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Wednesday, 15 December 2010

Leasing Knowledge

By **Ctein**

My favorable review of Lloyd Chambers' Web-based book two weeks back touched upon a concern I had, which was that the material was only available as a temporary subscription, so the reader did not permanently own a copy of it.

Truth is, I understated my concerns, because I didn't want this side-issue to distract from the value of Lloyd's work. It's a great book and Lloyd's a neat guy—you should buy it. Make no mistake about that. So I was a little disingenuous and couched the matter in terms of the cost of the subscription rather than the concept itself. I didn't want to dissuade readers from buying the book, and anyway this isn't about Lloyd or Lloyd's book. There's a bigger issue.

I am very, very disturbed by a thought I've had, which is that leasing knowledge might become the norm. Certainly there are many powerful corporate interests that want to see it go that way. (Do we even need to revisit the Kindle/Amazon *1984* scandal? No we don't—'nough said.) I am not unsympathetic to nor ignorant of the problems and concerns of those who create and disseminate knowledge. Don't you all forget that's a big part of how I make my living. And trust me, even dead trees don't solve those problems; my last book was pirated and torrented before it had even left the printers, and that's not an uncommon occurrence.

My recent books have supplemental web content. If the website goes belly up, either by my choice or by the unwilling intervention of the Fates, that supplemental material will no longer be available. Fortunately, the physical book, which contains the really important stuff, won't suddenly disappear from the reader's shelf.

But, you know what? This isn't a column about how hard it is to make a living as a knowledge creator. This is about the impact that not owning knowledge has on me, as a reader, a consumer, an end-user, and a member of society. As said end-user, I don't care about the problems on the other side. Truly I don't. But I do care deeply about the possibility of living in a world where I can't hang onto the knowledge I've acquired. That's a really bad thing.

It's a bad thing for the very simple reason I mentioned two paragraphs ago. If you're leasing your knowledge from a knowledge provider (how is that for corporate-speak?) you only have that knowledge as long as they are willing and able to provide it. Someday I will stop writing and maintaining a website, either by choice or by death. The same is true for Lloyd or any other entity that is providing important, useful knowledge that the reader doesn't physically own. Sooner or later, the reader will lose it. We all hope it will be later rather than sooner, but none of us know. We can all name important writers in the field of photography who, more or less suddenly and with more or less forewarning, are no longer part of our community. Imagine if all their books and magazine articles suddenly disappeared from your shelf when they stopped being in the business.

By no stretch of the imagination can I imagine this to be a good or even acceptable situation. We've spent half a millennium developing a modern society, infrastructure, and information dissemination technologies to circumvent the problem of, "Only Sarah knew that, and she died last week." In fact, that's an understatement; before that we had copy scribes and oral tradition to ensure that knowledge might plausibly outlive its source.

Leasing knowledge is not an acceptable state of affairs. That is the bottom line that you must not lose sight of. I didn't say the alternatives would necessarily be easy to devise or implement (though they might be); I didn't say it was a simple problem nor that there would be a simple or single solution (though there might be). What I am saying is that leasing knowledge is not a tolerable solution, period, exclamation point, *fin*.

Figure out something different. This end-user has spoken.

Ctein

Ctein's regular weekly column now appears on Wednesdays on TOP.

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Featured Comment by **John Camp:** "Right now we're seeing the beginning of a struggle to revise the concept of 'ownership,' and it's led by universities and (of course) lawyers in an effort to monetize the knowledge that comes from research. The argument is, 'We spent a lot of time, effort and money to find this out, why shouldn't we have rights to it?'

"Generally, the answer to that (which is philosophical, rather than legal) is, 'You can't patent or own knowledge, because knowledge in the abstract is a public good, like air; you *can* patent or own a specific technique or a specific product.'

"I think those two concepts (knowledge and packaging) have to be kept carefully separate, because they drive each other. We (as a community) want the knowledge, and we drive the acquisition of it by allowing people to profit from its packaging.

"Knowledge belongs to everyone. Packaging belongs to a specific entity or person, at least long enough enough to be paid for the cost of the packaging.

"The problem I see with Ctein's argument is that people like Chambers are not really leasing knowledge, they are leasing the box that the knowledge comes in—a book or a website, which they pay to create or maintain. If somebody wants to more-or-less duplicate Lloyd Chamber's reference books, that could be done—he's not hiding or even really creating the knowledge, as far as I can see. Rather, he's organized it into a product. If you don't like it, you have several choices, including acquiring the information on your own and putting into your own box, and even selling that box to others in competition with Chambers; or you could lead a boycott of Chambers' box until he changes his sales strategy; or you could go without, etc.

"But Chambers' activity is rather different than developing knowledge and then attempting to restrict the use of the knowledge itself."

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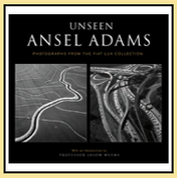

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Comments

Another aspect may be the disappearance of multiple editions of a work.

Now, if I buy the 2nd edition of a book, I still have the 1st edition as well. But not in the future if my first edition automatically updates itself, eliminating my copy of the 1st ed.

Also, as it stands, I can buy an earlier edition from eBay, a used book store, etc. But in the utopian DRM scenario, the concept of used books goes away, so I won't be able to buy a "used" copy of an earlier edition.

Posted by: Gary Brown | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 10:30 AM

I must be missing something here. I understand that someone can remove content from their website, but that's just the content, the original reference source, not any knowledge I may have subsequently derived from it. Short of killing me or subjecting me to a trauma such as shock therapy, how can someone take knowledge away from me?

Posted by: Gordon Lewis | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 10:31 AM

Dear Ctein,

Amazon is not the only culprit. Or better to say, not the first culprit.

It may not be on the same level of obnoxiousness, but aren't there programs where you need to officially go through the manufacturing company to sell or give your copy to somebody else?

Posted by: erlik | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 10:45 AM

Dear Ctein,

The second (or third) thing that I thought of when I read your column about Lloyd Chamber's web-based book, was that it would be simple enough to copy the site once one had paid for access. Then, one is paying $45 for a snapshot of a work in progress, which is pretty typical for how textbook revisions work.

I think that the future of "rented knowledge" probably looks a lot like that: knowledge never goes away, but it becomes fragmented and disorganized, spread across the hard-drives of many fans. Collecting things is a human trait, and many people are magpies when it comes to data. A huge number of the mp3 "collectors" (pirates!) never listen to their acquisitions even once, but they feel compelled to collect a "complete set". Some are so benighted that they will attempt to collect a complete set of *everything*. Sound familiar? Just substitute "lenses" for "mp3s"...

I also think the trading of "complete" collections - e.g. all of the game ROMs (arcade game data) for a given decade - is based around the difficulty of finding a single game that is greatly desired. In other words, it's a simple workaround to solve the problem of the fragmentation of data.

Lloyd, I do apologize for bringing up this option - I mean you no harm, but I think copying is inevitable. Perhaps you could delay it for a time with obfuscation, or through the clever use of server-side database queries for generating interactive demonstrations. I would suggest, instead, offering a zipped archive of the whole "book" that people could download. Perhaps you could only offer the previous edition, as you go through annual revisions?

Will

Posted by: Will Frostmill | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 10:47 AM

Oh dear! Try to make a distinction between creation, archival, delivery and management. Then maybe you won't feel so upset. LC creates, stores and manages knowledge for FREE. He is only charging for the delivery. That's a bargain AFAICT. Oh isn't it easy to confuse information and knowledge just like maybe I have? A hard topic this...

Posted by: bueler | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:01 AM

Greetings, I am a technical writer by profession and a photographer as a hobby. His pricing structure is strange, but not so strange as some of the other educational sites I have encountered for guitar lessons, cooking, and what have you. The thing is this, his website isn't the only place to get the information. Frequently I will see something in a book I want to do, but I don't need the whole book, so I use Google to search for that technique or something similar. There are ways(some legit, some not) to even get whole books downloaded for free.

The point is, is that his business practices will either work for him or they won't.

I don't know that I would pay a subscription fee for his book, just like I won't pay $350 for an ebook to tell me how to make the most out of my photography business.

I don't really see his business model taking off anytime soon while there are so many other free sources of information.

Posted by: wade courtney | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:07 AM

Ctein,

You've never written better, nor on a more important subject. Your last paragraph is where the rubber meets the road, of course. What is the solution, and how do we implement it?

I am a small and very minor 'knowledge creator' (I think many of Mike's readers are.) But, small-to-micro though my website may be, totally funded and maintained by me, at my whim, it is amazing how many people 'know' that the information will always be there, available whenever they need or want it.

This basic disconnect between the history of bound pages of ink on paper, and today's electronic publishing, is going to get us all in real trouble. No one should assume today's new information/knowledge is a guaranteed legacy to the future. I'm guilty of neglect, too. I posted a link to information from my website that is now completely gone. That was the real wake-up call to me.

Again, what is the answer?

Posted by: Denise Ross | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:11 AM

I wonder if you're not confusing knowledge with its delivery medium?

Knowledge is, by definition, yours once you -- "know" -- it and as long as you remember it.

The marketplace ultimately decides if the value proposition of information delivery media and terms are worthwhile and competitive. The notion of an access-expiration-dated reference work is perhaps no different that a subscription. But, personally, it just rubs me as a shameless grab when we're talking about a single small reference piece. I know that rock-and-tree snappers will generally leap at any title featuring the word "sharpness". But in an age where young people feel freely entitled to all information on the planet I don't see this being a broadly successful delivery model.

Posted by: Ken Tanaka | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:23 AM

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September 2010
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"Leasing knowledge is not an acceptable state of affairs."

I couldn't agree with you more. this is an issue of some importance.

Article I, Section 8, Clause 8 of the US Constitution would appear to support your point of view, too.

Posted by: Nigel | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:35 AM

Preach it, brother Ctein! And it's not just knowledge that's at risk, it's art, as you pointed out in reference to the "1984" fiasco. This is the reason I will never own a Kindle, and why I won't buy DRMed music from the iTunes store or an audiobook from Audible. The last one in particular is killing me; there are a ton of audiobooks I would love to have, but the dead-star-and-dead-dinosaur editions too huge and expensive, buying DRMed files rewards a foolish and consumer-hostile company, and torrenting them (all the DRM in the world isn't going to keep them off the torrents; most new DRM schemes don't survive a week in the wild, and even a non-hacker can re-record sound coming from a speaker) screws over the talented people If I choose to discard a book or a CD or a digital file, so be it; I avoid, as much as possible, situations where outside powers discard them for me.

A broader but related issue is the inherently non-archival nature of web pages. The Online Photographer contains a vast store of knowledge and entertainment, but were aliens to suddenly abduct Mike (and anyone else with admin priveleges here, if such people exist), what would happen to that information? Or what if Mike has a really bad day moderating comments and deletes the entire site and all backups in a fit of pique?

Posted by: Nicholas Condon | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:48 AM

I agree 1000%.
I had the same problem with Lloyd Chambers site. Paid a one year subscription and the only lasting result of my purchase was the disk testing programs. I did peruse the site with gusto (vividly recommended), but I always felt uncomfortable with the "only on-line" thing and ended up not renewing the subscription as most content is reference material that I do not need to read regularly.
This "knowledge leasing" is becoming a problem also in academia because Universities are no longer able to buy printed copies of scientific publications and instead are paying subscriptions to the editors ("providers") in order to access them. This may mean that a XXII century student may find out that his University Library collection ends somewhere in the beginning of the XXI century and that he has to pay to get whatever was created in between.

Posted by: Paulo Mendes | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:53 AM

I totally agree. E-readers are a good example. You don't own the content and can't access it if your current reader goes poof.

Posted by: Ed | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 12:13 PM

At the very least there will be lawsuits by failed rental publishers to extract money from people who retain some of that rented knowledge in their brains and use it or build on it. That would be no more absurd than the music industry suing children.

Can a scifi movie be far behind starring Keanu Reeves be far behind having his rented knowledge forcibly removed from his brain?

Posted by: Winsor | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 12:20 PM

I could not agree more with Ctein's thoughtful post. The entire post-enlightenment edifice of Western Civilization was built upon accumulated experience and knowledge, largely transmitted and shared in the form of the printed word. One didn't rent the content of Newton's Principia or Darwin's Origin of Species, only to see it evaporate from the shelf if another payment wasn't made. Having the cognitive content of Western Civilization locked up behind corporate firewalls and available only for lease is potentially an existential threat to further scientific advance.

An analogous corporate strategem has come to distort my own world of medicine. Pharmaceutical companies spend billions researching treatment of chronic (and therefore highly profitable) diseases like diabetes or hyperlipidemia that require maintenance therapy every day. Patients essentially 'rent' their treatment, providing drug companies with a steady revenue stream, but their condition deteriorates if they stop the medication. Antibiotics, on the other hand, are used as a single course that generally cures an infection, without the need for perpetual maintenance. It's no coincidence that pharmaceutical companies have spent very little on antibiotic research, despite the frightening threat of antibiotic resistant infections. There's not enough money in it.

Posted by: Geoff Wittig | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 12:22 PM

Yes. Same reason I'm not as big a library user as I might be, really -- back in gradeschool, perhaps my second or third gradeschool, I found the new library didn't have some of my old favorites when I wanted to reread them.

As a personal workaround, I will archive electronic copies of things, and run mirroring programs on websites to make a local copy if I want to protect myself against the original going away. This (in the current state of technology) requires some expertise, and sometimes the info leasers attempt to make it difficult. This can't be the long-term societal solution, but it helps me sometimes now.

Given how cheap it is to put content on the web, there could perhaps be a business model in finding unavailable content and making it available. Maybe. The real work here is largely in finding the rights holder and striking a deal; when three people die in a car crash a second-cousin in Sydney suddenly owns the rights to works he's never heard of by a woman from Barcelona, so the tracking down bit can be really hairy.

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 12:41 PM

Amen Ctein. Besides the philosophical and cost problems that you described I have another problem with Lloyd's model. I looked at Lloyd's material and, although I thought it valuable and interesting, decided not to subscribe because I could not download and print it. My reason is that I learn best by being able to study printed material on paper, take notes, make notations and review the content again some time later. I have not found it as easy for me to do this with material appearing on a computer screen.

Posted by: John St. Onge | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 12:48 PM

Very topical post below. Essentially Amazon pulled several authors' books from their Kindle store. They didn't stop there: they even deleted those books from customers' Kindles who had already bought them without the customers' consent. So in effect they went to the customer's home while they weren't home and took the book back.

Unlike previous case where Amazon deleted books which were illegal (copyright infringment), in this case there's apparently no illegal activity.

http://theselfpublishingrevolution.blogspot.com/2010/12/amazon-in-book-banning-business.html

Posted by: Ahem | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 01:00 PM

I paid for both Sean Reids site and lloyd's . When my subscription to Reid's site ended I thought I would be able to access everything written to that point, when I could not I felt cheated. then thought well I dsagreeded with reid a lot so I did not miss it, lloyd I realized when it was over that would be it. I liked his site a lot, but it is not that necessary for me to continue, so though I think it is wrong to not have access to what I paid for, I knew that going in,I wish that he would come up to allow those that have subscribed to download maybe with a confidentiality agreement.

Posted by: David Seelig | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 01:17 PM

I agree totally with you Ctein...

I've been aware for some time now, that software companies have been brain-storming and examining the idea of making their software usable only by yearly payment. There are some high-end professional software business packages that can only be purchased like this. If you don't "re-up", it goes dead on your computer. What disturbs me, is that I've heard that imaging software is being thought of as a possible market for this type of pay structure.

A bunch of us, with backgrounds in marketing, sat down a while back and had a discussion about how we realized that a whole myriad of services were starting to be marketed to the public as "open-ended" pay models; and the monthly fee seemed to always fall around the $49.95 a month figure. This must be the price that the financial people think a person will jump in without too much thought. It's so common, it's not too much of a leap of logic to understand that this has very little to do with the development and on-going expense of the actual service or item you are buying, and a lot to do with what you are willing to spend without thinking. Basic cable, Cell phone, high-speed internet connection...

Having had some experience being educated in copyright law for media, and negotiating fees and services from imagists, I can tell you it's fairly easy to understand that when you buy a music CD, you are paying cash for the delivery vehicle, and leasing the use of the music. Ditto for almost any intellectual property, such as books, magazines, whatever. It's one of the things the general public has had difficulty understanding; and one of the things the sellers of intellectual property didn't care much about until virtually lossless reproduction became possible through modern computerization. You were also buying the personal use of this property for your life, or basically, in most cases, the life of the delivery vehicle. This has all been covered ad infinitum in other places during the Great Copyright Wars of the 1990's, so no reason to go over it here.

But what I object to, is the idea that the marketing people are working long and hard on trying to figure out how to make you pay, pay, and repay for a lot of the intellectual property that you are buying, based on the ethereal nature of the modern delivery vehicle. I already have extensive problems with computer software upgrades that seemingly have very little value added to the product, and may make some ways I do things unavailable on, or untransferable to the new software. In addition, there is usually time wasted spent learning how to do things on the new software that really didn't need to be changed from the old system, and more likely were facilitated to make you think you are "getting something", which makes the upgrade price seem reasonable. There is also pressure from outside clients you may be working with, to upgrade at their behest in order to stay "lock-step" with the system they keep upgrading with their deep pockets.

From a marketing standpoint, the drive to "cloud computing", has less to do with the nice idea of making the software available to you from every host computer you might be using, and the version of the software you are using being constantly tweaked and improved by the originating engineers; and a lot to do with figuring out how to make you pay over and over again for the use of this product. Better for the industry that you DON'T pay $300 dollars for imaging software up front, and use it until you can't possible get it to function on a modern computer anymore; and instead pay $15.00 a month for the rest of your natural life.

I still buy CD's, and DVD's, and books precisely because I want this information available to me as long as possible. I buy software packages on disc because if I have a computer snafu, I can re-download a program to my computer at any given moment, regardless of my current internet connection status. I want to OWN the use of these items at my discretion, within the confines of the copyright law.

On the other hand, Lloyd Chambers has the right to market his intellectual property in whatever way he deems necessary for his well-being. And he can let the market decide if they want to purchase his item based on that, and we can all be sad if no one has a hard copy of it anymore after the post WWIII EMF fallout.

Posted by: Tom Kwas | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 01:37 PM

Dear John Camp, Ken, and Gordon,

Addressing you collectively, because you all hit upon common points:

First, can we not have a semantic quibble over the word “knowledge?” If the word doth offend thee, pluck it out and substitute something else. So far as I am concerned, and I think is clear in the intent and content of my article, I mean “knowledge” to be that useful information not merely in my head but also on my computer and my bookshelves. Absent an eidetic memory, which I don't have and I'm pretty sure most TOP readers don't, the subset of knowledge that is actually in my brain is much, much smaller than that that is in all my reference materials. What I do need to keep in my brain is the library catalog, as it were; if I don't even remember that I have a book that addresses Topic X, well, that's pretty much book-bound knowledge I don't have. Not in any useful sense. But that aside, please, let's not get into the word games.

John, I think you underestimate Lloyd's work. There is material in his book that I have not seen in any other place and I am reasonably certain is original with him. Similarly, there are parts of my book POST EXPOSURE that I am reasonably certain are original with me (or at least I am the first publicly available source for that research and information), and I think there may be some in DIGITAL RESTORATION. Harder to be sure with the Photoshop stuff; so many people do that.

But that's really not the point. I don't see the distinction between packaging knowledge and creating it as being germane. Talking about me (because this isn't supposed to be about Lloyd, so he shouldn't have to be the point man on this), when someone sends me an e-mail saying they learned a really valuable technique from DIGITAL RESTORATION, it doesn't matter whether I invented that technique, reinvented it or merely repackaged it. My book was the source of the knowledge for them. When they need to refresh themselves on how to use that technique (and it is “when,” even I don't remember all the techniques that I wrote about), they will turn to their copy of my book to get it.

If my book magically disappears from their shelf, they may or may not be at find the same technique somewhere else. But they will certainly have to hunt for it, and, as I demonstrated to myself too many times, unless their memory and their search is precisely and well constructed, finding that technique may very well be beyond their means. Much of what's in my reference library is easy for me to find online (in which case is I don't consult my reference library); a great deal of it is not. Probably the majority of it. Well, at least not by my modest search skills.

In summary, as an end-user, I don't really care about “knowledge” as an abstract state of the human condition or some philosophical or platonic ideal. I care about knowledge as a tool. It's a mentally-tangible entity that I can use. And as a tool, I don't care if it's original with the person I bought it from, or if there are 1000 other tools like it somewhere else in the world that I don't know how to find. What I care about is that I have that tool, and that it's not going to capriciously disappear from my workbench.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
==========
-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 02:27 PM

I like the "tool disappearing from the workbench" analogy. It's resonant, and also it fits.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 02:40 PM

Even if one sets aside the legal and ethical aspects of the problem, there are real technical issues with preserving knowledge in electronic form.

It's a fascinating, complicated, cross-disciplinary problem, and I'm glad to see it addressed here. Thanks, Ctein.

Posted by: Ben Rosengart | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 02:41 PM

My son and I have been having this discussion of late; he just got a Kindle and loves it. I, on the other hand, will fight the urge as long as it is possible. I don't need to be reminded that I'm a dinosaur; that I just don't get it.

But 1. I'm an engineer, by education and trade, and I've seen too much knowledge disappear because a publisher needed to reduce page count for the new edition, for some unfathomable reason - he did have a captive readership and the laws of Physics pretty much don't change. Without the old edition on the shelf, proven and sucessful techniques would die with individual practitioners.
2. I'm a photographer, by desire, and I spend hours every day in front of my computer screen processing photo files. I need to walk away from that computer sometimes; and, if I need to review a technique, it's much more effective to have the reference book, or books, beside me as I work on the file.
3. If I pay normal retail prices for said container of knowledge, it has always, in the past, been mine to keep and even share with another person. E-books are another paradigm, and I believe, ultimately, a dangerous one. You pay for something that you don't get and, imagine the nightmare when your computer fries and all of your purchase/lease numbers go up in smoke. How easy is it to get those books back?
4. I fear that the controlling book-buying demographic does not share these concerns, and the book providers see a better profit model.

... alas (sigh) ... I'm with ya, Ctein.

Posted by: Al Benas | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 03:13 PM

Al Benas,
Then again, I struggle with another question sometimes--what am I doing with all these books? I keep books for all sorts of reasons. Some books I like to keep around because I haven't read them yet. But others are books that I read, enjoyed, and know full well I will never read again (I'm not a re-reader). A few of these are worthwhile to have because they give me a pleasant memory when I see them. But in a lot of other cases, I'm done with them.

I feel the same way about DVDs. I am not a big movie watcher, and I know I really don't need to own DVDs of movies. A DVD to me is desirable when I haven't seen it and more or less worthless to me after I've seen it. Consequently, I love Netflix on demand--I can watch whatever movie strikes my fancy at any particular moment, and when I'm done with it I don't need to do anything more with it--store it, sell it, etc. Suits me fine.

Aren't many books like that? I'm not saying you would want ALL your books on the Kindle. But certainly it suits certain kinds of books. And there's absolutely no reason to think that you can't have other books in classic paper-and-ink book form. I certainly shall never be without paper books at any time until my death.

Anyway, I don't know why you'd say "you pay for what you don't get." If you're paying for a convenient way the read a book through one time and then be done with it, you do get that. Whether it's worth what it costs is up to you to determine.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 03:36 PM

Another aspect of the problem is that the representation of knowledge changes over time.
When a subject is young, pleople are forced to ask fundamental questions and seek to find the answers to them.
As the subject evolves, people are more and more driven to answer more detailed questions. When you want to move forward at such a later point time, reading the older texts is more of a longterm investment many people no longer consider to be necessary.
In effect, if storage and retrieval of information is dictated by market value, the older information is bound to get lost. Another possibility is that someone buys all the older stuff and tries to get a monopoly on it.

Apart from that there are lots of people on this planet who simply cannot afford to pay the price for a subscription. In case of books there is at least a chance to buy a cheap torn down version which might still have its full intellectual value. In case of electronic subscriptions, this possibility is lost.

Posted by: Jan | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 04:43 PM

Ctein,

The distinction between knowledge and packaging is not a semantic quibble or a word game, it's a critical distinction. The distinction exists in such things as patent law, real estate law, and laws governing plagiarism, as well as philosophically.

If the distinction didn't exist, then one guy or company would own the rights to transistors; but because the *transistor concept* got out there, different expressions of it took off, and we have everything from transistor radios to computers and digital cameras. That's why some large companies try to hold tight to "proprietary information" that they haven't patented or copyrighted, because they've developed a concept [knowledge] that gives them some kind of economic advantage. If they patent or copyright it, then the concept gets out here, and somebody will come up with alternative ways to package it, and they lose their advantage.

If you or Lloyd developed new knowledge and packaged it in your books, then the knowledge is now out there, and other people can us it as they please – and they will. For example, they can take your hard-won knowledge, add to it, embellish it, whatever, and put it in *their* book. You don't own the knowledge.

But you do own your book, which you may be willing to sell to people at a price. And if somebody *copies* your book, you can sue them, because they illegally took your *package*, not because they took your knowledge.

If Lloyd really has developed some unique ideas, they'll be out there soon enough, and his book will lose its unique value. That's one reason that he has to maximize his return now – because the value of his book will eventually expire.

I would certainly agree with you that I don't like the way that Lloyd is selling his book, and probably won't buy it for that reason. But it's his book, and all I can do is register my displeasure...and wait for the knowledge to leak. If it's really good stuff, it will.

I'd add that there are lots of weird property-related concepts out there. For example, many photographers and artists are now copyrighting their images. So when you buy one of their images -- even a one-of-a-kind painting,you are buying only limited rights to that package, not including the right of reproduction. I read several years ago (in Art News, I think) of a lawsuit involving a decorating magazine (Architecture Digest?) in which a painting was shown on a wall, just as an incidental element of a decorating scheme, and the artist sued for unauthorized reproduction. I don't know what happened in that suit. The point is, the owner of the painting owned only limited rights to the painting -- just as you own only (time)-limited rights to Lloyd's book.

JC

Posted by: John Camp | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 05:12 PM

Dear Ctein,

Pandora's box you've opened, but I'm glad you did! How timely, too. Today, I read (for free) an article on the internet by a tech writer who says Microsoft is in deep doo-doo in the next few years. Why pay hundreds of dollars for content creation tools that you will be able to access free (or much cheaper, anyway from many competing app providers) on tablet devices accessing the "cloud" rather than storing a copy of the code on the device.

The author's contention about Microsoft was that Microsoft is not positioned well for this massive shift on the internet to cloud computing, and will struggle mightily to maintain it's current revenues which are in fact based ultimately on intellectual property rather than the physical object (a CD or DVD) which the cloud will replace. I don't know if he's right, but I do believe that the current technology trends foretell yet another paradigm shift in an Internet age that's barely old enough to sort out the last paradigm (i.e, going from mini computers and mainframes to personal desktop computers). And that last paradigm transformed printed (ie. democratized) knowledge more radically in just a decade than all other developments since perhaps the Gutenberg press in the 15th century.

The obvious financial winners appear to be the gatekeepers (i.e. bandwidth and app store providers), not the content creators. It's no wonder us little guys are struggling to create and distribute our stuff in this new age of easily pirated intellectual property. Indeed the whole concept of intellectual "property" is being run over by a train in this modern era.

Posted by: MHMG | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 05:13 PM

"Knowledge" used to be stored infrequently and as permanently as possible, and the knowledge that existed often had long term relevance, though the amount of knowledge was fairly limited (comparatively).

Now "knowledge" is stored very frequently but often with little specific permanence at all, is often of marginal relevance anyway (generally speaking) and there's so dam much of it.

In terms of specific points of access (as opposed to a more general sense of more permanent "availability", at least in the case of "important stuff") knowledge is becoming more temporary in nature due to the digital revolution in storage media and delivery and publishing.

The move to the computer/web/net/cloud/whatever's next made that inevitable really IMO.

I suspect that future generations will be far more comfortable with the ephemeral nature of such things than the current incumbents.

The fact is there is more information now then ever - and large amounts of it become irrelevant very quickly - but so what?

In 5 years time maybe Lloyd's book will have little relevance too, so a temporary lease isn't really the issue its made out to be here...

Everything fades, nothing lasts - why should a lack of permanence (or permanent access) be so scary? (I mean in the general sense - I agree that Lloyd's specific situation seems a little - well hopeful :)

anyway just wanted to express another point of view - I found Ctein's conclusions a bit OTT and just a little "fuddy duddy" perhaps :)

Posted by: Stu Aitken | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 05:14 PM

"It's a great book and Lloyd's a neat guy—you should buy it."

The whole leasing thing was enough for me to reject the book immediately when I read your first review.

That's not a game I'm prepared to play.

I'm not going to invest my time into getting to know a reference source that's be taken away a year later.

Same way Kindle is good for throw away airport books and free out of copyright classics, but I'd only pay serious money for a PDF.

Posted by: Hugh Alison | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 05:55 PM

>>can we not have a semantic quibble over the word “knowledge?”<<

I beg your pardon, sir. What you call a "semantic quibble" I call a simple desire to understand your true and complete meaning. It was you who chose the word "knowledge." Had you provided your particular definition of it ("useful information not merely in my head but also on my computer and my bookshelves") from the start, perhaps John, Ken and I--who some consider to be reasonably intelligent and (dare I say it?) *knowledgeable* individuals--would have known exactly what you meant. Thank you for the clarification. I have no further questions.

Posted by: Gordon Lewis | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 06:11 PM

Yup. What Ctein said. Twice.

Stephen

Posted by: stephen | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 07:08 PM

Finding and assembling relevant knowledge, then creating new knowledge is what I do for a living. Impermanent references would be a bane of my existence.

Which is why I have never even considered getting a Kindle or any kind of electronic book subscription. If a reference work could disappear at any time, because some outside agent decides I'm no longer allowed to use it, then I am seriously better off never getting it in the first place.

Amazon, with the 1984 debacle and lately yanking all pornography from the Kindle, is a perfect example. "Who cares if some literary smut is gone?" you may say. But imagine for a moment if a researcher in modern literature or culture was using such material - studying how themes in such works reflect greater societal concerns or whatever - and suddenly a major part of their research corpus disappeared from under their feet. Taking their research project, and possibly their career with it into oblivion.

If I can't own it, I don't want it. I don't want it because I can't rely on it.

Posted by: Janne | Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 07:22 PM

This is reminiscent to me of the current situations with DVDs and CDs (and what I believe to be the situation, although I could have the details wrong).

On the one hand you have the (music) recording industry, who initially wanted to control your ability to copy, lend, or reproduce digital music via DRM. In the course of fighting the internet distribution issue and finding ways to better distribute, they lost out and music is easily available legally in non-DRM forms (I love Amazon for MP3s). I can download an MP3, burn it for backup, play it in the car, copy it between my computers, etc. Yes, I can also give it to my friends and they'll have it for free, but the industry is currently not trying to actively prevent that. (They of course have actively prevented mass distribution as much as possible.)

The movie industry on the other hand has maintained that you aren't buying the content of a DVD - you're only buying that specific physical DVD. So you can't legally copy it to your iPod or iPad, can't copy it to your computer, can't make a copy and leave it at your summer home, etc. (Some DVD makers are seemingly getting around this by providing a "digital copy" when you buy the DVD - I'm not sure what DRM is involved there.)

The book publishers in this case are taking this a step further since there isn't even a physical medium that you're buying. You're only getting a single DRM digital copy. I really wish book publishers (and the movie industry) would adopt the music industry model. I like owning the content I buy and not just the physical medium. I don't like that I can't put my movies on my iPod (legally).

They won't change models, of course, unless some member of the industry breaks the current mold and starts selling non-DRM movies AND those movies consequently sell better.

Posted by: David Bostedo | **Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 10:52 PM**

Dear John C,

All entirely accurate and cogent, from the supply side. As a "producer" of "knowledge" (for some arbitrary meaning of those words), I have to wrestle with all the issues and implications you raised.

But as an end-user?

I don't see why I should care one bit about those distinctions from the consumption side. They seem utterly irrelevant to me.

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | **Wednesday, 15 December 2010 at 11:39 PM**

Mike I think you nailed something with your Kindle review that's applicable here - ebooks are great for fiction, but questionable for many types of reference material, just due to the interface. The ownership issues are similar - 6-12 bucks for a book I'll read and maybe reread in the future(if partially due to ease of access) is a fair price, and if I lose it, well, darn. Annoying but recoverable, and worth the trade off.
50-100 bucks or more for a purely electronic copy that isn't really mine? Dodgy. I dislike people assuming I'm a thief, and so being treated as one when I'm trying to give a party money rankles, and factors into a buying decision.

Posted by: Robert L. | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 12:02 AM**

What about fair use? I should be able to print what one copy of I've paid for on sheets made from dead trees or some sort of substitute; for backup and future reference. What if I'm having a hard time reading a book on a monitor? Leasing knowledge takes that possibility away from me.

Posted by: ggl | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 12:56 AM**

To quote somebody about something else: "You should not put your faith in cloud computing – one day it will rain on your parade."

Posted by: erlik | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 01:25 AM**

Yay,Ctein!

Posted by: Paul Joseph | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 01:44 AM**

My father is addicted to both reading and books. He buys books by the pile and reads every single one at least twice. Every 10 years or so he is forced to dispose of some of his books just so that his house is habitable. This exercise in the disposal of books has shown that even giving books away for free it is excruciatingly difficult to find a new home for old books. It is easier to find a new home for an old dog.

One day my father will be going to the great library in the sky. Had he leased his books on yearly subscriptions...

The lease model does make a lot of sense to me, but for people who must have access to over 1000 books in their personal library, then $10 per year per book is just too much money.

Posted by: bueler | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 03:53 AM**

I love the big picture (no pun intended; I usually print no larger than 8x10) and I love that TOP tackles topics like this that address it.

So... I'm going to be provocative and stretch Ctein's concerns further. Knowledge preservation and the technologies we choose for such are going to become increasingly pressing issues in the next century.

In 15-20 years the United States will loose its world hegemony, and the ensuing chaos in North America will severely diminish many of the institutions that underpin our culture and its knowledge stores.

Of course, a new power or alliance of global players will fill the void created by the collapse of the American empire, and our 500 year old western culture of science and technology will continue, albeit with a new locus and new masters.

In 30-50 years, however, global warming will stress this new status quo beyond its economic and military abilities to maintain global peace and economic order. The world will fracture into isolated sovereignties so distracted with maintaining internal order that they won't even have the resources to vie amongst themselves for the vast swaths of anarchic slums and wastelands that they once considered important cities and cherished countryside when they were nations, much less keep their citizens in stock of the latest consumer electronics.

The good news is that these catastrophes will strip away the cultural ephemera that a previous commenter noted, as great works of art and important reference materials are consolidated in private collections for protection. The bad news is much of value will be lost, and we will have entered the next dark ages.

I hate to be a downer.

But, sadly, the die is already cast on both of these turns of events. Please history, I be proved wrong.

Print a copy of these prognostications on archival paper today for review in 2040! While you're at it, print and frame your best 3 photographs for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren too.

Posted by: Jeff Hohner | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 04:15 AM**

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http://www.goodcopybadcopy.net/
Available as a full length Flash file.
I saw this film a few weeks ago transmitted on Sky Arts channel. It deals in general terms with issues of what we might, with apologies to Walter Benjamin, call "the work of art in the age of digital reproduction". Made in 2007 but still very interesting despite the gigantic period that has elapsed in "digital time".
Roy

Posted by: roy | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 05:34 AM**

Janne's point needs to be extended just a little to see how dire this threat truly is-

Today Amazon decides to bannish all "pornography" from the Kindle (begging the question of who gets to decide what's porn and what's legitimate art). What prevents Amazon from obliterating all "politically objectionable" content next year? Sure, most folks might be okay with blocking pure Neo-Nazi hate speech. But how about milder nativist tripe? More realistically, what would prevent Amazon from quietly suppressing any content not supportive of Amazon's corporate goals and political agenda? This is utterly poisonous to democratic discourse. The widespread availability of unfiltered printed political 'broadsides' was absolutely essential to the formation of democracy in the U.S.; Benjamin Franklin after all was a printer by profession.

But when giant corporate entities hold the keys to all public content, and have the power to conceal or obliterate anything they find 'inappropriate'...

1984, anyone?

Posted by: Geoff Wittig | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 06:40 AM

The business and philosophical questions around "renting" vs. "owning" digital content are in general too complicated for my simple primate brain to really think about... but I do know one thing.

In my lifetime I have lost more content, and thus knowledge, stored in various physical formats (books, DVD, CD, video tape, LP, film, prints) than I have ever lost on my computer. And all I have to do to keep this record up is remember to copy the hard disk from place to place once in a while.

Posted by: psu | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 06:56 AM

I currently work in scientific publishing and I think we need to think carefully about the distinction between public and private knowledge and whether we make knowledge available publicly or privately.

Much of the world relies on Google for basic fact-checking, because although we know that the links we find are filtered, we somehow assume that the way they are filtered is benign, vaguely based on statistics. We have made the decision to live with that.

I am only using Google as an example. I find it easier.

When we buy a book, we can choose to keep it forever (more or less). When we view something on the web, we rely on a specific group of private companies to keep the technology in place to allow us to view that content. We have to keep paying subscription fees to someone or the internet feed stops.

Sooner or later, Google will install a CEO who is incompetent, or a wacko, or a fundamentalist of some sort, or a paid lackey for other wackos, it's bound to happen. Sooner or later, they may add filtering to the delivered knowledge that is not benign. But they will be a private company, so it's not so clear what we could do about that. In a perfect world, competition would keep them honest, but our culture seems to have fallen out of love with competition (except when it comes to the lowering of wages by the competition of global labour markets), and have fallen in love with large monolithic corporations that we have come to convince ourselves are "efficient" because they are privately owned.

Private enterprises come and go all the time. They are not part of the commons, they are not part of the publicly financed web of societal constructs that we rely on. They have no obligation to maintain our knowledge base, nor to maintain it in a pristine state. When GM, Ford and the rest decided north americans didn't like hatchbacks, they stop making them. What happens if the monopolistic knowledge deliverers decide we don't need to know about something anymore.

Posted by: Robert Roaldi | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:32 AM

"More realistically, what would prevent Amazon from quietly suppressing any content not supportive of Amazon's corporate goals and political agenda?"

You mean like Mal-Wart does?

Mike

P.S. That was a real typo, but I guess I'll let it stand. [g]

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:43 AM

I might also add to this debate this tiny little factoid: there are plenty of books I own that I, um, can't find. I know they're around here somewhere....

Disorganized Mike

P.S. Honestly, this actually included Ctein's "Post-Exposure" a while back. Turned the @#$! house upside down looking for that thing. Since found, but for some considerable period of time it was formally inaccessible, despite ownership of the information in a persistent and durable format.

P.P.S. And I own TWO copies.

Again, this is not a joke.

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:45 AM

I hail from that generation where recorded knowledge was almost exclusively embedded in book form.

My book collection is the one material thing which I truly cherish. And I'm still of the opinion that I'd rather have my comically unsearchable and physically massive library, than all my books on a single device (formats, durablility) even though I increasingly read on, and am very comfortable with eReaders, screens and other non-traditional devices.

But 'owning' knowledge? We can physically own books; I don't believe I've ever owned the knowledge in my extensive library. Only Lloyd Chambers can 'own' the knowledge in his books (and this is itself a moot point - see Rose's excellent book on the genesis of copyright, but I digress). If I were to read his book, some of his knowledge would be converted into 'mine own'. And yes, it would be nice to be able to refer to the ur-text (my memory is not what it used to be), but I would never claim that having permanent access to his book meant that I 'owned' the knowledge within it.

To me, the value of knoweldge lies it its metabolism. How it interacts with, and is contextualised by my own pre-existing knowledge. (I do, of course, have friends who own many, many magnificent texts, on prominent display - naturally - in the vain hope that their contents will telemagically transfer themselves into their brains: good luck to them.) Perhaps the real value to me is how I might disseminate this metabolised product to others by word and by deed (eg. my own digital restoration projects - great article, thanks!).

It's true that knowledge is becoming increasingly externalised, but fortunately, we can secret away whatever we want. It's called memory. I've never been charged a fee for remembering information, and until that happens, I'll put up with whatever business models sustain authors who publish stuff I want to read about.

best,
wmy

NB. Most people who still read physical newpapers, 'lease' them (ie. throw away the physical product when they're done). If I subsequent want to reread an article, I'll pay to access that content again (as I do with my Lexis-Nexis account). Is that so different from controlling access in the way that Lloyd is attempting to do? FWIW I think 'leasing knowledge' is emotionally charged, it seems to me that we are talking about access control, as some other commenters have noted.

Posted by: wmy.me | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:50 AM

Look at the Lynda.com model for a successful use of the leasing idea. It works well there because the knowledge available has a very short shelf life. They teach how to use various software so there is always new content to sell and the old content always goes out of date. You can learn Photoshop CS5 today and not have a shelf full of old prior version instruction manuals littering your shelves. It's a good model for knowledge that's rapidly changing. As far as the book you mentioned goes, "shift+print screen" and it's yours!

Posted by: Dennis Moyes | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:56 AM**

For the record, all my work is original, based on my own research, analysis, and examples.

I think my work has immediate value that gets into my reader's consciousness and skill set forever. Those who refuse it because of no download have zero benefit, a curious "win". Movie theatres and shows and in-person classes and lectures produce no tangible good, only new ideas in one's head— the most valuable result of all— actionable new knowledge.

As for the reference work idea: my work is valuable as a reference, but I'd feel my work was a failure if it did not provide immediate value, and ongoing value by regular updates. The download model clashes with the regular updates issue. The download model discourages updates. I just threw out a number of printed photo books on infrared— dated and useless. I want current, up to date information, not Sharpening with Photoshop 2.

My site has the possibility to save web pages as PDF. My pages can be printed if desired. So it's not true there are zero options. I expect that my subscribers can and should print key pages they want to refer to later. That's a solution, if not printed and bound.

Hit by a bus: I don't plan on dying, but it's always a risk of a one person operation. Who's going to maintain TOP when it goes away? Accounts get closed, services go out of operation. My demise would not mean my site would go down immediately, it would probably run for months. I'm aware of the issue, if for no other reason than so that my family could continue to benefit from my work. Pondering ideas there. But bottom line is that my material has avoided formats that do not offer longevity.

I'm aware of the download suggestion, as I've had many discussions on the topic, and have pondered it for a while. A download is more complex than it seems, and entails security and support and financial costs which are ongoing, and not small. Nor is my work updated "yearly" it's ongoing (the printed book mindset is hard to get past). So a download of 500MB (about the size of MSI), multiplied by every subscriber who wants it 5 times a year is a very large cost (my internet costs already have tripled this year). Some offerings are in the 2-3GB range, and all are growing. Not so attractive for download.

BTW, I am looking for someone who could produce a printed book for me of Making Sharp Images, but I don't have the time to prepare and organize it, or I'd have no time for my other projects. I want it "done" by someone who has proven experience with such things.

I had a pure download model for the first few years with things 1/4 - 1/10 the size of current sizes, and had almost daily support issues with people who could not download because of their internet connection. Try, retry, and pretty soon a 500MB download is 2GB of bandwidth— for one person (my bandwidth costs tripled this year). Suggestions to have a download take no account of security, performance, my time for support, etc, wholly new costs that must be borne. If I charge extra for a download snapshot, then users are unhappy that I would charge "extra" for what in fact is an *unbounded* new cost of business. I am not a big corporation with a huge budget, nor is integrating with something like Amazon S3 trivial or free or user-login-based. I wish to add value with improvements and updates, not fixate on a snapshot no one will want 2 years later. Nevertheless I am aware of the concerns, and I'm looking at options.

Posted by: Lloyd Chambers | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 10:36 AM**

Mike J (TOP guy):

"Then again, I struggle with another question sometimes--what am I doing with all these books? ..."

1. I buy all of my read-em-and-forget-em books from Costco ~ $14 ea. I buy my serious, meant-to-be-kept books from Amazon (through TOP, of course) and they stay on the shelf. "read-em-and-forget-em books" are passed around the family, and then donated to our local Public Library. They, in turn, hold book fairs to raise money for new acquisitions - in cases of like-new condition, current books, they might even add them to their stacks. Can't do that with eBooks.

"I feel the same way about DVDs ... I love Netflix on demand--I can watch whatever movie strikes my fancy at any particular moment, and when I'm done with it I don't need to do anything more with it ..."

2. I'm in total agreement with you, there. I own very few movies - "Blade Runner" 25th Anniverary version, and any film that my daughter gets screen credit for :)

"... I'm not saying you would want ALL your books on the Kindle. But certainly it suits certain kinds of books."

3. Agreed, but, considering the cost of purchase of the reader, and being locked in to one purveyor, for me the cost savings and/or convenience isn't there, yet. (Please note the word "dinosaur" in my original post) This might all change, of course, when the "iPad" wars heat up and competitive devices mature.

"Anyway, I don't know why you'd say "you pay for what you don't get." If you're paying for a convenient way the read a book through one time and then be done with it, you do get that. Whether it's worth what it costs is up to you to determine."

4. See 1., above. But I am happy that you, my son and the other millions of eBook readers are enjoying their experience. I just hope that this doesn't become the only book delivery system. It does seem to be the way our business culture works - one size fits all :(

Posted by: Al Benas | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 10:39 AM**

"You pay for something that you don't get and, imagine the nightmare when your computer fries and all of your purchase/lease numbers go up in smoke. How easy is it to get those books back?"

I respond immediately to anyone with such an issue on my site. It's a login issue only, and I don't require any license numbers or such headaches, only a username/password good on any computer in the world. So the only thing that can go wrong is forgetting one's login credentials, trivially solved by emailing me.

BTW, there are wonderful services like Pandora and satellite radio and movie theatres that you don't "get", but they are wonderful nonetheless.

Posted by: Lloyd Chambers | **Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 10:41 AM**

To elaborate on the pricing structure someone else brought up on here, Mr. Chambers on-line "book" seems to be priced out, for a years usage, at what I would expect to pay for a fat, illustrated, comprehensive tome on PhotoShop CS5000 (or whatever it's up to now) that I might keep on my shelf over my computer for constant reference. The cost of that book is mostly eaten up with production, packaging, shipping, returns, overstock destruction, etc. etc., with the writer (or "intellectual property owner", as someone put it) getting probably anywhere between a buck to two bucks a copy. Friends of mine with third-party published photo "art" books say for them, it's more on the order of seventy-five cents a copy.

Again, as someone else stated on here, that price point between 40-50 bucks, seems to be placed most likely on a mark that someone might be able to purchase without thinking too much about it, maybe a small luxury; and maybe after surveying at what those de-luxcious books cost at your local book store.

I don't know anything about Mr. Chambers and how he runs his business, or businesses; but let's think about this for a second, let's say a few magazines and web-sites positively review his work and it drives 100,000 people to buy his one year subscription. Is his information really worth 4.5 million dollars in the market place? Let's say realistically, 25,000 people decide to make that purchase, a figure that seems possible because because I know a lot of people with web-sites that get 30,000 hits a day. Is his information really worth 1.125 million dollars in the market?

Mr. Chambers may have considerable expenses associated with paying for bandwidth, and I don't know if he has additional salaries to pay for in the production of this item, but this pricing structure seems out of whack with the value of the information. Of course, we live in a capitalist society, so Mr. Chambers is welcome to charge whatever he feels his work is worth, and let it stand on it's merits.

If 25,000 people bought a year of his web-site for $15.00, the $375,000 this would garnish for Mr. Chambers would still seem to me, after expenses, to be a pretty fine payday for him, and at that price point, it might be a far easier sell for far more than 25,000 people!

Posted by: Crabby Umbo | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 01:19 PM

Dear David B., Tom K, and Robert L.,

I think you've noted one major source behind the mess.

A gripe I have with some of my cyperpunkish friends is that they only seem to think in terms of broad concepts where one-size-fits-all. Which is extremely useful when one wants to be synthetic and creative, but not so good for analysis. Intellectual property is an area where "one-size-fits-all" really doesn't work-- you can't have exactly the same consumer rules for fiction books, nonfiction books, art/photograph books, published music, performed music, plays, movies, and videos. Well, not sanely, unless you want to guarantee screwing the provider and/or the consumer (most likely both).

Well, we seem to be getting this same overgeneralized thinking from the providers--"Wow, DRM worked so well for movies, let's apply it to everything!"

Oh look, an Allen-head screw. Well, I've got a hammer-- close enough.

I must caution readers here against falling into the same trap. The issues and needs are not the same for all kinds of IP and content. Don't overgeneralize.

pax / Ctein
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 01:35 PM

Dear Mike,

At one point in our lives, it looked vaguely possible that Paula and I would have enough money to have "hired help." We both agreed that the first priority was a part-time librarian to organize and maintain our books, journals and papers, so we could find stuff! (Well, to be precise, so the librarian could find it for us.)

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Dear wmy,

In the nonfiction book world, I *DO* own whatever knowledge is contained in my reference books. I can repackage it (to use John C.'s term) and resell it. I do it every time I write a book or article that contains some technique or factoid that I didn't invent myself. Nonfiction authors are constantly doing that.

Lloyd, for example, is far too modest-- I think much of what I read in MSI does have enduring value. If I find a method or procedure or factoid in there that I think will benefit my readers I can write it up in my own words for my audience, and I am legally and morally in the right.

IOW, Lloyd owns the package containing the knowledge, but once he makes the package available to me, I own the knowledge contained therein, too.

Outside of academic/scholarly journals and papers, I don't even have to give him credit for it. It's the polite thing to do, so if I remember the source for some cool infobit, I'll credit it when I write about it. But that's 'cause it's good manners, that's all.

There are exceptions to this, but they are narrow.

pax / Ctein
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 01:51 PM

"Let's say realistically, 25,000 people decide to make that purchase"

Crabby Umbo,
Here, you can picture Lloyd and I both laughing heartily....

An actual realistic figure might be in three digits. IF the project is a success. Maybe--throwing caution to the winds now--modestly into four digits.

I advertise my Amazon and B&H links constantly and not as many as 25,000 people use one or the other in the course of a whole year.

In any event, you don't get to determine how much Lloyd deserves to get paid for his work. The only transaction for you to evaluate is whether it's worth it to YOU to pay the price to get the product on offer. In other words, you get one vote.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 04:44 PM

How is this different from Lynda.com or NAPP where you have to buy a subscription to access their tutorials? I grant that they are both much better bargains due to the fact that for about the same money you get access to far more material but the basic concept, knowledge for lease, is the same.

Posted by: James Bullard | Thursday, 16 December 2010 at 07:55 PM

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Hey Mike...

...not trying to tell Mr. Chambers what to charge for his work, or how to get paid. I DO only get one vote. The market place will tell him if he's charging the correct amount, it always does! Just saying at his price point and restrictions, it doesn't sound like he talked to a marketing or publishing professional to see if this is viable. Guess he'll find out...

Posted by: Crabby Umbo | Friday, 17 December 2010 at 05:54 AM

Thirteen years ago, Free Software guru/zealot Richard Stallman wrote a short story about a future educational system and society based on leased knowledge and the DRM technologies and laws that go with it. And a lot of people laughed or ignored it.

I think that future looks more plausible every year.

Posted by: Lyman | Friday, 17 December 2010 at 03:34 PM

"More realistically, what would prevent Amazon from quietly suppressing any content not supportive of Amazon's corporate goals and political agenda?"

The threat of a sharp competitor arising and grabbing that chunk of Amazon's business should there be sufficient demand for content not supportive of Amazon's goals. Fox News, for example, still has plenty of competition. Quite a bit different than the state control of "1984."

Posted by: David H. | Friday, 17 December 2010 at 05:30 PM

...the next problem we are going to get, if this continues, in spite of the knowledge itself being public, and only the packaging being a sellable product, will be (and are) the attempts to restrict and hinder the means of keeping, categorizing and processing this knowledge!

No one hardly ever has problems with people writing excepts from books via a pencil on a paper notepad, drawing sketches of paintings from a gallery or a museum, but try to copy/paste or simply take a picture of the text/image you just saw, and you're in trouble. What is the difference other than efficiency?

And, if the target is indeed to lower the efficiency of keeping, processing and assessing knowledge, then these are in essence attempts at halting progress.

So, to sum things up, I'm all for selling boxes and paper, but after one legally accesses what is within, there should be no restrictions to the knowledge what-so-ever... with the exception of reselling it as-is or not giving credit, both of which are unfair.

Posted by: Alex Nanou | Friday, 17 December 2010 at 07:19 PM

Dear Alex,

Drifting afield, but this is wrapping up anyway...

Oh, so you think you're OK with a sketchpad in a museum? Read this!

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/12/14/DDU51GOU4E.DTL

"They said, 'Cheer up, things could get worse.' So I did and they did."

pax / Jolly ol' Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Saturday, 18 December 2010 at 02:30 PM

Dear Ctein,

So now I do not know if I want to laugh or get really annoyed...

...thus, the next logical step would be to prohibit people to enter an exhibit without *"memory quality certification"* and banning everyone half way to eidetic memory and up.

Cheers!

Posted by: Alex Nanou | Sunday, 19 December 2010 at 07:22 PM

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