

Google gets digital foothold in France

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The logo of web search engine Google is seen behind a computer keyboard. Despite fierce resistance to Google's plans to digitise the world's books, observers say it is well placed to start scanning Europe's cultural treasures -- beginning in France, where the US giant got a digital foothold this week.

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The Internet search giant on Monday began peeling open the pages of half a million books from the grand Municipal Library of Lyon and is contracted to scan them within 10 years, the library's director Patrick Bazin told AFP.

French authorities have given mixed messages over the prospect of a similar deal to scan national holdings. They have vowed to protect

France's heritage from private interests but never openly ruled out a project with Google.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Monday said the government would spend 750 million euros to digitally scan "the content of our museums, our libraries and our cinematographic heritage" via a public-private partnership.

Sarkozy did not say who the private partner might be.

But observers say there is no one as well-positioned as Google for such a project -- a big part of which would be scanning books from France's National Library (BNF) so they could be consulted online.

"In my opinion, the National Library of France will probably accept to work with Google," which would make it the first national library to do so, said Olivier Ertzscheid, an Internet and communications expert at Nantes University.

"France recognises the importance of digitisation and bit by bit is releasing extra funding," he told AFP. "But that will not allow it to rival the power and the economic and financial clout of Google, that's for sure."

Meanwhile European countries have started their own projects to rival Google in scanning books -- the EU site Europeana and the BNF's Gallica offer portals to view old works scanned online.

Francis Balle, a media and internet expert at Paris University, wrote recently that "none of these projects, however promising it is, today constitutes an alternative to the Californian giant.

"The only ones that will survive are those that refuse to be closed shops

and don't shut themselves off from the Google network."

The Lyon library -- whose books are municipal and not national property -- made a call for offers for the digitisation project in 2006, Bazin said, but the American company was the only one to come up with a formal bid.

Microsoft and France Telecom had shown an interest but did not follow through with a proposal, he said, adding that Google offered "an excellent solution."

Google on Monday began working through 500,000 of the library's works at a location near Lyon -- where the library can easily check on the work -- hand-scanning each page of the delicate volumes individually, Bazin said.

The antique books include a 16th-century edition of predictions by Nostradamus, Isaac Newton's 17th-century scientific treatise "Principia" and a work by the French humourist Rabelais from the same period.

Under the contract, the Lyon library will use the digital images of its books for its own purposes but notably cedes to Google the right to exploit them commercially for 25 years. Google in return scans the books for free.

The US company has been less welcome elsewhere in France, where digitisation has become bound up with the sensitive issue of protecting French cultural and intellectual property.

Culture Minister Frederic Mitterrand met earlier this month with Google's vice-president David Drummond and expressed his "concern" about the company's worldwide book-scanning activities.

"Every day we have news from Google saying 'we have made a deal with such-and-such a record company, or with so-and-so. But we have to be very careful," he told France 2 television last week.

"The content must not fall into private hands."

Meanwhile French publishers have accused Google of breaching their copyright by scanning books for publication in its online library Google Books.

A Paris court on Friday ruled that they were right.

It told Google that it cannot digitise any more French books without the publisher's approval and ordered it to pay 300,000 euros (430,000 dollars) in damages to publishers whose books it has relady scanned.

The ruling capped a three-year-old case brought by one of France's biggest publishing houses, Le Seuil, which claimed that thousands of its works had been digitised by Google without consent.

[France](#) also joined Germany along with technology firms and others in challenging a US legal settlement that would allow the Internet giant to scan and sell millions of books online.

In a concession to European publishers, Google agreed in September to remove all [books](#) still on sale in Europe from its US online market offering millions of titles that are out of print in the United States, the company said Monday.

A French government-commissioned report with recommendations on a possible digitisation contract with Google had been due this month but is now expected in the new year.

"If the contract ... lets the (national) library make whatever use it wants (of the content) -- then why not sign with Google?" Ertzscheid said.

"Afterwards things could move very quickly. If the BNF signs a deal with [Google](#), that would also be a very strong green light for the whole library network."

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