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## In Defense of Google Books

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Don't listen to dystopian monopoly-mongers.

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In 1885, the city of Khartoum, the British-held capital of what is now Sudan, fell to Islamic revolutionary [Mohamed Ahmad](#) [3], known to his followers, who believed him to be the last in a line of prophets stretching back to the beginning of Islam, as the Mahdi. When he was asked to judge a difficult case or listen to a wrenching story, the Mahdi would weep. His enemies claimed that his tears were a trick, accomplished by putting pepper on his fingertips so he could brush his eyes and sob at will.

This is the kind of story that you might find in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel, but in fact it comes from the [journals of Charles Gordon](#) [4], a British general who died in the battle for Khartoum. The memoirs have been out of print for many years, but I know the story because I have been reading Gordon's diaries online, thanks to Google Book Search.

There are a hundred other gems like the story of the Mahdi's peppered fingertips in Gen. Gordon's diary alone, and *hundreds of millions* of facts are now being uncovered and made accessible by Google's extraordinary project of digitizing millions of books. But these days, when you read about Google Books, you hardly ever-well, never-get to read anything as lively as those kinds of facts and insights. No, what you get, over and over again if you've followed the saga of Google Books, is the story of all the folks fighting The Coming Google Monopoly.

The meme of the Google book monopoly has been gathering force over the last months, after being given a push by Robert Darnton, the head of Harvard's library system. Darnton was originally one of the most prominent backers of Google's digitization initiative. But somewhere along the line, Darnton got cold feet. In February, he [wrote an essay](#) [5] for the *New York Review of Books* in which he set out the case that thanks to Google Book Search, Google will enjoy "a monopoly of a new kind, not of railroads or steel but of access to information." Since Darnton's essay appeared, the anti-Google crusade has gathered steam, fed by Google-bashing advocacy groups like [Consumer Watchdog](#) [6], and the hue and cry has sparked a [federal antitrust inquiry](#) [7].

In the dystopian vision of the Google critics, Google Books threatens to leave human knowledge at the mercy of a dark power that will ratchet up the price of digital editions of books while running roughshod over the rights of authors, publishers, and readers. So far, nothing that Google—whose business model is based mainly around giving people information *for free*—has done would make you think that Google plans to do anything but

maximize access to its library. But it *can*, and in every dystopia everything bad that *can* happen *will* happen.

Some critics, led by Darnton, argue that Google Books threatens to develop a stranglehold on human knowledge and use it to gouge consumers. Others—such as literary agent Lynn Chu, in [this Wall Street Journal op-ed](#) [8]—contend that Book Search will rip off writers and publishers. And a few, such as Consumer Watchdog, try to argue that Book Search will *both* charge too much and give authors and publishers too little. None of this is true.

So let's take on some of the myths that have been propagated about Book Search:

**Google forces writers and publishers into an unfair deal that won't give them a fair share of what their work is worth.** Let's deal with this one first, because it's the easiest to dispense with. The deal that Google signed with publishers gives copyright holders *63 percent* of the revenue that Google takes in from their books. Very few authors and publishers might individually strike better deals than this one, and nothing in Google's agreement keeps them from doing that. But anybody who thinks that the majority of writers or small publishers could do better on their own than the deal for almost two-thirds of Google's book revenue that the publishing industry negotiated by acting in concert is living in dreamland.

**Google will ratchet up the price of online content and make it inaccessible.** Everything we know about Google indicates a clear preference for one price point: *free*. Darnton admits this but points out that this might change in the future. This is true—maybe even probable in the case of Book Search, which offers publishers and authors the chance to make money by *selling* books. Some will indeed sell for high prices, as they do now. But the notion that, in general, the books that publishers and authors cannot keep in print now will suddenly be available only at a cost that beggars consumers is bizarre. There are no profits in selling online access to today's out-of-print books for high prices—if there were, they wouldn't be out of print in the first place.

**The public would be better served by a nonprofit database that guaranteed access to books at "reasonable" prices.** In his *NYRB* essay, Darnton counts the failure to establish this kind of independent, noncorporate library as a big missed opportunity. The problem here is that, in practice, there is no assurance that what this independent authority would count as a reasonable price would be better than the price that Google is likely to charge. On the contrary, we already know that Google has the ability to come up with ad-driven business models that make "free" work; Darnton's hypothetical entity does not. Maybe more important, though, is that this kind of advance guarantee of reasonable prices *really would trample* the rights of writers and publishers who want to maximize how much they get for their work.

**Writers or publishers who let Book Search scan their books give up the right to control how they are presented and sold forever.** Even after Google has scanned their books, rights holders can *at any time* exclude them from Google's services. They can allow Google to display the whole book, excerpts, or nothing at all. The only right they lose if they accept the agreement that Google signed last year with associations of publishers and authors is the right to sue Google for copyright violations simply for adding their books to its electronic files. Google's critics have been spectacularly unsuccessful in getting actual writers or publishers to step up and explain how Google's efforts might harm them. The best that Consumer Watchdog could do was [an e-mail from an unnamed "successful author"](#) [9] convinced that Google has already stolen his "valuable rights."

**Google's enormous library will make publishers and authors beholden to only one all-powerful player.** This sounds plausible in theory but utterly misrepresents the facts on the ground when it comes to publishing. There already is one dominant player in the book business: It's Amazon, and publishers are uniformly terrified of

its growing power. By including a library of books that Amazon doesn't have, Google Book Search may at some point present an alternative go-to source for book buyers and create a counterweight to Amazon. This is what just about everyone in the book business really wants.

The bottom line on Book Search is that if you want to construct doomsday scenarios about how Google's Larry Page and Sergey Brin will partner with Dr. Evil to suddenly shut off our access to hundreds of years of knowledge, you can. But nothing we know about Google or about the book business gives us any indication we should expect that. A more likely scenario is that Google will give away so much of its content for free that, even after giving them 63 percent of its revenue, it may well return too little to writers and publishers. That would *still* leave the creators of the millions of out-of-print books that Google is scanning more than they get from their work now (zero!), but it would mean that eventually many will desert for better options.

We can worry about that when we get to it. Right now, though, it's not Google that's standing in the way of the advance of human knowledge. It's the Google bashers. Folks like Darnton might be worried about the effects that concentrating power in Google's hands will have on public access to books, but ask yourself this: In the past decade, who has done more for public access to knowledge. Harvard? Or Google? If you want to pick sides in this debate, that's what really tells you everything you need know.

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