Who owns your books?

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“Do you own your books?” sounds like a stupid question, doesn’t it? It’s like asking “do you own your socks?” Yet the recent actions by Amazon to reclaim books literally from their owner’s hands have demonstrated that in the digital economy, it isn’t a stupid question at all. We are giving up our ownership of information for temporary ethereal possession, and are at the mercy of those who “rent” that content to us.

This issue has been brewing under the radar ever since the first content was converted to data. A book, or any analog hard data medium, is a physical object. It can be carried, thrown, torn asunder, and even burned, but its physical manifestation is still intact. The information it carries can be obscured, written over, or cut out of the text, but any actions must be up close and personal due to the nature of the thing. Once content becomes data it loses its physical manifestation and is no longer as sacrosanct and inviolable as it once was.

In the Amazon case, they sold a copy of a book that is in the public domain everywhere but here in the USA, 1984 and Animal Farm (why we have such screwed-up copyright law is another matter entirely). Amazon sold the “books” to people who thought they were buying books. The US copyright holder complained, and Amazon not only removed the book from its shelves, it went into the personal property of Kindle users and deleted the books in question from their machines (giving them a refund, of course).

This is patently horse manure. Amazon’s actions are the equivalent of breaking into your house and stealing a book that they changed their minds about selling to you. The actions aren’t a crime, though, because every user of a Kindle signed their rights away to the very content that they paid for when they signed up for the service. This goes for most other digital content services as well, regardless of type

of content.

We are so used to the idea that digital content is ephemeral that we no longer complain when we are treated shabbily by an industry that forgot long ago what quality means and that sacrificed service to the audience (and other things) on the altar of profit.

Breaking “free” of print also means that the content is also now more tenuous. Digital files are not only subject to external tampering; they are also a snapshot of and locked into the tech used to create them. You could have the secrets to the universe, but if they were written on an Osborne and stored on a 5-1/4 floppy you’d be hard-pressed to read them. Archivists have been tangling with that problem for a while now, and it won’t get much better as we move forward.

So what’s the answer? We can’t insist that everything be put in analog format on hard media, but we can insist on giving ownership rights of content back to the audience that paid for them. As the marketplace, we are the final arbiters, and must join together now in insisting on our rights before we lose our ability to even recognize them.

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