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E-Book Dodge

By **RANDY COHEN**

I bought an e-reader for travel and was eager to begin “Under the Dome,” the new Stephen King novel. Unfortunately, the electronic version was not yet available. The publisher apparently withheld it to encourage people to buy the more expensive hardcover. So I did, all 1,074 pages, more than three and a half pounds. Then I found a pirated version online, downloaded it to my e-reader and took it on my trip. I generally disapprove of illegal downloads, but wasn’t this O.K.? C.D., BRIGHTWATERS, N.Y.

An illegal download is — to use an ugly word — illegal. But in this case, it is not unethical. Author and publisher are entitled to be paid for their work, and by purchasing the hardcover, you did so. Your subsequent downloading is akin to buying a CD, then copying it to your iPod.

Buying a book or a piece of music should be regarded as a license to enjoy it on any platform. Sadly, the anachronistic conventions of bookselling and copyright law lag the technology. Thus you’ve violated the publishing company’s legal right to control the distribution of its intellectual property, but you’ve done no harm or so little as to meet my threshold of acceptability.

Unsurprisingly, many in the book business take a harder line. My friend Jamie Raab, the publisher of Grand Central Publishing and an executive vice president of the Hachette Book Group, says: “Anyone who downloads a pirated e-book has, in effect, stolen the intellectual property of an author and publisher. To condone this is to condone theft.”

Yet it is a curious sort of theft that involves actually paying for a book. Publishers do delay the release of e-books to encourage hardcover sales — a process called “windowing” — so it is difficult to see you as piratical for actually buying the book (\$35 list price, \$20 from Amazon) rather than waiting for the \$9.99 Kindle edition.

Your action is not pristine. Downloading a bootleg copy could be said to encourage piracy, although only in the abstract: no potential pirate will actually realize you’ve done it. It’s true that you might have thwarted the publisher’s intent — perhaps he or she has a violent

antipathy to trees, maybe a wish to slaughter acres of them and grind them into Stephen King novels. Or to clog the highways with trucks crammed with Stephen King novels. Or perhaps King himself wishes to improve America's physique by having readers lug massive volumes.

So be it. Your paying for the hardcover put you in the clear as a matter of ethics, forestry and fitness training.

My salaried job requires much travel. When a trip extends into the evening, I turn off my laptop and read or have a drink. But during business hours I typically work, although I've seen many travelers in business apparel watching videos at 10 a.m. Am I overly conscientious, or are they taking advantage? Am I doing my job simply by being in motion?
RACHEL BRAGIN, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

It depends on your job. If it involves smelting, you ought not attempt it in a taxi. It also depends on your mode of transportation. If you are driving yourself to a satellite office, do not use your laptop. (Especially if you are driving a motorcycle.) That is, where circumstances make it onerous or perilous to work in transit, don't do it.

Air travel, for example, is generally so vile (at least outside first class) that the trip itself is work, as you suggest. You should be given bonus pay. Or a powerful sedative. But where conditions are conducive to work, do some — at one of those nice tables in the quiet car on Amtrak's Acela or in your stateroom during a leisurely Atlantic crossing by ocean liner in 1927.

There are other considerations. Sometimes it is important that a business traveler arrive rested and alert, ready to meet with clients or colleagues. That can be a factor in deciding if the most effective way to do your job is simply to turn off the computer and relax. This is necessarily a judgment call. In making it, you may want to consult your supervisor.

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