only make sense of knowledge if it applies to local situation. Those who grow up in colonies know that reading Jane Austen and Shakespeare does not help the colonised to understand their local cultures. The belief that universal knowledge can be one day archived and retrieved misses one important

point—that knowledge is only useful if the knowers can relate to it. Jean-Noël Jeanneney, former president of French National Library, complained that Google Books has an English bias. However, even if all the French-language books are scanned, there will always be more books in the English language. There are simply not enough books written in minority and oral-based languages. For someone who speaks a minority language, Google Books may further reinforce the hegemony of the English language in print culture.

The unequal relations at both the micro and macro levels shows that Google Books does not disrupt society, but reinforces labour's relationship to owners of production and consolidates the dominance of the English language in knowledge production.