

Google's next step towards domination of the Information Age

by Nicholas Pullen via quill - ABC Thursday, Nov 27 2008, 7:46pm

international / mass media / other press

[Numerous posts to this site (input google in search box) warned very early of Google's intention to monopolise ALL available data. The mass media has as usual been extremely sluggish in reporting real threats to our democracies and freedoms. However, perhaps from fear of its own future relevance, if Google succeeds with its plans, the mass media now reports on the Corporation that is without doubt the greatest threat to free thought and liberty in the world today. Ed.]



The recent announcement of a proposed settlement in the class action by US publishers and authors in the copyright case against Google signals an inevitable, but nevertheless worrying, milestone in the collection and storage of the world's information.

The deal will not have financial benefits for Australian publishers and will only provide Australian authors with diluted revenues as royalties will be paid directly to US publishers. It will have no cultural benefit for Australian people, with the internet behemoth Americanising all content for the US market, and finally, it will hold a dangerous monopoly over charges and public access to information.

Under the proposed deal, which is yet to be sanctioned by a US court, Google will pay \$US125 million to settle the litigation. The money will go towards setting up a registry to make payments to "rights holders" (US authors and publishers with works still subject to copyright) whose books will be digitised and exploited by Google over the web and for books that have already been entered into Google's Book Search site (at last count, about 7 million).

Everyone involved in the settlement has described it as historic and "win-win" with suitable justification. Costly litigation has been avoided, there are no losers facing a damaging decision that would set a new precedent for copyright laws, authors and publishers now have a new revenue stream to rely on and out-of-print books will be more accessible. It looks as though everyone benefits and there is no downside. However, the subtleties in this agreement are not readily apparent and have very real dangers for the future.

In one of the greatest sleight of hand deals in intellectual property history (there is no assignment of copyright - just a "non-exclusive" use of the material), Google may be the repository of all books and similar publications coming out of the US. It will become a virtual gatekeeper of this source of

information. Think of it. Most books in the English language (plus other languages) past, present and future, all residing in one database and accessible by a privately owned company that is aggregating the world's data and metadata (data that describes other data) at an exponential rate.

The agreement has severe restrictions on the ability of Google to republish books that are still in copyright. But that is not the real issue. In essence, Google will not be in a different position to an agent with a licence to reproduce books on behalf of publishers and authors.

When one delves into the small print (of a settlement document of more than 300 pages), commercial implications arise. Google will be the only privately owned company to be able to analyse all information on this database. Already image analysis and text extractions, textual analysis, automated translation and research on different techniques for indexing and searching are on the agenda. Applications for this type of information in the commercial world are endless.

Harvard University has already sounded warning bells about public accessibility to the database. This will be in a subscription basis. However, the amount payable to Google is not known. Regulating rises in the subscription rate - for information that is generally free at the moment - is not addressed.

Countries outside the US (including Australia) will have another major issue to consider concerning US cultural hegemony. A person in Australia downloading Tim Winton's latest work from the database will receive the Americanised version - the one edited for the US market consumption that does not contain expressions foreign to that market. It will be a different version to the one available at a local bookshop.

Google is amassing a database of information that could only exist in a science fiction novella a few years ago. It collects information every time we use its search engine and it is in the grips of a defining copyright action concerning clips posted to YouTube, which it owns. Now it is on the threshold of dominating everything that appears in books throughout the world. And all for \$US125 million. Not bad positioning for a company with revenue of more than \$US10 billion per year.

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