

Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Still Waiting For A Real Google Book Search API

For years on this blog, at conferences, and even in direct conversations with Google employees I have been agitating for [an API^{\[1\]}](#) (application programming interface) for [Google Book Search^{\[2\]}](#). (For a summary of my thoughts on the matter, see my imaginatively titled post, “[Why Google Books Should Have an API^{\[3\]}](#).”) With the world's largest collection of scanned books, I thought such an API would have major implications for doing research in the humanities. And I looked forward to building applications on top of the API, as I had done with my [Syllabus Finder^{\[4\]}](#).

So why was I disappointed when Google finally released [an API^{\[5\]}](#) for their book scanning project [a couple of weeks ago^{\[6\]}](#)?

My suspicion began with the name of the API itself. Even though the URL for the API is <http://code.google.com/apis/books/>, suggesting that this is the long-awaited API for the kind of access to Google Books that I've been waiting for, the rather prosaic and awkward title of the API suggests otherwise: The Google Book Search Book Viewability API. From the API's [home page^{\[7\]}](#):

The Google Book Search Book Viewability API enables developers to:

- Link to Books in Google Book Search using ISBNs, LCCNs, and OCLC numbers
- Know whether Google Book Search has a specific title and what the viewability of that title is
- Generate links to a thumbnail of the cover of a book
- Generate links to an informational page about a book
- Generate links to a preview of a book

These are remarkably modest goals. Certainly the API will be helpful for online library catalogs and other book services (such as [LibraryThing](#)^[8]) that wish to embed links to Google's landing pages for books and (when copyright law allows) links to the full texts. The thumbnails of book covers will make [OPACs](#)^[9] look prettier.

But this API does nothing to advance the kind of digital scholarship I have advocated for in this space. To do that the API would have to provide direct access to the full OCR'd text of the books, to provide the ability to mine these texts for patterns and to combine them with other digital tools and corpora. Undoubtedly copyright concerns are part of the story here, hobbling what Google can do. But why not give full access to pre-1923 books through the API?

I'm not hopeful that there are additional Google Book Search APIs coming. If that were the case the URL for the viewability API would be <http://code.google.com/apis/books/viewability/>. The result is that this API simply seems like a way to drive traffic to Google Books, rather than to help academia or to foster a external community of developers, as other Google APIs have done.

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References

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