



Be wary of the latest e-book scam

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There's a literary scam on the market involving e-books, and it's sufficiently serious that if something isn't done to fix it, the result could be a major setback for authors, readers, publishers and marketers in the e-book industry.

So far, only a couple of seriously egregious offenders have been identified, but the loophole they're using to market essentially worthless e-books which take little effort to produce discloses a methodology which could be exploited. And if the exploiting is done in a not-so-obvious way, and too many authors and publishers try to use it, the damage to the nascent e-book industry could be significant.

Before anyone panics too substantially, please understand that I have come up with a cure for this problem which is virtually cost-free. All it takes is just a slight bit of extra effort on the part of e-book authors, publishers and marketers. But before getting to that cure, here's a description of the problem.

When an e-book is listed in the catalog of an e-book marketer, such as Barnes & Noble (Nook) and Amazon (Kindle), the description of the book does not include a word count or an estimate of the number of

pages that would be displayed on an e-book reader. In many cases, the description of the book will contain the file size, expressed as either bytes or kilobytes, but there is no formula provided to show how that file size converts to the number of pages in the book.

The bigger problem is that readers typically don't take the time to evaluate the file size as a function of the length of the book.

Even if someone were to try to come up with such a formula, it wouldn't have a lot of meaning. The reason is that if the book has a lot of illustrations, especially color illustrations, the file size can be driven up dramatically. For example, the book, *Rick Perry: a politician's journey* (Published by VOOK), has a stated file size of 18,000 kB, a size that is larger than many books more than 200 pages in length, yet this particular book is only about 28 pages long when displayed on a Nook or a Kindle, which includes six color photos and two black-and-white photos. The photos, obviously, drove the file size to a very high number, but the actual text is far short of a real, full-length book, even though the file size would suggest that it is a full-length book.

The reader, unfortunately, has no way of determining the length of the book without buying it.

The most egregious offender in this practice is someone who goes by the name of Ron Paul Jones, which is obviously a pseudonym inasmuch as extensive research can't turn him or her up. The name of the publisher is the same as the author. Jones (or whoever he or she is) has listed more than 20 e-books on the Nook and Kindle websites, ranging in price from \$2.99 to \$3.99, and in none of these books is there any contact information for Ron Paul Jones the author or Ron Paul Jones the publisher.

Almost all of his or her books are titled as some permutation of Republican candidates who are running for president, such as *Herman Cain A to Z*, *John Huntsman A to Z*, *Romney versus Ron Paul*, *Obama versus Perry*, *Perry versus Ron Paul*, *Obama versus Romney*, and the list goes on. Two variations are *The way to steal freedom: the guide for government*, and *Why Ron Paul is the right choice for Catholics*.

The longest of these books by "Jones", as displayed on an e-book reader, is *The way to steal freedom: the guide for government*, which displays as 50 e-book pages. The shortest is *Herman Cain A to Z*, which displays as only three pages in the e-book version.

And, as would be expected, the contents of these books are severely lacking in quality. They are written using newspaper articles and other public sources without attribution. They are simplistic in both style and syntax, and obviously not much care was taken in drafting them.

I have talked with several people at both Amazon and Barnes & Noble about this problem, beginning with the basic customer-service personnel and then working my way up the ladder to the extent that these employees would give me other contact numbers. In both companies, these initially-contacted, customer service representatives have no acceptable answers or suggestions except to sympathize and to say, in effect, that they have no additional information either about the book length or the contact information for the author and publisher (in this case, Ron Paul Jones).

Representatives at both companies suggested that I read reviews of the books to aid my purchase decision, but the only books by Ron Paul Jones with such reviews were *Herman Cain A to Z* (my own review, plus a review from another reader who said the book could be read in three minutes), and *Why Rick Perry won't win the presidency*, which has only the one review by me.

However, some of these customer service representatives tried to be as helpful as possible. One representative at Barnes & Noble, while she had me on the phone, purchased and downloaded *Herman Cain A to Z* to her Nook, then reported with great exasperation that it was only three pages long. "I can see why you think it's a problem," she said.

In the effort to be helpful, a representative at Barnes & Noble and one at Amazon went online while they had me on the phone and then cheerfully announced that they had found the mysterious Ron Paul Jones. They both gave me a toll-free number which, as it turned out, was the number for Ron Paul, the presidential candidate. The humor in that result helped overcome some of their embarrassment. One of those representatives said, "I guess I was just trying too hard to reach out to you."

I managed to get a return call from the Amazon legal department in Seattle. That lady was very nice and understanding and took all the information I provided, and she promised to forward my characterization of the problem to company executives who make policy. I don't really expect to hear back from her.

In addition to the problem associated with unwary customers being scammed by the likes of Ron Paul Jones, the additional problem is that e-book marketers whose catalogs are flooded with books selling in the \$2.99 to \$3.99 range contribute to a situation in which legitimate, book-length authors who publish their work as e-books can be swallowed by the volume. As an author myself, at this point I would be wary of writing and marketing an e-book about any of the Republican presidential candidates—with the candidate's name prominently displayed in the title—for fear of being lumped into the category of scam artists like Ron Paul Jones, or whatever his or her name really is.

So, how can this problem be solved?

When authors and/or publishers submit e-books to Barnes and Noble (Nook) and Amazon (Kindle), they should make sure to include in their promo-synopsis of the book (1) the specific contact information for the author and publisher, and (2) the word count of the volume. A book of 75,000 words is a full-length book, and it doesn't matter how many e-book pages it utilizes, thus eliminating the argument that one cannot provide the length of the book (in pages) because e-books display pages differently, depending on the size of the type selected by the reader. The word count would solve that problem.

And when Barnes & Noble (Nook) and Amazon (Kindle) accept e-books for marketing, they should at least take time to make sure that these two pieces of information are available to the reader before the reader decides whether or not to buy and download the book. They should implement a requirement that in submitting a book for marketing, the author and/or publisher should include the word count and the contact information in the promo-synopsis.

It goes without saying that e-book marketers can do much to protect and grow their industry, and they can protect the authors and publishers who are vital for their business success by building these safeguards into their business models. Most of all, taking such steps would provide the kind of consumer protection readers have every right to expect from these successful companies. If these two companies in particular don't take steps to correct this problem, it will be a major disappointment, not to mention being a liability for authors, publishers and marketers who are part of the new and exciting e-book industry.

And, if anyone happens to find the mysterious and enigmatic Ron Paul Jones, please send me the contact information. I would like very much to have that important conversation or send that certified letter.

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