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[France to Google Books: "Hands Off Our Culture"](#)

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Sarkozy Proposes Rival Digitization Plan Made in France

As a key (and culturally symbolic) part of its grandiose global design to make and compile electronic copies of all existing books, Google, the U.S. online search giant, has long sought to digitize the nearly 15 million books on the shelves of the French National Library. From the outset, Google's ambitions have met opposition in some French circles, and now President Nicolas Sarkozy has put his foot down, announcing that Paris will put up more than \$1 billion to fund its own national electronic-scanning project for France's body of literary work.

"We won't let ourselves be stripped of our heritage for the benefit of a big company, no matter how friendly, big or American it is," Sarkozy was [quoted](#) telling the New York Times. Alongside the mass of French books in print (but not always widely available), the Google project is designed to cover hard-to-get books that are out of copyright or no longer in print, together with other rare documents.

France's national library in Paris, housed in a very sophisticated site by the late President François Mitterrand on the banks of the Seine river, has a similar project of its own, which has been limping. Last summer the library seemed to shift its position away from outright opposition to the Google plan in favor of an attempt at negotiating with Google on cooperation. The latest developments are a fresh chapter in the saga of the voracious appetite of Google and its ambitions in Europe, as recounted in a [recent article](#) in European Affairs.

But the French government "no" came December 15 shortly after a hastily-scheduled meeting in Paris between the minister of culture (and the late President's nephew) Frédéric Mitterrand, and Google executive David Drummond. The ensuing presidential statement said that a public-private partnership will be set up to protect France's cultural heritage from the U.S. company's program.

France's door may still be slightly ajar to Google. The head of the French national library, Bruno Racine – himself a distinguished diplomat and author – said that some form of cooperation with Google may be possible in the new formula.

Details remain unclear about the details and funding sources of the new national effort by France. An earlier project failed to get off the ground: France and Germany announced plans in 2005 to develop a multimedia search engine called "Quareo," which means "I seek" in Latin, but then abandoned the venture.

The new French digitization [consortium](#) is called "Polinum," the acronym in French for "Operating Platform for Digital Books." It is headed by Jean-Pierre G rault, the chief executive of the French company i2S that makes optical scanning machines capable of digitizing thousands of book pages an hour.

So far, the project has attracted only €4 million (\$5.7 million) in financing from the EU and from regional authorities in the Aquitaine region of France near Bordeaux, where the company is based. It aims to have its technology operational in three years. The eight-member consortium includes i2S, Exalead, a French search engine, Isako, a software and

electronic publishing company, and Labri, an information technology-research laboratory in Bordeaux.

Mr. G rault said the consortium would attempt to be the technological choice for the digitization programs undertaken by French institutions with the funds promised by Mr. Sarkozy.

France already has a less ambitious program at the French National Library. Called Gallica, it has scanned only one million items (compared to 10 million in Google's database of books) and has proved disappointing to the French government. A progress report released last month by Mitterrand's Ministry of Culture called the effort "slow and insufficient." The report said that both the French National Library's Gallica program (like a similar Europe-wide venture called "Europeana") are "not perceived as satisfactory alternatives" to Google.

The anti-Google crusade in the name of "defending French culture" won a victory last month when a Paris court ruled that Google [infringed French authors' copyrights](#) by digitizing books and putting excerpts online without authorization. The case was brought by a group of publishers and writers, led by the prominent publishing house La Martini re, which argued that the industry was being exploited by Google's "Book Search" program.

The court ordered Google to pay 300,000 euros, or \$430,000, in damages and interest and to stop digital reproduction of the material. The company was also ordered to pay 10,000 euros a day in fines until it removed excerpts of some French books from its online database.

Google said it believed that it had complied with French copyright law and that it planned to appeal the decision.

Google's Book Search initiative, which started in 2005, has also raised hackles in the U.S., where authors and librarians have filed lawsuits that have produced Google concessions on its program's modalities. A settlement offer is now pending in U.S. federal court.