



Information Research - Vol. 28 No. 3 (2023)

Marcum, Denna and Schonfeld, Roger C.

Along came Google:

A history of library digitization

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. x, 222 p. ISBN 978-0-691-22437-4

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691224374/along-came-google>

A sub-title of the book under review – *A history of library digitization* – explains the subject of this work faithfully. It is definitely an attempt to present the historical record of events and processes leading to the present day. At the end of this book about library digitisation, the authors register their surprise at the vast change that has happened in scholarly communication and academic libraries. This surprise is quite legitimate. Though the book covers almost 100 years – the period that merits the term of history, it is true to say that the main changes brought about by the digitisation of books and library collections have occurred during our lifetime.

It should be made clear that the historical record covers American academic libraries, and some mentioning of events in Europe do not change this fact. On the other hand, the major digitisation technologies and the actors driving book digitisation or inhibiting it come from the US. Their impact on the process globally and on any other region or country is crucial and undeniable, especially if we see it from the perspective of access to the published content.

However, the authors write specifically about the US library system, legal regulation of publishing, business giants and their models of activity. On the other hand, dreams, aims, relationships and conflicts may be recognised as more universal in character. It is also true that elsewhere in the world, the digitisation stories if recorded with the same degree of detail and understanding would look rather different. Cultural conflicts, linguistic barriers, much greater lack of resources of all kinds, in some cases, the ideological control and poor reading culture would provide a rather different picture from the one that emerges from this text, though the final outcome seen today would be quite comparable.

The authors follow more or less faithfully the timeline of the events, though putting different emphasis on the roles and especially perspectives of such varied actors as technological companies, foundations, publishers or academic libraries, as well as exceptionally influential individual personalities (e.g., Brewster Kahle, Paul Courant or Robert Darnton) in different chapters.

The Introduction depicts the main idea of the book and its synopsis. The first chapter outlines what can be called a pre-history of library digitisation, emphasising collaborative structures of academic libraries and first use of automation and computer technologies for library work and bibliographic control. The second chapter places emphasis on visionaries of digital library future and their attempts to implement these dreams in libraries by attracting other institutions to support these efforts.

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to Google partnership with academic libraries in realising the plan of mass digitisation of library collections and the emerging prospects of enhanced access to them. As usually happens with visions, the reality interferes and the fifth chapter relates to the opposition of academic communities, though supporting general idea, but expressing doubts and dissatisfaction with some of Google's approaches as well as offering other alternatives. The sixth chapter is devoted to the legal issues expressed by publishers and, especially, to the legal settlement, which was rejected by the Court. The authors present a favourable assessment of the settlement and provide argument to support its different aspects as benefiting all involved actors and institutions.

The seventh chapter looks into the events after the rejection of the settlement and investigates the case of establishing the HathiTrust in detail. The eighth chapter discusses the transformations brought by the whole digitisation development to American academic libraries, publishing, scholarly communication presenting a balanced view of positive and negative aspects experienced by academic libraries in the first place.

The Epilogue of the book is far from an optimistic one. It reflects on the effect that the whole transformed situation had on the understanding of open digital library power during the covid19 situation and on conflict of interests that have emerged during this recent period. It is quite disappointing that they resembled the earlier ones. On the other hand, the threat to libraries as organisations posed by universal access to digital materials erodes their traditional place in higher education and scholarly communication.

Both authors of the book are knowledgeable and most probably know the events they write about from inside. However, this insider knowledge does not turn into any bias, thus the emerging picture is multisided and balanced.

It is a pleasure to read the book as it is written in an easy to understand language, presents clear arguments, and explains how the diversity of interests causes quite complicated outcomes.

The most interested readers would be those who took part in the events and processes described in the book, but there will be those who could learn from the experiences, mistakes and achievements of others: young professionals in libraries, publishing houses and technology companies, digitisers of cultural heritage, students in humanities and information sciences, and especially policy makers and legislators.

Elena Maceviciute
Swedish School of Library and Information Sciences
July, 2023