

The relationship between books: how academic knowledge becomes productive

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Abstract

Google's Herculean project at becoming the world's online library has recently hit the news. As reported in *The New Yorker* magazine, Google's ambition is to digitize every book ever published, currently estimated at no less than thirty-two million volumes. Dan Clancy, chief engineer of Google's scanning project, summarized the venture thus: "The real challenge is to get somebody something that they are actually interested in, inside a book. Web sites are part of a network, and that's a significant part of how we rank sites in our search how much other sites refer to the others. Books are not part of a network. There is a huge research challenge, to understand the relationship between books."

In this paper, I want to explore how the "relationship between books" may speak to and about our contemporary "knowledge economy", and I do so through an ethnography of the production of research among humanities scholars at Spain's National Research Council (CSIC). For CSIC's human scientists, books (and other bookish-analogues, like libraries or manuscript collections), occupy a place of prominence in the institutional production of research. Human scientists also speak of "personal relations" as central to how the institution governs its knowledge economy: Which books one is working on (translating or annotating them) being an index of who one works with. This relational economy (between books; between people and books; and between what books do and what institutions and researchers imagine them to do) stands in friction to the "network economy of information" (à la Google) that CSIC's management and majority of natural scientists institutionally promote.

The paper contrasts the epistemological economies of CSIC's natural and human scientists, and asks some questions about the sociological imagination of the knowledge economy when books become bearers of relations in their own right.