

Sharing Intellectual Property: Online Books as opposed to Books in Hardcopy

Kalina Maleska-Gegaj



In light of the fact that an increasing number of works are published on daily basis under Creative Commons licenses, the Google project “Google Books” which envisages digitalizing books from the world heritage, it is very obvious that the nature of the publishing industry and the understanding of copyright are changing rapidly. That is why I have discussed with several people, who are involved in one way or another with publishing books, what the differences are between the hardcopy publishing and online publishing. When they compared the two forms of book publishing, they all emphasized the positive, rather than the negative, aspects of the opportunities offered by the Internet in terms of electronic books. That is why today I will talk more about the advantages of online publishing although there are a couple of disadvantages that I consider should be mentioned in a this kind of a comparison between the two forms of publishing books.

Online Books Increase Popularity of Authors

On the website of Creative Commons, there are dozens of positive commentaries on the work of this project, referring to the fact that it has helped the general public learn more about intellectual property, copyright law or minimizing piracy (2009). Generally, among writers and publisher alike, the opinion is that publishing on the Internet, whether through CC or in any other form, has helped writers become better known to the readers, so it has contributed to their popularity, and it also helps increase sales levels of printed versions of books.

In a *Guardian* column, Cory Doctorow, a science-fiction writer, who releases all his books both in hardcopy and online for free at the same time, defends the popularization of books through the Internet (Doctorow, 2009). According to his experience, the free access to his books has generated more sales.

Aleks Bukarski, a young Macedonian writer, who has published his work *People whose Parachute doesn't Open* both in hardcopy and under Creative Commons license, told me that he has “become popular thanks to the Internet”. He considers that the fact that anyone can publish on the Internet through the CC license is an especially prominent advantage as opposed to hardcopy publishing because he considers that censorship is a big problem for publishing

through publishing houses, and that no matter how good a poet or novelist you may be, it is possible that no publishing house would accept to publish your work because of their policy or because of the politics in the country. He also considers that there are differences between the approaches to online publishing in the western countries and in Macedonia. According to him, authors in the west publish on the Internet because they want to become famous, whereas in Macedonia the general position is that: if a book is distributed for free, that it is not a good book.

I've also asked Filip Stojanovski from "Metamorfozi", which is a national representative for CC in Macedonia, what advantages are there for authors if they publish under CC license. According to Filip, the authors who published their work approximately at the same time in hardcopy and electronic version, directly benefited from CC "because they had additional publicity, especially among the younger audiences, and the readers had the opportunity to view what the books are about, and buy them on the basis of this information". Some authors also published their books only on the Internet, so this was their only means to reach readers. According to Filip, Metamorfozi also had the support from bloggers who voluntarily helped in promoting the new works.

It may be even more disputable for publishing houses than for writers whether a book should be published online for free, since publishing houses work for profit, while authors may work for their satisfaction or popularity, apart from profit. That's why I also wanted to discuss this issue with a publishing house. In an email interview I did with Emily Clark, a publisher in Aduki Independent Press, a publishing house in Australia, which has published the book *Stick this in your memory hole* by Tristan Clark both in print copy and online, she says she doesn't think that the free online offer adversely affected sales. "The book has produced strong print sales as I think people were able to have a decent browse of the book online before committing to buy it," says Emily Clark. Another advantage to the online publishing that she mentions is that it can be "an easy place for people to grab references from the book to reproduce content for non-commercial purposes". The feedback "Aduki" received was also very positive, especially in terms of the offering of a new approach. "The main feedback has been that people prefer to read the whole book in print. Reading a 192-page book online is not entirely convenient as not all computers are highly portable. More than the fact of the book being online, our readers

appreciated primarily that the book had broken with convention and been licensed under Creative Commons,” Emily says.

Online Comments on the Content as an Advantage

The possibility of leaving comments on certain sites where books are published online is an additional advantage that people are mentioning, and it’s also something that is missing in traditional publishing. The opportunity of leaving comments, for instance on a site dedicated to the book, is that you can do so at any time when you feel like saying something regarding the book, so even if no one is available at the moment to chat, everyone who opens the site later will be able to read the comment and respond, so you can share your opinion with people who have read or at least seen the book, whom you don’t have to know personally.

The advantage of direct contact on the Internet is visible not only on the sites where people can leave comments on the book, but also where they leave comments on issues regarding online publishing. Such is the case with the reactions to John Hilton’s article (John is a doctoral student at Brigham Young University) on sale levels prior to and after online release of books, where there are interesting comments about the reader’s attitudes towards online and hardcopy publishing, and there are also some suggestions about John undertaking additional research, which actually he did, and then responded to the comment, and updated his post (Hilton, 2009).

Impossible to Tell and Things that have Remained the Same

John Hilton carried out the research in order to determine whether releasing books through Creative Commons really does benefit authors and publishers. Saying immediately that it is impossible to know this for certain, John, nevertheless, tried to see if he could come up with some numbers. For his research, he considered approximately 40 book titles for which publishers have released free online versions at least eight weeks after releasing the printed version. For 4 out of 5 books in Random House publisher he noted an increase in the sales level after the free online release of the books, whereas when he considered Tor Publishers, he found that 20 out of 24 books showed decrease of the sales level (Hilton, 2009) after online release. So, as the results of the two publishing houses are completely opposite, it is impossible to determine whether online publishing gives any advantage in terms of more books being sold or read, especially

since it is impossible to take into consideration all outside factors that may have affected sales levels.

Another example in which there is no noticeable difference in terms of online and hardcopy publishing can be seen in the popularity of the online books on the Macedonian Creative Commons. The Macedonian CC case shows that in most cases, though by no means all, the most popular books are those whose authors have blogs or books that deal with issues that are of interest to the younger generation, than works that have a long tradition of being valued, such as Shakespeare, or whose authors have gone through years-long research before writing them. For illustration, several Shakespeare's plays, among them *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliette*, *Richard III*, *Coriolanus* and a few others have been published under CC license in translation of Dragi Mihajlovski, who has also licensed under CC his novel *My Skenderbej*, for which, as it is very evident in the novel itself, considerable research of the history of this person – Skenderbeg – was carried out. The numbers show that the book by Aleks Bukarski, who is a young author and a blogger, was downloaded 2540 times, whereas Shakespeare's plays were downloaded 141 times and *My Skenderbej*, for instance, was downloaded 242 times (2009) – these numbers date from 20 September this year. So, this shows an aspect that remains the same regardless of whether a book is in online or in hardcopy version – since the printed copy of Aleks's book is sold in more copies than the volume of Shakespeare's plays translated into Macedonian.

Disadvantages

Regarding the disadvantages I mentioned in the beginning, one is explained by Sandy Grant, a publisher and a member of the Copyright Agency Limited Board, and the other is something that I, personally, do not like, although this does not concern online publishing but leaving online comments on books or another form of art.

According to Grant, a weakness of Creative Commons (as he says in an interview for ABC) is that there is, at the same time, good quality work and “unreadable crap”, which is changing the intellectual culture for the worse. One example that he gives of why it is not a good idea to give up your copyrights is the case of Virgin which has taken photographs from CC and put them into

mobile commercials: so Virgin earned money from the works of these photographers who were not paid for their photographs, and additionally the people on the photographs were not happy to be on commercials.

Recently, I was writing an article on the film *Babel*, and I wanted to do some Internet research before starting to write. I used the words “criticism”, “reviews” and “Babel” in the search box of the search engines, and everything I read in more than an hour was similar to the following posts:

This Movie Was Good But It's True It Didn't Need That Third Story The One About The Japanese People It Doesn't Fit In The Movie (2009);

It's a depressing film with hardly any likable characters, so maybe its real point is that there are idiots around the globe. Except you get the feeling that some of these idiots you're supposed to feel sorry for (2009);

My wife bought this film since she wanted to see it. After the first ten minutes she fell asleep and I turned it off. Trite, contrived, ignorant and a big waste of time (2009).

The examples are about the film *Babel*, and I chose them because I recently found them, but the case is very similar with reviews and criticism on books, too. So, this is not exactly what I would like to spend an hour or two on when I am searching for reviews or criticism on a book or a film. Eventually, I did find a few articles that really discussed the film seriously, but it was truly after about reading such comments for about an hour.

Conclusion

So, authors generally view the opportunity of allowing wide access to readers as a positive thing, and more popularity for authors. For readers this is especially great benefit since, especially in small markets such as the Macedonian, it is impossible for bookstores or publishers to provide a comprehensive variety of books on various topics or that have been published in the last few years. So, with the online copies readers are able, provided that they know the language, to read books from any place in the world. But there is also the question if everyone can license and get published how do readers know what may be of interest to them, as well as the issue of giving up copyrights which is a great disadvantage for writers especially from a financial aspect.

References:

1. Creative Commons (2009) *Creative Commons* [online]. Available from: <http://creativecommons.org/> [Accessed: 1 September 2009].
2. Doctorow, C. (2009). Why free ebooks should be part of the plot for writers. *The Guardian*. [Online]. 18th May 2009. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/aug/18/free-ebooks-cory-doctorow> [Accessed: 18 September 2009].
3. Hilton, J. (2009). Did Random House's free online book releases affect sales? [Online]. 11th May 2009. Available from: <http://bloggasm.com/did-random-houses-free-online-book-releases-affect-sales> [Accessed: 2 September 2009].
4. Creative Commons Macedonia (2009) *Creative Commons Македонија* [online]. Available from: <http://cc.org.mk/> [Accessed: 20 September 2009].
5. Flixter (2009) *Flixter Babel Comments* [online]. Available from: <http://www.flixster.com/movie/babel> [Accessed: 4 October 2009].
6. Threemoveiebuffs (2009) *Movie Review Babel* [online]. Available from: <http://www.threemoviebuffs.com/review.php?movieID=babel> [Accessed: 4 October 2009].
7. Metacritic (2009) *Metacritic: Babel* [online]. Available from: <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/babel> [Accessed: 4 October 2009].