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The Kindle Swindle?

By ROY BLOUNT Jr.
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BEING president of too many well-meaning organizations put my father into an early grave. The lesson in this was not lost on me. But now I am president of the [Authors Guild](#), whose mission is to sustain book-writing as a viable occupation. This borders on quixotic, given all the new ways of not getting paid that new technology affords authors. A case in point: [Amazon's Kindle 2](#), which was released yesterday.

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The Kindle 2 is a portable, wireless, paperback-size device onto which people can download a virtual library of digitalized titles. Amazon sells these downloads, and where the books are under copyright, it pays royalties to the authors and publishers.

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Serves readers, pays writers: so far, so good. But there's another thing about Kindle 2 — its heavily marketed text-to-speech function. Kindle 2 can read books aloud. And Kindle 2 is not paying anyone for audio rights.

True, you can already get software that will read aloud whatever is on your computer. But Kindle 2 is being sold specifically as a new, improved, multimedia version of books — every title is an e-book and an audio book rolled into one. And whereas e-books have yet to win mainstream enthusiasm, audio books are a billion-dollar market, and growing. Audio rights are not generally packaged with e-book rights. They are more valuable than e-book rights. Income from audio books helps not inconsiderably to keep authors, and publishers, afloat.

You may be thinking that no automated read-aloud function can compete with the dulcet resonance of Jim Dale reading "[Harry Potter](#)" or of authors, ahem, reading themselves. But the voices of Kindle 2 are quite listenable. There's even a male version and a female version. (A book by, say, [Norman Mailer](#) on Kindle 2 might do a brisk business among people wondering how his prose would sound in measured feminine tones.)

And that sort of technology is improving all the time. [I.B.M.](#) has patented a computerized

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voice that is said to be almost indistinguishable from human ones. This voice is programmed to include “ums,” “ers” and sighs, to cough for attention, even to “shhh” when interrupted. According to Andy Aaron, of I.B.M.’s Thomas J. Watson research group speech team: “These sounds can be incredibly subtle, even unnoticeable, but have a profound psychological effect. It can be extremely reassuring to have a more attentive-sounding voice.”

When I read that quotation, it hit me: Hey, I know Andy Aaron. Years ago, he said he was working on some sort of voice simulation, and asked to work my Southern accent into the mix. I don’t remember whether we got around to that or not, and this new I.B.M. software is designed, at any rate, not for audio books but for computer help lines. So no part of my voice is competing with my own audio books yet. But people who want to keep on doing creative things for a living must be duly vigilant about any new means of transmitting their work.

What the guild is asserting is that authors have a right to a fair share of the value that audio adds to Kindle 2’s version of books. For this, the guild is being assailed. On the National Federation of the Blind’s Web [site](#), the guild is accused of arguing that it is illegal for blind people to use “readers, either human or machine, to access books that are not available in alternative formats like Braille or audio.”

In fact, publishers, authors and American copyright laws have long provided for free audio availability to the blind and the guild is all for technologies that expand that availability. (The federation, though, points out that blind readers can’t independently use the Kindle 2’s visual, on-screen controls.) But that doesn’t mean Amazon should be able, without copyright-holders’ participation, to pass that service on to everyone.

The guild is also accused of wanting to profiteer off family bedtime rituals. A lawyer at the Electronic Frontier Foundation sarcastically [warned](#) that “parents everywhere should be on the lookout for legal papers haling them into court for reading to their kids.”

For the record: no, the Authors Guild does not expect royalties from anybody doing non-commercial performances of “Goodnight Moon.” If parents want to send their children off to bed with the voice of Kindle 2, however, it’s another matter.

Roy Blount Jr. is the author, most recently, of “Alphabet Juice.”

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