

Is Amazon Destroying Society's Ability To Share Stories?

By Lee Russell

It seems odd to be writing an article asking whether Amazon is having a negative impact on Society's ability to tell stories using a Kindle Fire tablet. However, the Fire is a fairly responsive and versatile Android tablet, and portable word processing means I can be creative away from my study, so why not?

Like many people, I have been a life-long reader of stories. In my case that's mostly, but not exclusively, science fiction. Over the years I have enjoyed getting my books from a wide variety of sources like high street bookstores, second hand shops, e-bay, physical books from Amazon, internet downloads in all their wonderful formats, audio books and, most recently, downloads to my Kindle. Fiction writers are by definition *creativity experimenters*, as that wide range of outlets demonstrates.

What has surprised me is how seductive the Kindle e-bookstore is. With seamless integration a Kindle device offers thousands of books at the touch of a button, all delivered direct to your device through the magic of Wi-Fi and Amazon's 'Whisper Net' service. Don't want to pay? No problem, the store has thousands of books available for free under self-published author's promotions. If you're reading for leisure and don't mind trying new writers, you need never pay for a book again.

Actually, the point of this article is not to ask whether Kindle promotions and pricing strategies are damaging the long-term financial health of the e-book market; plenty of more informed people than me have also already commented on that. Rather, I am wondering about the impact of such a massive centralisation of free e-books on author's general ability to make their stories available to be read.

A quick search on Google indicates that the Kindle is taking in the region of 70 - 80% of the e-book market. If my personal observations about using Amazon's service and the comments I hear from others are representative of how the whole market is operating, then it is likely that most (i.e. 70 – 80%) people will NEVER look anywhere else for their books. **Why is this a problem?** Surely it is the ultimate convergence of readers wanting to access good quality stories with authors who are ready to sell them?

I think the problem is that not all authors are seeking to sell their stories.

There is a whole continuum of authors' aspirations, ranging from the so-called 'traditional' route of placing works with Publishing Houses (who nowadays may well offer physical and e-book versions), through a variety of more or less professional self-publishing options including free offerings, magazines and fanzines, and onto vanity presses.

In any case, my experience is that the bulk of stories placed by aspiring new authors on the Kindle will not be paid for. Canny readers have quickly realised that all they need to do is watch out for the next free e-book promotion.

The middle area of self-publishing, blogging, magazines and so on used to be somewhere that authors could productively exploit in the pre-Kindle book market. Using social media tools would ensure that at least *some* people picked up their story, and hopefully word of mouth would do the rest to ensure that many other interested people would also be able to access it. But currently most readers will not bother to even try to access their work unless authors are publishing on the Kindle. They will simply move on trying the next free e-book on the Kindle store no matter how good the rest of a writer's social media campaign might be.

In my case writing to a high standard is a hobby and I'd like to just share my stories with as many interested people as possible, for free. How can I do that when the majority of the pool of available readers has become indoctrinated with the idea of ONLY obtaining their books from a commercial, paying site, on those rare occasions that their books are on a free promotion?

There is no route for simply sharing stories continuously for free via the Kindle, just for the love of it. What is worse is that publishing on the Kindle requires all authors to behave as selling corporations, including registering for US tax, even if their aspirations aren't commercial. This is a massive barrier to sharing stories for free for many authors, including myself.

In my opinion the internet community needs a new place where good quality stories can be found in a wide variety of formats, including *.mobi* files that can be read on a Kindle. And Kindle readers need to be re-educated to understand that their devices can display more than just the Kindle store offerings, even if that means they need to hook up their reader with a USB cable to copy a file over. Otherwise the works of many new writers will be lost forever, and that would be a terrible failure of the internet-age.