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MEDIA

You authors are saps to resist Googling

By Xení Jardin, XENI JARDIN is co-editor of the blog BoingBoing, a contributing writer for Wired magazine and a contributor to National Public Radio. She has written for many print and online magazines.

A CLASS-ACTION lawsuit filed this week against Google by the Authors Guild, a biographer of Abraham Lincoln, a children's book author and a former U.S. poet laureate is further evidence that copyright traditionalists' knee-jerk defenses can be worse for business than the technology they fear.

The guild, a group representing 8,000 authors, sued the Internet search powerhouse over the Google Print Library Project. Launched in December 2004, it promises to do for books what regular old Google does for websites — make them searchable and findable.

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Using high-speed scanning technology — the nature of which the company has yet to reveal (it must involve hamsters or time machines) — Google has been digitizing books in the libraries of the University of Michigan, Harvard, Stanford, Oxford and the New York Public Library.

The planned result: The world's most ginormous digital card catalog. Google "doesn't show even a single page to users who find copyrighted books through this program unless the copyright holder gives us permission to show more," according to the search engine's vice president, Susan Wojcicki. "At most," she explains, "we show only a brief snippet of text where their search term appears, along with basic bibliographic information and several links to online booksellers and libraries."

Google will make its money by selling ads next to book search result pages, just as it does when you search for images or Web pages — but the company says it won't show ads on pages that display books from libraries.

Authors Guild President Nick Taylor says the act of copying is a violation, even if Google isn't giving away entire books. Google is still a business, and it's copying with commercial intent.

Authors can tell Google to exclude their works. In August, Google halted the scanning of copyrighted books until Nov. 1, to give publishers time to compile do-not-scan lists. The authors suing Google argue that they should be the ones to decide when and how their works are copied and that the burden of opting out shouldn't be on them.

But this isn't the same as the recording industry's war on file-sharing or the Motion Picture Assn. of America's battles against DVD bootleggers. Google isn't pirating books. They're giving away previews. And in order to provide those keyword-searchable peeks, Google may have to scan entire books. For example, let's say you're a pug aficionado. A search on print.google.com for "tiara" + "pug" can't point you to the instructive masterpiece "Putting Party Hats on Dogs" unless the scan process got all the way to page 237, where the chapter "Princess Tea Parties for Toy Breeds" begins.

OK, there is no such book, but work with me here.

Perhaps the Authors Guild members would prefer that search companies pay them for the right to build book search services. If Google has its way, their logic goes, we'll

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lose control over who can copy our work, and we'll lose sales. But Internet history proves the opposite is true. Any product that is more easily found online can be more easily sold.

Amazon.com's "look inside" feature works similarly. And,

surprise, the Authors Guild has squabbled with it too.

If the paranoid myopia that drives such thinking penetrates too deeply into the law, search engines will eventually shut down. What's the difference, after all, between a copyrighted Web page and a copyrighted book? What if Internet entrepreneurs could sue Google for indexing their websites? What if the law required search engines to get clearance for every Web page? Even a company as large and well-funded as Google couldn't pull that off because what's on the Internet, and who owns that content, changes constantly.

As one author told me, "fear of obscurity, not digital indexing, is what keeps most authors awake at night."

Technology that makes it easier to find, buy and read books is good for everyone — even the authors suing Google.

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