



Free Does Not Mean Gratis

2009-11-22

Some days ago I read in the Spanish newspaper, El Pais, about the extent of the impact on digital distribution in the world of books. Looks like we are rushing around when we had years to prepare for this, to have clear plans and a defined strategy. One just had to observe what was happening on the music industry, for example.

A couple of months ago I was “discussing” with one of the country’s culture section leading journalists and a well known editor and they told me “nothing is going to happen to the paper book. There is nothing to worry about.” I wrote a post in which I made a parallel between the book, media and music, and someone told me “they had nothing to do with each other.”

Well, looks like they do.

The first “enemy” seemed to be Google. Now it also appears that the problem is to prevent piracy (?) by controlling the distribution of digital book using the same methods than in the real world.

Could it be that they make no difference between **FREE ACCESS** and **FREE OF CHARGE**? Could it be that the publishing sector actors and the media have not realized that the rules are changing?

All actors that revolve around the publishing industry, as it happened with the administrators of labels and media, believe that we should not liberalize the contents because it makes people think they are free. **They still want to control what you buy and how you buy it**

I believe that in the Internet you can not apply the same strategy as in the real world, you cannot “try to stem the tide” to how books are distributed. But that does not mean we have to provide all content for nothing. No doubt there are or will be models where advertising may eventually supports a free of charge model, but I think:

- **The content is what is valuable but, perhaps, is priceless.** Maybe you have to build a world of products and services around the content and that will not be for free. The book, like music, would be the “excuse” to attract users.
- We need to make our **books available in all formats** so the user can decide what to buy. This enables you at the same time to reach all targets.
- **Everything has its price.** You just cannot price the same a hardcover book and pdf version, not even like a paperback.
- Implement a content policy “**freemium**”. A part is free and the other is free access but you have to pay something. For instance: in a CD offer something free or put a bonus track for free. In a technical book allow access to the abstract for free (not worth just the first chapter).



These are just some ideas. Surely there is no a single solution and every publisher should adapt its offer, but something I am sure about is:

- As in the music industry, this “revolution” will only **popularize reading**. Seize it.
- You can spend all day debating whether or when this will change. **Let's do something**.
- **Someone in the value chain will not survive** or at least not all of that link.

David Soler

david.soler@bwconsultores.com