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Print Books Are Target of Pirates on the Web

by MOTOKO RICH • MAY 12, 2009

Ursula K. Le Guin, the science fiction writer, was perusing the Web site Scribd last month when she came across digital copies of some books that seemed quite familiar to her. No wonder. She wrote them, including a free-for-the-taking copy of one of her most enduring novels, “The Left Hand of Darkness.”

Neither Ms. Le Guin nor her publisher had authorized the electronic editions. To Ms. Le Guin, it was a rude introduction to the quietly proliferating problem of digital piracy in the literary world. “I thought, who do these people think they are?” Ms. Le Guin said. “Why do they think they can violate my copyright and get away with it?”

This would all sound familiar to filmmakers and musicians who fought similar battles — with varying degrees of success — over the last decade. But to authors and their publishers in the age of Kindle, it’s new and frightening territory.

For a while now, determined readers have been able to sniff out errant digital copies of titles as varied as the “Harry Potter” series and best sellers by Stephen King and John Grisham. But some publishers say the problem has ballooned in recent months as an expanding appetite for e-books has spawned a bumper crop of pirated editions on Web sites like Scribd and Wattpad, and on file-sharing services like RapidShare and MediaFire.

“It’s exponentially up,” said David Young, chief executive of Hachette Book Group, whose Little, Brown division publishes the “Twilight” series by Stephenie Meyer, a favorite among digital pirates. “Our legal department is spending an ever-increasing time policing sites where copyrighted material is being presented.”

John Wiley & Sons, a textbook publisher that also issues the “Dummies” series, employs three full-time staff members to trawl for unauthorized copies. Gary M. Rinck, general counsel, said that in the last month, the company had sent notices on more than 5,000 titles — five times more than a year ago — asking various sites to take down digital versions of Wiley’s books.

“It’s a game of Whac-a-Mole,” said Russell Davis, an author and president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, a trade association that helps authors pursue digital pirates. “You knock one down and five more spring up.”

Sites like Scribd and Wattpad, which invite users to upload documents like college theses and self-published novels, have been the target of industry grumbling in recent weeks, as illegal reproductions of popular titles have turned up on them. Trip Adler, chief executive of Scribd, said it was his “gut feeling” that unauthorized editions represented only a small fraction of the site’s content.

Both sites say they immediately remove illegally posted books once notified of them. The companies have also installed filters to identify copyrighted work when it is uploaded. “We are working very hard to keep unauthorized content off the site,” Mr. Adler said.

Several publishers declined to comment on the issue, fearing the attention might inspire more theft. For now, electronic piracy of books does not seem as widespread as what hit the music world, when file-sharing services like Napster threatened to take down the whole industry.

Publishers and authors say they can learn from their peers in music, who alienated fans by using the courts aggressively to go after college students and Napster before it converted to a legitimate online store.

“If iTunes started three years earlier, I’m not sure how big Napster and the subsequent piratical environments would have been, because people would have been in the habit of legitimately purchasing at pricing that wasn’t considered pernicious,” said Richard Sarnoff, a chairman of Bertelsmann, which owns Random House, the world’s largest publisher of consumer titles.

Until recently, publishers believed books were relatively safe from piracy because it was so labor-intensive to scan each page to convert a book to a digital file. What’s more, reading books on the computer was relatively unappealing compared with a printed version.

Now, with publishers producing more digital editions, it is potentially easier for hackers to copy files. And the growing popularity of electronic reading devices like the Kindle from Amazon or the Reader from Sony make it easier to read in digital form. Many of the unauthorized editions are uploaded as PDFs, which can be easily e-mailed to a Kindle or the Sony device.

An example of copyrighted material on Scribd recently included a digital version of “The Tales of Beedle the Bard,” a collection of fairy tales by J. K. Rowling. One commenter, posting as vicious-9690, wrote “thx for posting it up ur like the robinhood of ebooks.”

For some writers, tracking down illegal e-books is simply not worth it.

“The question is, how much time and energy do I want to spend chasing these guys,” Stephen King wrote in an e-mail message. “And to what end? My sense is that most of them live in basements

floored with carpeting remnants, living on Funions and discount beer.”

Book sales are down significantly, and publishers say it is difficult to determine whether electronic piracy is denting sales. Some of the most frequently uploaded books, like the “Twilight” series, are also huge best sellers.

Some authors say they just want to protect the principle of compensating writers. “I don’t ask to get rich off this stuff,” said Harlan Ellison, an author and screenwriter. “I just ask to be paid.”

Nine years ago, Mr. Ellison sued Internet service providers for failing to stop a user from posting four of his stories to an online newsgroup. Since settling that suit, he has pursued more than 240 people who have posted his work to the Internet without permission. “If you put your hand in my pocket, you’ll drag back six inches of bloody stump,” he said.

Others view digital piracy as a way for new readers to discover writers. Cory Doctorow, a novelist whose young adult novel “Little Brother” spent seven weeks on the New York Times children’s chapter books best-seller list last year, offers free electronic versions of his books on the same day they are published in hardcover. He believes free versions, even unauthorized ones, entice new readers.

“I really feel like my problem isn’t piracy,” Mr. Doctorow said. “It’s obscurity.”

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