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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)- Soup Kitchens and Superstores: An (Imperfect) Google Books Analogy

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ogy but goes beyond it....”² Such an approach, in effect, provided the analytical framework to work through and among different strata. In using genealogy, **Foucault** broke through individual strata which he had been investigating to trace changes in concepts and practices through many layers.

I recently found myself in an interesting dilemma which brought to mind **Foucault’s** switch to genealogy: as I move through issue after issue of “classic” **ATG** (often to the neglect of far more recent issues, I’m afraid to say), something strange is beginning to happen. History is starting to repeat itself, at least in a manner of speaking. I’ve noticed themes, as I will call them, developing between various strata. I very much enjoy reading through each issue to find out what it says beyond what it says, what it alludes to, what it foreshadows: I enjoy solving the riddle of a stratum’s unique internal coherence. But I am starting to wonder about some things. While I have enjoyed working within individual strata (taking each issue to be its own layer), I cannot help but feel that I have uncovered just so many curiosities. These finds have proven to be worthy of examination, certainly, but they are somewhat isolated in their respective layers.

As I work down through the stack of **ATG** issues (though metaphorically I suppose I am actually working my way up), I am always coming across various discursive artifacts that catch my attention. At the same time, looking across all the strata (archaeology analogies aside, I actually do have the issues arranged horizontally!), I have started to ask the bigger question: “What does it all (taken together) mean?” I guess this is the same ques-

tion **Nietzsche** posed about morality and that **Foucault** later applied to discipline and punishment. I now more fully appreciate the leap that **Foucault** made. Rather than continuing to uncover shards of the publishing-vending-acquisitions regime in fragments, the time has come to start working out what it all means.

Over the last year, I have found that **ATG** is fraught with what I will call preoccupations: “themes,” if you will, or even “circles,” if you must. Indeed, what might even be properly considered “anxieties.” I have uncovered what seems to be a tangle of often present, never resolved problems. But these are problems in the existential sense; not to be solved, exactly, but whose constant presence help define who we are in a professional sense that goes beyond job titles and responsibilities.

For example, are any of these familiar to you in the course of your contemporary discourse...?

- Escalating prices of continuing resources.
- Implementing new technologies to manage and/or manipulate content.
- Declining or uncertain staffing.
- Budgetary pressures that force difficult decisions.
- Global events that impact how and what we collect.
- Vendor consolidation and/or sudden changes in the information marketplace.
- Growing prominence and continual innovation within electronic resources.
- Crises in monograph publishing and collecting due to one or more of the above.

I thought so. Take the example of CD-ROMs, which I had originally planned to write this issue's column about. Looking at a

single stratum may be instructive; it can inform debates about historical conditions or make a useful comparison for our current practices. But after flipping through a number of issues and being unable to decide on which single stratum to focus, I realized that I needed to go beyond basic archaeology for the answers that I hoped to find. While fragments of CD-ROM discourse are scattered throughout a number of issues, what is revealed is more than a single artifact. What emerges is a preoccupation.

My brief look at CD-ROMs has shown it to be a medium that has caused a preoccupation through time, not just merely buried at a couple of points within it. The meteoric rise and fall of the CD-ROM is an interesting example of instability in technology created by a constantly changing environment of hyper-development, or at least that is my hypothesis at the outset. Still new just 20 years ago, the CD already seems antiquated — yet at its inception held a great deal of promise (not to mention hope) for the future of information storage and management. I believe the preoccupation with CD-ROMs is more complex than it initially appears, and so I will start my investigation there.

I hope that you will join me! 🐼

Endnotes

1. **Keith Ansell-Pearson**, “Introduction.” In **Friedrich Nietzsche**, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Revised Student Edition). Ed. By **Keith Ansell-Pearson**, Translated by **Carol Diethe**. Cambridge University Press: 2008. p. xx.
2. **Gary Gutting**, “Foucault.” In **Robert Audi** (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press: 2006. p. 231.

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — Soup Kitchens and Superstores: An (Imperfect) Google Books Analogy

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Imagine this scenario: the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen is operating in a downtown neighborhood. It has limited funding, but the dedicated and skilled employees who run it do their best. Every day, from 7:00 am until 9:00 pm, they offer soup and bread to anyone who comes through the door. Theoretically, the service is available to all, but in reality there are limitations: only those with access to the facility can use its services, for example (home delivery is available, but only to residents of the immediate neighborhood). The dining area can seat 45 people at a time. The menu is limited as well: each day three kinds of soup and two kinds of bread are offered. Since the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen relies on

a combination of (increasingly scarce) public funding and private donations, such limitations are inevitable.

Now imagine that **Wal-Mart** decides to open a soup kitchen of its own in the same neighborhood. Soup-Mart will operate in a manner that is in some ways similar to that of Sunny Day, with some very significant differences. First of all, Soup-Mart will offer a changing menu of 30 varieties of soup and ten varieties of bread each day, at no charge. The service will be available every day of the week, around the clock, and the dining area seats 500. Soup-Mart will use a small fleet of trucks to deliver soup and bread to shut-ins anywhere in the greater metro area, also at no charge. Costs

will be underwritten in part by the chain’s other commercial ventures and in part by advertising placed on the walls of the dining room, on the Soup-Mart delivery trucks, and on the bowls in which soup is delivered.

So far, the functional difference between Soup-Mart and the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen is really only one of scale — more soup, more bread, more seats, and more hours of service to more people. But here’s

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the kicker: in addition to its free menu of 30 varieties of soup and ten of bread, Soup-Mart will offer five “premium” soups (including lobster bisque, cream of asparagus with truffle oil, and wild mushroom) and two artisanal bread varieties at a modest cost, one that most (but not all) will be able to afford. In addition, the drivers of the delivery trucks will not carry cash with them, but will have card-readers. This means that distant customers who wish to buy premium soup and bread will have to use credit or debit cards.

What might we make of this situation? One possible response would be to applaud **Wal-Mart’s** innovative approach, and celebrate its use of massive market power to benefit hundreds of thousands of previously underserved people. We also might object to it on a number of grounds, including:

Equity of access to food. Soup-Mart is taking a vital resource (food) and using its market power to create tiers of privilege. The “haves” get premium soups and artisanal bread, while the “have-nots” get plain soup and pedestrian bread.

Privacy. Those who are attracted by the offer of moderately-priced premium food will be required to give up personal information (as encoded in their credit or debit cards) in order to buy it. Soup-Mart makes no promises as to exactly how it will keep its customers’ personal information private.

Threat of inflation. Sure, the premium soup is available at a low price today, but what will stop Soup-Mart from raising its prices once it builds a loyal customer base? For that matter, what assurance does the public have that it won’t eventually start charging for *all* of its soup?

Lack of competition. While it’s theoretically possible for competitors to enter Soup-Mart’s marketplace, in reality who is in a position to do so? Who can compete with **Wal-Mart**?

Threat to traditional soup kitchens. And here’s the real nut of the problem. What Soup-Mart threatens to do is put the good, caring people of Sunny Day out of business. People who know the needs of their local neighborhoods, and who are operating with the needs of poor people at heart, rather than the needs of shareholders. People who have been lovingly preparing soup and bread for years — some of them for decades — at little or no pay.

Whatever the merits of these objections, the ultimate question is this: does Soup-Mart offer a net gain or a net loss to the people of the city in which it operates? It’s always easy to identify and focus on either the downsides or the upsides to any new initiative, but the only way to know whether it’s a good initiative or a bad one is to put *all* of the negatives and *all* of the positives together and see how they balance out.

Analyses of the **Google Books** project generally and of the proposed settlement in particular have, I think, generally failed to do this. Those in favor have (predictably enough) focused on the upsides and pretended that the downsides don’t exist, and opponents have done the opposite. The problem for opponents is that the upsides are so obviously huge, and the downsides generally either frivolous or imaginary. The strongest argument against the settlement is probably the competition-and-monopoly argument, though even that one is not exactly a slam-dunk. The weakest are the equity and privacy objections. It seems a bit silly to object to the settlement on the basis of equal access when the impact on access will be all positive — if the settlement goes through, access to books will increase enormously for nearly everyone, and will decrease for absolutely no one. And the privacy objection is even weaker: if the settlement goes through, everyone will be able to access huge amounts of book content on the open Web without disclosing anything more about themselves than they would by visiting **Slate** or **Wikipedia** or the **American Library Association** site. Those who choose to purchase books via the Registry will have to give up some personal information to do so, of course, and it’s true that **Google** has remained vague about the privacy protections it will offer its customers. But **Amazon** is pretty vague about its privacy protections as well, and I don’t see the **Electronic Frontier Foundation** taking out any petitions against them.

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much technology and our bible was the **Shelf List** which was in call number order the way the books sat on the shelves. (p.32) Was thinking that a column called “old time practices” would be a great **ATG** column. Surely one of you old-timers out there is interested?

Talking about old practices, **Jesse Holden’s** column this time is about some of our old anxieties, this issue, p.79. And be sure to order **Jesse’s** new book, just out. *Acquisitions in the New Information Universe: Core Competencies and Ethical Practices* (Neal-Shuman, 2010).

By the time this column goes to print, there’s a good chance that US District Court **Judge Denny Chin** will have made a ruling on whether the **Google Books Settlement** can go forward. If he rules against it, opponents of the settlement may feel that they’ve struck a blow for fairness, equity, privacy, and competition. I’m willing to bet that most of those opponents are people who already have easy access to pretty good library collections. The huge number of people around the world who have some form of Internet access but little or no access to traditional libraries — in other words, those who stand to benefit the most from the **Google Books** project — may feel differently. 🌧️

And one new note, **Richard Brown, Peter Givler** and **Alex Holman** <aholzman@temple.edu> are planning to take over the **university press column** in **ATG**. They would like to try something different for the next year and invite various members of our community to discuss different issues involving libraries and university presses. **Alex** also says he hopes to come to **Charleston** this year (he’s been away too long!).

I had a computer meltdown (something to do with thunderstorms and lightning that fried my modem — and, yes, I had a surge protector but it didn’t stop the computer genie!) over Labor Day and we are just getting Conference registrations caught up. However, we are way ahead of last year’s registrations by nearly one hundred strong! Come on down! www.katina.info/conference 🌧️