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VAST: Don’t Buy This Book

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Electronic Readers, Copyright Laws, and an Unknown Economy

Societies current copyright laws do not and will not work well with the increasing use of electronic readers and books. Our copyright laws main “purpose, stated in the US Constitution, was to “promote progress”—that is, to encourage publication” (Stallman). At the time of the invention of the printing press, the idea of protecting “the business of writing and publishing” made sense because copyright laws protected a new source of income into our economy (Stallman). During the time period of the printing press and the written book, copyright laws strongly benefitted the public. However with the introduction of new technology into our society, the need for copyright laws has greatly changed. Our society has been introduced to many new ways of obtaining information including computers and now electronic readers. Amazon introduced the electronic reader, which is better known as the e-book, in 2007 with the reveal of the Amazon Kindle. The Kindle like all other e-books allows for readers to purchase and read all of their books on a small hand held electronic device. By making information so easily available, technology “facilitates copying and manipulating information, including software, musical recordings and books (Stallman). An interesting question to ask is if technology encourages people to obtain and share information and ideas, then why do we still have copyright laws that prevent people from using the information out there?

The issue of copyright laws and electronic books causes there to be a complication with the meaning and ownership of public information. Copyright laws were originally created to protect the author and to aid the people by taking power away from the publishers. However with the introduction of e-books, the publishers gain power from copyright laws. One example of this is the idea of electronic lending. With written books, people can lend and borrow books whenever they want and libraries were created for this specific purpose. However, an electronic book is not nearly as easy to share as a written book. Publishers have the ability to not allow purchasers to share the electronic version of a book. Apple, another company known for electronic reading, includes this message with the purchase of any one of their e-books “You shall be authorized to use the iBookstore Products only for personal, noncommercial use” (Polanka). This statement, technically, says that the only person who is allowed to read the electronic form of the book is the person who purchased the book. Although not a huge problem for individual consumers who share books between friends and family, it does become a problem when libraries purchase e-books because they are not always legally allowed to lend out electronic copies to their members. A person might argue that this is not a problem because libraries can just buy paper copies while individuals buy electronic copies. However, people have failed to notice that some authors are choosing to only publish electronically. By publishing only electronically, authors give publishers the ability to take advantage of the consumers because they have complete control over the device needed to actually read the book.

In 1998, the United States Congress passed a new copyright law known as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. At the time, the law was proposed to protect authors and creative thinkers and proved to be very successful, until about ten years later when technology surpassed the law. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act or the DMCA is well known for introducing the notice-and-takedown provision for writings, videos, etc. found on the Internet (“Copyright Law…”). This act took the control of ideas away from consumers and authors who realistically should be the only people involved in the spread of ideas and creativity and gave control to the publishers. The DMCA, also, gave publishers “total legal power over almost anything a reader might do with an e-book” (Stallman). With total legal power, publishers are allowing books to become “a service, not a product” through e-books (Mitchell). Since the introduction of the e-book into society, the “balance between the rights of copyright holders, and the rights to promote educational scholarship, criticism, and allowing broad access to information” has been disrupted and only a change in copyright laws is going to restore the balance (Andrews).

It is, also, important to look at the problems that could potentially arise if copyright laws are not changed or eliminated. The key to all the possible problems is the amount of control held by those who created the electronic readers like the Amazon Kindle and the Barnes and Nobles Nook. As electronic books become more popular, bookstores will and already have started to go out of business including well-known stores like Borders. However, those companies, who sell electronic readers, will slowly begin to take over and manipulate the book economy. There has already been a Justice Department lawsuit “accusing five of the country’s biggest publishers of illegally colluding with Apple to fix the price of e-books” (Wasserman). By eliminating competition, electronic readers have the ability to potentially really harm our already struggling economy. As the use of electronic readers begins to grow, our society will need to look into changing the laws surrounding copyright issues because without some type of change our economy has the potential to experience real economic problems.

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