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On the Web, a Textbook Proliferation of Piracy

Publishers hunt down illegally scanned books

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

Book publishers are stepping up efforts to stop college students from downloading illegal copies of textbooks online.

One Web site, Textbook Torrents, promises more than 5,000 textbooks for download in PDF format, complete with the original books' layouts and full-color illustrations. Users must simply set up a free account and download a free software program that uses a popular peer-to-peer system called BitTorrent. Other book-download sites are even easier to use, offering digital books at the click of a mouse.

The founder of the site, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of legal action against him, said in an interview that he considers his actions "civil disobedience" against "the monopolistic business prac-tices" of textbook publishers. He said he views the 64,000 registered users of his textbook-download site as votes against a system that charges students too much and continually raises prices.

In response to such sites, the Association of American Publishers hired a law firm this summer to scour the Web for illegally offered textbooks. The firm has identified thousands of instances of book piracy and has sent legal notices to Web sites that host the files, demanding their removal. The group is looking for all types of books, although trade books and textbooks, which generally have high price tags, are the ones most frequently offered on peer-to-peer sites.

"In any given two-week period we found from 60,000 files all the way up to 250,000 files," said Edward McCoyd, director of digital policy for the publishing association. Mr. McCoyd, who leads the association's Online Piracy Working Group, said the group had been performing periodic scans for piracy since 2001, and that it had seen a gradual rise in the number of titles available.

"It is troubling that there is a culture of infringement out there," said Mr. McCoyd. But as more publishers offer books online and readers become more familiar with digital formats, he added, more people are likely to illegally download them.

No Action Against Downloaders

So far the publishing group has not sought legal action against individual student downloaders, as the Recording Industry Association of America has done in its campaign to stamp out illegal music trading at colleges. The book-publishing group has not tried to shut down entire Web sites that offer downloads either, said Mr. McCoyd. Instead, officials are studying the extent of the problem and asking Web-site owners to remove individual files. "We've just tried to keep sweeping away these infringements as they continue to come online," he said.

Albert N. Greco. a professor of marketing at Fordham University's Graduate School of Business who studies academic publishing, said that publishers expressed even greater concerns in private about piracy than they did in their public comments. "We knew that this would happen, and it has happened very rapidly," he said. "It's not going to go away — it's only going to get worse."

Academic publishers have also taken steps to stop book pirates.

After *The Chronicle*
began asking publishers about Textbook Torrents, Pearson Education sent a request to the site to remove 78 listings of its books. Site administrators quickly complied.

Allan A. Ryan, director of intellectual property at Harvard Business Publishing, said the press had assigned one employee to spend much of his time looking for unauthorized book copies online. He sends out about 100 takedown requests per week. "We have been fairly vigorous in monitoring these sites and in requesting that they take down our copyrighted content," he said.

One place their titles keep popping up is Scribd, a document-sharing Web site that opened this year. The site's policies do not allow users to post copyrighted content without permission, but some people break the rules. Jason M. Bentley, community-development director and copyright agent at Scribd, said the company quickly complies with requests from copyright holders to take down pirated books. Scribd often gets takedown requests from the MIT, Oxford University, and Harvard University Presses, he said. He noted that the company gets at least one takedown request each day.

Officials of the Textbook Torrents Web site could not be reached for comment. But on the site's forums, where users list which books they would like to see uploaded, people offer various reasons for seeking pirated books. "I really need this book for my report," said one anonymous user. "I looked for the Volume II in the bookstores around us, but it's out of stock."

Some users request the teacher's manuals for textbooks, and in some cases, the site lists those for trade as well.

Identifying Piracy

Peter Stearns, provost and professor of history at George Mason University, edited the sixth edition of *The Encyclopedia of World History,*
which is listed on Textbook Torrents. He said he had never heard of Textbook Torrents, but he was aware that such sites existed.

"I don't feel deep anger," he said. "It probably has economic impact on me, but I can't say I feel desperate about this." He said the publisher, Houghton Mifflin, would probably be more concerned than he was because it had a bigger financial stake in the book.

And it is. "We think piracy is a significant problem and a growing problem for the textbook industry," said William A. Sampson, manager of infringement and antipiracy at Cengage Learning, which recently acquired Houghton Mifflin's college division. The company also hired an outside firm to hunt for instances of book piracy; investigators find 250 to 800 each month.

Mr. Greco, the scholar studying academic publishing, praised the publishers for taking action against online book pirates and for working to make digital copies of their books available for sale so that students who want such versions have a legal alternative.

But he said going after pirated copies one at a time will not stop the practice. "You close down three people, and four more open up — it's like roaches."

If the problem worsened, he said, publishers may have to take other steps to prevent piracy, like releasing new versions of most textbooks every semester. The versions could include slight modifications that could be changed easily, like altering the numbers in math problems.

"They may be compelled to," he said, "in order to stay one step ahead of the pirates."