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Publishers cut book sharing deal with Scribd

The online content-sharing site Scribd has reached an agreement with major …

JOHN TIMMER - 3/18/2009, 7:00 PM

The music industry's struggle with piracy and DRM might be considered a case study in how to alienate your users and annoy your business partners. With DRM dead and the music business still struggling to reach a stable level of income in the digital world, the big question is who's next to experience a case of digital growing pains. The fact that Amazon's Kindle has produced a patent suit and DMCA takedowns in recent days might be viewed as an indication that the book publishing industry is a prime candidate, but at least some publishers appear to be taking a progressive approach to digital content.

The latest of possible progress is a series of agreements announced by online content sharing site Scribd. Scribd offers written content through a flash-based viewing system. Users can upload content in a variety of forms, and the site will convert it into a portable document that can be viewed in any Flash-enabled browser. Content can also be downloaded as a PDF, and the documents can be embedded into third-party web sites—Scribd provides the code for doing so as part of the Flash interface for its content.

The company claims it handles over 50,000 new documents every day, and sees visits from over 50 million users every month. Those numbers make it an appealing target for publishers looking to attract new readers, and Scribd recently announced that it has reached agreements with several, including Random House, Simon & Schuster, and Workman Publishing Co.

The terms of the agreements weren't disclosed, but the plan is that a variety of book material will be made available through Scribd at no cost to readers. This material may be anything from excerpts to entire novels. It wasn't stated explicitly, but some of the accompanying literature suggests that the excerpts are likely to come from books that are selling well on their own, while full novels will be made available if they're part of a larger series that hasn't yet found an audience.

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The fact that Scribd is offering the publishers this level of control over their content is part of the appeal. In a statement announcing its participation, Simon & Schuster's Ellie Hirschhorn said, "its unique approach provides us with the desired flexibility to determine how our content is viewed and used on a case by case basis, and is proving to be an effective tool for creating excitement for our books."

Another part of the appeal is undoubtedly the fact that Scribd takes its potential use for copyright infringement seriously. The company hosts a copy of a legally valid DMCA takedown notice in its support section, and it provides a mechanism for users to contest these claims. Any text that is removed as a response to the takedown notice gets processed into a digital fingerprint that is then used for comparison whenever any new content is uploaded. Clearly, publishers are more likely to look more favorably on Scribd than the music labels did on Napster.

But it appears that the book publishers are also recognizing that online sharing and its social aspects can be a valuable marketing tool. "Word-of-mouth, recommendations, and 'hand-selling' are tried and true ways to increase sales, and Scribd makes all those things possible in an extremely cost-effective, online environment," said Matt Schwartzof Random House Publishing Group. "Scribd offers publishers an amazing new marketing platform that will surely generate book sales." That's a lesson that some in the music industry still haven't embraced.

None of this is to say that taking book publishing digital will be without its problems, as Amazon's example demonstrates. However, the deals with Scribd are part of what appears to be a larger effort to embrace a e-book filled future. A spokesperson for technical publisher Springer recently told Ars that it had amassed an e-book library of 40,000 titles over the last three years, and was on pace to add over 5,000 more annually going forward. Publishers are also experimenting with other modes of distribution. Shortcovers seems to provide the similar features to Scribd, but is focused on mobile reading‐at launch, dedicated applications were available for the iPhone, Blackberry, and Android platforms.

All of this suggests that book publishers are not anxious to find themselves with the same list of problems faced by their peers in the music business.