Channel 4 News

How can publishers limit e-book piracy?

By Benjamin Cohen Updated on 18 October 2009

Technology correspondent Benjamin Cohen goes to the world's largest book fair in Frankfurt, where publishers from around the globe have been considering how to tackle online piracy.

Just days before the Amazon Kindle goes on sale in Europe, the publishing industry have gathered in the city for their annual book fair, which is among the largest in the world. There, piracy of books has been a hot topic.

Books have suffered from piracy for centuries, it's nothing new. Think back to your days at school or university and you needed to keep a set text book for months but you'd rather spend your student loan on booze than books.

You'd grab the book from the library or a mate and then find a cheap photocopy shop and, hey presto, for a couple of quid you'd have your hands on a book that would have cost £30-£40.

While the growth of the internet and set texts found on university intranets might have reduced the frequency of this practise in the UK, this is still a massive problem in the developing world, particularly where primary and secondary school students are expected to purchase their own text books. There, quite sophisticated and good quality printed and bounded copies are common place.

This is also the case in countries like Turkey where millions of pirated English language books have been seized over the past few years alone.

But in the west, book piracy is on the rise again, primarily due to the impact of electronic book readers like the Amazon Kindle or the Sony Reader series. These light weight devices have the storage capacity for many hundreds of books and, while they do use digital rights management software to attempt to restrict the trade of pirated materials, all allow readers to view PDF files.

Dan Brown's "The Lost Symbol" has been one of the fastest selling books of recent times. Its publisher, Random House successfully kept the manuscript under lock and key and effectively prevented leaked copies of the book being distributed prior to publication.

However just minutes after publication, Channel 4 News was able to locate hundreds of unencrypted copies of the book being offered for free, illegal download from scores of different websites.

These pirated copies were identical to the legitimate copies to the extent that the book's publisher was unable to tell the difference when I showed him it on an eBook reader.

Random House international director, Simon Littlewood, told me that the file we'd discovered was more than likely to have emerged as a result of a major British high street retailer accidentally offering the book for download without DRM (digital rights management) encryption that would restrict it from being viewed on more than one device.

The relatively small file sizes for eBooks provides a unique problem for the book industry. Music and, to an even greater extent, films are rather large in file size. A movie typically being 650MB to 1.5GB in size whereas the typical eBook would be no more than 3MB.

Films being pretty big files makes them more likely than not to be shared either on "cyber-locker" sites or else on P2P (peer2peer) sharing systems. P2P has long been within the sites of the law enforcement community and the government is sponsoring a crack down on file sharers using them as part of the upcoming Digital Economy bill.

Books are often shared via email, on disposable hosting or else using sites like Rapidshare or on document sharing services including Scribd.

On Rapidshare, users can upload any file and then share it using blogs, forums or emails with their friends or if they chose the whole world. Although you can make limited use of its service for free, many pay £7 a month for unlimited

EX1058
Roku V. Media Chain
U.S. Patent No. 10,860,691

access to the service. It's currently being sued in the German and Swiss courts and publishers claim that it does not respond quickly to requests to remove pirated content.

Scribd, is described as the "YouTube of documents," there you can legitimately share your own files or purchase books, but increasingly people are uploading copyrighted works. But the UK Publishers Association says that they positively remove copyrighted material in 100 per cent of cases.

Publishing associations from all over the world are investigating so called "digital fingerprinting". Here they give a site, for example Scribd, the full text of a book, Scribd would then do a fingerprint style check on any file being uploaded to determine whether it contains significant amounts of text from a copyrighted work and if it does then the file is automatically removed.

But many publishers are only just coming to terms with piracy.

Discuss e-book piracy with Benjamin Cohen on Twitter.

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