



Evidence Summary

Free E-Books May Increase Print Sales: A Study with Mixed Results

A Review of:

Hilton, J. III, & Wiley, D. (2010). The short-term influence of free digital versions of books on print sales. *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, 13(1).

Reviewed by:

Heather R. Williams

Strategist for Content Processes & Services, Robert W. Woodruff Library

Emory University

Atlanta, Georgia, United States of America

Email: hrwilli@emory.edu

Received: 29 Nov. 2010

Accepted: 15 Feb. 2011

© 2011 Williams. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 2.5 Canada (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/ca/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

Abstract

Objective – To determine whether the availability of free digital versions of books impacts print sales.

Design – Quantitative data comparison.

Setting – University Instructional Psychology Department.

Subjects – A total of 41 books, each with a free digital version and a traditional print version.

Methods – This study used Nielson BookScan data to track print book sales during a 16-week period, 8 weeks before a free digital version of the book became available and 8 weeks after the availability of the free digital version. The authors tracked 41 books and

organized them into four categories. The first included 7 nonfiction books, the second consisted of 5 science fiction/fantasy books, the third included 5 science fiction/fantasy books released together by Random House, and the fourth group consisted of 24 science fiction/fantasy books released by Tor Books. The books released by Tor Books, unlike the other books in the study, were available by free download only if a person registered for Tor's newsletter and the downloads were only available for one week. When a free digital book from any of the other three groups was released, it remained available for several weeks, and more often, indefinitely.

Main Results – Combined print sales of the nonfiction titles in the first group increased 5% after the release of a free digital copy. The majority of the science fiction/fantasy books in

the second group also had an increase in post-free release sales, with a combined increase of 26%. The combined sales of the Random House titles increased by 9% after the release of the free digital versions. However, in stark contrast to the results of the first three groups, the fourth group of Tor books had a combined decrease in print sales of 18%. While the authors were not able to explain this difference with certainty, they point out that the Tor model for releasing the free digital books (making the free books available for only one week and requiring registration in order to download the books) was substantially different from the models used by the other publishers.

Conclusion – The study suggests a positive relationship may exist between free digital books and short-term print sales. However, the availability of free digital books did not always lead to increased print sales. The authors acknowledge a number of factors not fully accounted for, including the timing of the free digital release, the promotion it received, and the differences in the size of the audiences for the various books studied. Ultimately, however, the authors believe the data indicates that when free digital books are offered for a period of time longer than a week, without requiring registration, print sales will increase.

Commentary

This study attempts to answer the question of whether the availability of a free digital version of a book helps or hinders print book sales. However, as the authors point out in their introduction, the question of causation is difficult, if not impossible, to answer experimentally, because it is impossible to both release and not release a free digital version of a book. Though true causality may not be determinable, the results of this study did appear to show a positive relationship between the availability of free digital books and print sales.

The results of this study should be viewed with some caution. The study had a relatively small subject population, 41 books. How those 41 books were chosen is unclear. Were they simply the only books for which the authors could clearly identify the release date of the free digital version? Did the genre of the book influence its inclusion in the study? The study consisted of books from two different genres; three of the groups included science fiction/fantasy books and one consisted of nonfiction books. Potential disparities in the marketing and promotion of the various books were not considered, nor as the authors acknowledge, were the differences in potential audience size for the books. In looking at the specific sales figures for the various titles, some clearly outsold others by several orders of magnitude. How did the possible differences in marketing effort and audience size impact the results?

This study will be of interest to those concerned about issues of open access, open publishing, and the sustainability of traditional publishing models. This study was not meant to be an exhaustive analysis, and more studies of this type should be conducted to determine if the results are replicable for other categories of books. It is unclear whether a study of more academically oriented books or children's books, for example, would yield the same results.

Ultimately, this study does contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the availability of free digital versions of books and print sales, and appears to give credence to the argument that the availability of free digital versions will increase print sales. Additional studies showing such a correlation among various genres of books would strengthen the argument.