Inheritance and loss? A brief survey of Google Books

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Abstract

The Google Books Project has drawn a great deal of attention, offering the prospect of the library of the future and rendering many other library and digitizing projects apparently superfluous. To grasp the value of Google's endeavor, we need among other things, to assess its quality. On such a vast and undocumented project, the task is challenging. In this essay, I attempt an initial assessment in two steps. First, I argue that most quality assurance on the Web is provided either through innovation or through "inheritance." In the later case, Web sites rely heavily on institutional authority and quality assurance techniques that antedate the Web, assuming that they will carry across unproblematically into the digital world. I suggest that quality assurance in the Google's Book Search and Google Books Library Project primarily comes through inheritance, drawing on the reputation of the libraries, and before them publishers involved. Then I chose one book to sample the Google's Project, Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy. This book proved a difficult challenge for Project Gutenberg, but more surprisingly, it evidently challenged Google's approach, suggesting that quality is not automatically inherited. In conclusion, I suggest that a strain of romanticism may limit Google's ability to deal with that very awkward object, the book.

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