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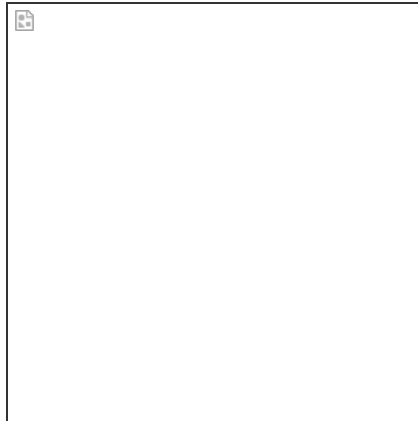and Technology Alliance
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Interview with Daniel Reetz, founder of the DIY Bookscanning project

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Author: Kim Lacey

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Daniel Reetz, founder of the DIY Bookscanning project, was kind enough to take the time to speak with me about the start of his project and what he sees as the future of DIY Bookscanning. What started out as a brilliant way to overcome a difficult situation has really branched into a worldwide project taking many forms. Back in 2008, Reetz realized that by using cheap cameras, he could build high-speed book scanning equipment to use on his textbooks. He purchased two cameras, gathered some supplies from a dumpster for his photo shoot, and photographed an entire textbook. Surprised that this technique worked right out of the box, Reetz knew he had something big on his hands. After writing some software to scan the books you already own, Reetz published the first DIY Bookscanning instructable in early 2009. It immediately became an internet phenomenon. In fact, the first person to copy the instructions was a village official in Indonesia who hoped to scan documents that were important to his region and unlikely to hit Google's radar. Reetz explains that there is no commercial solution for what people, like the village official, want: "It's not that it's too expensive, it's that it's not available."

However, making the DIY Bookscanners available is one of Reetz's main goals. Not every person needs her own DIY Bookscanner, but Reetz suggests that maybe one in a local library or even an apartment complex is enough. Reetz hopes that hacker communities will latch onto DIY Bookscanners, and even make them available at their public nights. For instance, rather than constructing your own scanner, you could use your group's DIY Bookscanner to scan a book or two you have on your shelf. By making the scanning a communal effort, more books could be digitized and made available. Reetz also stressed that DIY Bookscanning is a slow growth idea, meaning that the idea is to use the existing technology until it doesn't work any more and then expand it. There is no rush to expand, no necessity for explosive growth. One of the more interesting and recent trends in DIY threads is that users are now posting images of their scans noting that, "this is what such-and-such camera can produce with no processing." Such threads, Reetz notes, have been started organically entirely from the community of DIY users; a lot of people had questions

About Kim Lacey

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about quality, and the community responded by posting pictures.

As for the future of DIY Bookscanning, Reetz recognizes that it is a self-sustaining process: "It's not me helping people, but people helping themselves. I love that." Because DIY is different than other scanning efforts like Google's, people can scan all sorts of interesting, and personally meaningful objects (the contents of your drawers, for example) and documents (such as rifle repair manuals or even your grandmother's diary). For Reetz, these random "nooks and crannies" are "profoundly interesting things," and we're at a level of technology where DIY Bookscanning is achievable with off-the-shelf equipment. There is a recognizable gap between the poor quality, but inexpensive, flatbeds and the excellent quality, but pricey, scanners. Reetz and his project is the remedy: "I want to fill that gap with open-source, freely available technology so it can function in places where nothing else will."

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Great post!

Nathan Moore
3 years 32 weeks ago

Wow, this is a great post! I had not heard of DIY Bookscanning before this, but it seems like it could have tremendous possibilities. I can see this being incredibly beneficial for marginalized communities, activist groups, and archival projects. I can't wait to find out more about this.

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Very cool stuff!

Kim Lacey
3 years 31 weeks ago

Hi Nathan!

You should check out the DIY website--so many manuals, videos, etc. Daniel Reetz has done a great thing, and here's hoping the project continues to pick up speed and be used in new ways!

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