



O'Reilly stopped selling ebooks directly: Why I think that's a bad move

This post was originally written in 2017 when I first saw that O'Reilly was shutting down direct books and video sales in favor of Safari and selling ebooks through Amazon.

It was updated in 2019 when the announcement came through the login screens that the member library service was shutting down

It was updated again in 2020 when I found out that you could no longer use dropbox to download your purchases.

Look ma'... no more direct content!

This shocked me tremendously. I saw that O'Reilly is no longer selling books directly through their website. I asked in Twitter and got the following response:

Here's some context - <https://t.co/w4N4KZEqrn> Early Release are available on Safari only. /JJ

— O'Reilly Media (@OReillyMedia) [July 19, 2017](#)

Digging in the URL I found several things that worry me enormously. I'll quote the relevant sections and will explain why.

Yesterday, we announced that O'Reilly is no longer selling books and videos on shop.oreilly.com. We heard from some of you that you're unhappy about that decision, especially because no other sellers offer DRM-free ebooks in multiple digital formats. You're right about that, but there's more to the story. And since we've always been transparent with our customers, here's some additional context about why we made those recent changes.

The announcement was not the first sign that something was up. I wanted to buy early release ebooks and I wasn't able to. At the time I chuckled at some glitch in their ecommerce system and left it at that. My first reaction at reading the announcement was a loud WTF?!

The publisher is channeling you to their own subscription service to continue reading online, brick and mortar vendors to buy the physical books. They also suggest vendors like Amazon for digital content.

All these options are problematic, each for their own reasons.

I don't want a subscription service, regardless of how reasonably priced you think it is. Other than early release books you don't update your existing content often enough to justify monthly payments for them. I'd much rather buy the books.

I prefer ebooks (epub first and PDF if I must) to physical books for portability and ease of annotating. You've taken away that choice because even offering PDF of the books as part of a Safari subscription is not enough to entice me to subscribe,

Finally, in pushing me towards Amazon or other stores that sell ebooks you've broken your promise of making your content DRM free. I would be locked into whatever reading device the vendor decides I have to use. Google books may be a good option but I'm not sure I want to give Google any more data about me than they already have.

What's more, I would no longer own the content. The content downloaded to the device or my computer is encrypted and only the seller can unlock the book so I can read it legally. Furthermore the evidence does point out to the level of control that the seller has over the content they've licensed me. Thank goodness it hasn't happened recently but Amazon has demonstrated a frightening capability of erasing purchased books from users' accounts and devices.

Early releases of O'Reilly titles. That's right. You won't find those anywhere but on Safari.

If I want to read an early release book my only choice is to read the, for now, only version online in Safari. Gone is the chance to purchase the book and download it to my device (independent of the format I choose) to read when it's convenient for me.

When the digital revolution started, Tim and the team had the foresight in 2000 to build Safari (which, by the way, has nothing to do with Apple's Safari browser, which it predated by many years. It works in every browser!). We believed, correctly, that reading a book cover-to-cover was only one of the ways people used our content. Many of them needed information on-demand, and we could best deliver that through an all-inclusive online service. That was why we reached out to our competitors and brought them into the platform. And the business began to grow. The promise was simple—everything you need to be the best developer or engineer possible.

I doubt this is true. I need reference material that is available in a format that is convenient to me not easier for the publisher to work with. I highlight ebooks and make notes that I use as references for further work, be it writing, research or development.

As new learning modalities emerged, O'Reilly moved to embrace new formats. We developed an amazing video training series (thanks to a talented author base and editorial team willing to try something new), we purchased a small screencasting company and integrated it into our editorial offerings, we developed Oriole, our own interactive learning technology that integrates video and in-browser coding, and developed a formative assessment program for our popular video learning paths.

That's commendable but how many people did you loose in the process? How many people are you going to loose as a result of the move?

Meanwhile, sales of books have declined consistently year after year since 2000! Ebooks expanded the market for a while, and direct distribution from oreilly.com was a great way to make them widely available while traditional retailers other than Amazon were slow to embrace that market. But starting a few years ago, ebook sales too started to flatten, and then to fall. Running oreilly.com as a distribution platform was effective, but also costly. It required a dedicated investment in e-commerce software, staff, marketing, and so on. It also required us to choose whether to direct incoming customers to

the declining e-commerce business to buy standalone units, or to our growing subscription business.

That choice is not yours to make. As a customer I know what I'm looking for and I know what my needs are. In directing me to the subscription service that I tried and chose not to continue you've lost both a book customer and a subscription user.

But we are also sensitive to those of you who still prefer to learn from and to own books. We are still publishing books, and you can buy them directly, either on paper or in a variety of electronic formats from a number of resellers, just not directly from us. We've closed our online store, not our publishing operation! We still support those who prefer the model of ownership to subscription.

For all the reasons I've described none of those options work for me. I bought directly from you as a way to support a publisher, because you were one of the few publishers who sold books without DRM and because I've always liked both the technologies you worked with and the timeliness of your content.

And we also listen. After our announcement, the bulk of your requests have been for PDFs versus kindle or EPUB format. We're already working on offering PDF downloads as part of the Safari subscription, as well as other new features to support offline reading. And we are looking into ways for our resellers to support unit sales of PDFs. I regret that we didn't get those arrangements in place in advance of this announcement.

How hard is to use Atlas or a similar service to generate all digital formats? Selling in Amazon means you'll have to continue making a MOBI version and iBooks means you'll have to make an epub or an iBooks enhanced version. Furthermore ebooks don't suffer the problems of printed books. There is no warehousing and a different distribution deal.

We know many of you are disappointed. But we have to reinvent to stay relevant in this competitive market and to continue our mission of spreading the knowledge of innovators. The formats may change, but the mission stays the

same.

That may be the case but I'll search for a different publisher that doesn't force my hand because of their business model. I'm also looking forward to seeing how the subscription statistics change over time and how many people who, like me, would have bought an ebook will move to the subscription model.

Host your own stuff

Some time later I heard that the member library, the collection of all your purchases would go away and to download your purchases before that time.

but a few months after that the member library is still there. Now it's next to impossible to access and it's giving me all sorts of nightmares trying to get to my content