



Knowledge from a Million Books and Palm Leaves

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The year 2003 began auspiciously for me and the other members of the Million Book Project (www.ulib.org) when we met with the President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, to discuss project progress at the presidential palace in New Delhi. President Kalam told us a story about a rural Indian physician whose knowledge of herbal medicines came from incised palm leaves, a traditional document format in southern India. This physician and his biotechnical urban colleague were able to bring forth a new cure by combining traditional knowledge with new scientific discoveries. Therein lies the hope of the Million Book Project.

The vision of the Million Book Project is to scan a million books using funding for equipment and travel from the U.S. National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0204865 and funding for labor from the country of India. My thesis in this editorial is that the potpourri of knowledge presented to the world at large will offer many new opportunities for fruitful and serendipitous meetings between old and new, east and west, technical and humanistic. The scope of the project will force an exploration of many assumptions and will press its participants to reach new solutions in such areas as public good/private gain and information technology/library cultures. The million book collection will be a collection of many other collections, and the project must observe both U.S. and other participating countries' copyright laws.

Physical/Digital Libraries

Physical libraries are unevenly distributed around the world and in the U.S.—from such information-rich areas as Boston, the Bay area, Philadelphia, Beijing, and Pittsburgh to rural areas with few books at all. This free-to-read collection will give all who can gain access to the web an opportunity to learn anywhere, anytime. Sacred texts literally incised on palm leaves with a stylus will be searched alongside robotics technical reports and publications of the National Academy Press, the official publishing arm of the national academies. The creativity engendered by these relationships will spawn new knowledge, as reported in President Kalam's story.

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Best Books

A driving force in this project is a desire to put the best books possible into the collection. To accomplish this, Carnegie Mellon University Libraries is seeking funding from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to write to academic and scholarly publishers to ask for permission to scan books that are out of print and still in copyright. Several university presses seem interested, and a few have already given permission. This project proposes a sensitive balance of the public's need for information with publishers/authors' needs to receive revenue—and allows both to flourish. The public will have access to materials and those who wish to use specific books extensively will probably elect to have those printed and bound at a commercial establishment. New micropayment systems will then return some to revenue to the publishers.

Public Good/Private Gain

In October 2002, Brewster Kahle, a partner in the Million Book Project, and others from the Internet Archive made a highly publicized trip from their home in San Francisco to the steps of the Supreme Court. Kahle traveled in a satellite-bearing converted bread truck so that books could be downloaded from the web, printed in the Internet Bookmobile, and bound in colored covers. Hundreds of children met the van at their public libraries and were able to see the printing of small books, which the children then folded into shape themselves (www.archive.org/texts/bookmobile.php). Kahle hoped to publicize the necessity of maintaining public domain as framed in the *Eldred v. Ashcroft* case then pending before the Supreme Court. The court has subsequently ruled that Congress does have the right to set the limit on copyright, no matter how long that might be. Currently, copyright is for the life of the author plus seventy years or for works for hire ninety-five years, and some entertainment companies are pushing for perpetual copyright. Private gain continues to trounce public good. The Million Book Project hopes to put as much quality material into the public domain as possible because students everywhere turn to the web as a first source for information. Currently, only about 6 percent of content on the Web is scholarly in nature, and the web is more like a sewer of pornography and vapid commercialism than like an electronic library.

Kahle's adventure further informed our thinking about the uses of a million digital books. In Hyderabad, we saw a book being scanned, drove across town to an internet café, and were given bound copies of that book. The cost of this binding and printing in India is only eighty cents for a paperback and two dollars for a hardback. At our subsequent meeting with President Kalam, we presented him with a similarly produced two-volume set of the classic *Pictorial Hyderabad*. This ability to return to the physical from the digital is an unexpected positive outcome of the project. The economics of print-on-demand, as compared with the costs of creating and storing books that may end up on remainder shelves, offer an attractive alternative to publishers, especially to university presses whose resources continue to shrink.

Academic libraries serve their scholarly communities of students, faculty, and staff. For many that service is a local, place-bound phenomenon, but now the web gives librarians the opportunity to serve not just local students and scholars but that same



community worldwide. Students in rural Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and Andhra Pradesh, a state of India, can all have access to the same books and palm leaves. Everywhere creative combinations of old and new knowledge from traditional and high tech sources will be combined to the benefit of a global community.

My special thanks to Winston Tabb and the staff of the Milton Eisenhower Library at The Johns Hopkins University. They provided the quiet space that allowed the composition of the better half of this editorial and their university campaign slogan “Knowledge for the World” inspired the title.

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