News organizations invade e-book battleground

NEW YORK

BY JULIE BOSMAN AND JEREMY W. PETERS

Book publishers are surrounded by hungry new competitors: Amazon, with its steadily growing imprints; authors who self-publish their own e-books; online start-ups like The Atavist and Byliner.

Now they have to contend with another group elbowing into their space: news organizations.

Swiftly and at little cost, newspapers, magazines and sites like The Huffington Post are hunting for revenue by publishing their own version of e-books, either using brand-new content or recycling material that they might have given away for free in the past.

And by making e-books that are usually shorter, cheaper to buy and more quickly produced than the typical book, they are redefining what an e-book is — and who gets to publish it.

On Tuesday, The Huffington Post will release its second e-book, ''How We Won'' by Aaron Belkin, an account of the campaign to end the U.S. military's ''don't ask, don't tell'' policy. It joins e-books recently published by The New Yorker, ABC News, The Boston Globe, Politico and Vanity Fair.

''Surely they're competing with us,'' said Stephen Rubin, the president and publisher of Henry Holt & Co., part of Macmillan. ''If I'm doing a book on Rupert Murdoch and four magazines are doing four instant e-books on Rupert Murdoch, then I'm competing with them.''

JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Aaron Belkin, whose ''How We Won,'' about the campaign to end the U.S. military's ''don't ask, don't tell'' policy, will be released Tuesday as an e-book by The Huffington Post.

But as much as news outlets and magazines would like a piece of the e-book market, it remains to be seen whether what they produce can match the breadth and depth of the work produced by traditional publishing houses.

''I'm doing something different than they're doing,'' Mr. Rubin said. ''I'm going to get the book on Rupert Murdoch that is the definitive book for all time.''

The proliferation of e-readers has helped magazine and newspaper publishers find new platforms for their work, publishing executives said.

''On the one hand, a Kindle or a Nook is perfect for reading a 1,000-page George R. R. Martin novel,'' said Eric Simonoff, a literary agent at William Morris Endeavor. ''On the other hand, these devices are uniquely suited for midlength content that runs too long for shrinking magazines and are too pamphlet-like to credibly be called a book.''

Some publishers have joined forces with news organizations to produce e-books on a faster schedule. Random House is partnering with Politico to produce a series of four e-books about the 2012 presidential race.

Many of the works sold as e-books are more of a hybrid between a long magazine piece and a serialized book. Each Random House-Politico e-book will be in the range of 20,000 to 30,000 words, and the releases will be spaced out over the course of the campaign.

''We think that the nature of a book is changing,'' said Jon Meacham, an executive editor at Random House and a former editor of Newsweek. ''The line between articles and books is getting ever fuzzier.''

Part of the appeal is cost. Instead of paying writers hefty advances and then sending them out to report for months at a time, publishers can rely on reporters who are already doing the work as part of their day job. Politico, for example, has assigned Mike Allen, its chief White House correspondent, to write and report with Evan Thomas, a noted political writer. The e-books will be the combination of their efforts. ''Our cost,'' said Mr. Meacham, ''is me and Evan.''

The Huffington Post, which began publishing e-books this month, is not paying its authors advances for their work but will share profits from the sales.

Some publishers are trying a different approach — one that requires even fewer reporting and writing resources. Vanity Fair and The New Yorker, for example, have created their own e-books by bundling together previously published works surrounding a major news event.

When a phone-hacking scandal erupted at News Corp. in early July, Vanity Fair collected 20 articles on Mr. Murdoch, the company's chairman and chief executive, his family and their businesses and compiled them in a $3.99 e-book that went on sale July 29. Graydon Carter, the magazine's editor, wrote an introduction. The articles were then grouped into six chapters, each with a theme that reflected various aspects of Mr. Murdoch's life.

''It's like having a loose-leaf binder and shoving new pages into it,'' Mr. Carter said. ''E-books are a wonderful way to do a book and do it quickly. They don't need to be fact-checked again. They do go through copy-editing. But you're not reinventing the wheel each time.''

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For the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, The New Yorker created an e-book collecting content from the magazine's writing on the attacks and their aftermath — everything from poetry to reported pieces on Al Qaeda. It sells for $7.99. So far, sales for the handful of digital special editions that The New Yorker has released remain relatively small.

Pamela McCarthy, the deputy editor, put the number in the thousands.

''The question of what constitutes 'well' in this new world is one that seems to be up for grabs,'' Ms. McCarthy said of the sales so far.

Another problem for e-books that are not simultaneously published in print is that they pose a marketing challenge. With no display space in thousands of bookstores across the country, making readers aware of a book that lives only online is a problem.

''I think one of the challenges for everybody is letting people know the material is there,'' Ms. McCarthy said. ''The e-book stores are tremendously deep, and what's there is not at all apparent on the surface. It's not like walking into a bookstore and seeing what's on the front table.''

Authors who are working with news organizations to publish their books also may have to miss the pleasure of seeing their work produced in print.

Mr. Belkin, whose e-book will be published by The Huffington Post, said he still hoped that the book would be released in print eventually. If not, he is content with the potential exposure offered by The Huffington Post, which draws some 25 million visitors each month. ''Even if the page itself is not as beautiful as a page from Oxford University Press,'' Mr. Belkin said, ''Oxford University Press would not be getting the word out to a million people on the first day my book is out.''

Going past passwords to find Web security

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dress or code, allowing companies to follow people around the Web and amass detailed profiles of their transactions.

''The whole thing is fraught with the potential for doing things wrong,'' Mr. Cameron said.

But next-generation software could solve part of the problem by allowing authentication systems to verify certain claims about a person, like age or citizenship, without needing to know their identities. Microsoft bought one brand of user-blind software, called U-Prove, in 2008 and has made it available as an open-source platform for developers.

Google, meanwhile, already has a free system, called the ''Google Identity Toolkit,'' for Web site operators who want to shift users from passwords to third-party authentication. It is the kind of platform that makes Google poised to become a major player in identity authentication.

But privacy advocates like Lee Tien, a senior staff lawyer at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, say the government would need new privacy laws or regulations to prohibit identity verifiers from selling user data or sharing the information with law enforcement officials without a warrant. And what would happen if, say, people lost devices containing their I.D. chips or smart cards?

The system would allow people to use the same secure credential on many Web sites.

''What happens when you leave your phone at a bar?'' asked said Aaron Titus, chief privacy officer at Identity Finder, a company that helps users locate and quarantine personal information on their computers. ''Could someone take it and use it to commit a form of hyper identity theft?''

For the government's part, Mr. Grant acknowledged that no system was invulnerable. But better online identity authentication would certainly improve the current situation, in which many people use the same one or two passwords for a dozen or more e-mail, e-commerce, online banking and social network accounts, he said.

Mr. Grant likened that kind of weak security to feeble locks. ''If we can get everyone to use a strong deadbolt instead of a flimsy bathroom door lock,'' he said, ''you significantly improve the kind of security we have.''

Parental consent required

A proposed update of the U.S. online privacy rule for children would revise definitions of personal information and strengthen parental consent systems to reflect technological changes, Reuters reported from Washington.

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission plan would modify its Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule, which gives parents a say in what information Web sites and other online providers can collect about children younger than 13.

''In this era of rapid technological change, kids are often tech savvy but judgment poor,'' the F.T.C. chairman, Jon Leibowitz, said last week.

The F.T.C. proposal makes it clear that privacy protections apply when a child is on a cellphone, playing interactive games online or participating in a virtual world. It further clarifies that the law requires parental consent before a behavioral profile of a child is undertaken.

ADAM NURKIEWICZ/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Georgios A. Provopoulos, left, governor of the Greek central bank, with Evangelos Venizelos, the finance minister, at a weekend meeting of European finance officials in Wroclaw, Poland.

Time is running out for Greece and Europe

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bank bailouts, analysts said.

''You can stabilize the banking system and let the sovereign go through the roof, but that is not the most efficient way to do it,'' said Guntram B. Wolff, deputy director of Bruegel, a research organization in Brussels.

Still, political leaders outside the euro zone have displayed concern that the European approach to the crisis lacks urgency. Timothy F. Geithner, the U.S. Treasury secretary, attended part of a meeting of European finance ministers on Friday and Saturday in Wroclaw, Poland. It is rare for a U.S. official to attend such a meeting, known as Ecofin, and it was Mr. Geithner's first time.

''I can't remember the last Ecofin meeting a U.S. Treasury secretary has attended,'' said Nick Matthews, an economist at Royal Bank of Scotland. ''It is a clear signal of how serious the sovereign debt crisis has become and an indication that it has gone beyond Europe and is threatening on a global dimension.''

The finance ministers failed to make substantial progress toward resolving the debt crisis or to make any pledge to recapitalize Europe's banks.

Jacek Rostowski, the finance minister of Poland, who invited Mr. Geithner, said the U.S. official's attendance showed ''unity within the trans-Atlantic family.'' Although Mr. Geithner's comments elicited grumbles from several European ministers, his plea for European politicians to make urgent decisions to shore up the euro zone was echoed Saturday by two ministers whose countries have remained outside the currency area.

''The euro zone leaders know that time is running out, that they need to deliver a solution to the uncertainty in the markets,'' said George Osborne, Britain's chancellor of the Exchequer, who told the BBC that he wanted to see action over Greece and the ''weakness'' in Europe's banking system.

Anders Borg, the Swedish finance minister, said that ''the politicians seem to be behind the curve all the time.'' Citing a ''clear need for bank recapitalization,'' he added: ''We really need to see some more political leadership.''

Despite the potentially grave consequences, the mood in Germany seemed to be turning increasingly in favor of letting Greece fail rather than bear the growing cost.

Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister, on Sunday repeated warnings that Greece will not receive any more aid unless it keeps promises it made to the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank to cut government spending and improve the economy. ''The payments on Greece are contingent on clear conditions,'' he told the Bild am Sonntag newspaper.

German commitment to the euro seems to weakening as membership becomes increasingly expensive. The Ifo Institute, an economic research organization in Munich, said in a study released Saturday that if Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain all became insolvent, Germans would be liable for €465 billion, or $642 billion. The institute has argued that Greece should leave the euro for its own good.

As the largest country in the 17-nation euro zone, Germany is the biggest contributor to a bailout fund designed to help Greece as well as Portugal and Ireland continue to pay their debts while their economies recover.

But Greece has not moved as fast as the I.M.F. and other overseers would like to reduce the bloated government work force, deregulate the labor market and remove other impediments to growth. Mr. Papandreou faces enormous political pressure at home from a public desperately weary of austerity measures and plunging economic output.

The European Central Bank also will play a role in the decision whether to continue aid to Greece and has a strong interest in preventing a Greek default. The E.C.B. has spent an estimated €40 billion to €50 billion buying Greek bonds in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to hold down the yields, or effective interest rate, on the securities. The central bank might need to rebuild its capital if those bonds default and will do all it can to dissuade political leaders from allowing Greece to fail.

Jens Weidmann, president of the German central bank, said that the E.C.B.'s purchases of debt from countries like Greece and Spain create liabilities that might eventually have to be borne by taxpayers, the German newsweekly Der Spiegel reported Sunday on its Web site.

''Without an injection of cash within the next weeks, the nation will run out of resources to service its debt.''

''We have to reduce these risks, 27 percent of which are backed up by the German taxpayer,'' Mr. Weidmann said, referring to the country's share of E.C.B. capital. Mr. Weidmann is a member of the E.C.B.'s policy-making governing council.

Many Germans have come to see the euro as a burden, an alliance that makes them to prop up irresponsible partners. But most economists and business people see the country as one of the common currency's main beneficiaries. The euro is probably weaker than the Deutsche mark would be, helping to keep down the price of German goods when exported abroad.

German political leaders are well aware of the importance of the euro to the German economy and may tone down their rhetoric following elections Sunday in Berlin, which besides being the capital has the status of a state. There is only one state election next year, in May in Schleswig-Holstein. With less need to appease restive voters, Chancellor Angela Merkel could, if she chooses to, use the time to push through some of the measures that are probably necessary to save the euro.

German banks would also be vulnerable to declines in the value of the government bonds they own, and they might require another round of government aid if Greece defaulted. Germany's 10 biggest banks need to increase their reserves by €127 billion, Frankfurter Allgemeine reported in its Sunday edition, citing a study conducted for the newspaper by the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin.

The E.C.B. has signaled its determination to make sure that European banks have enough cash even if investors in the United States and elsewhere choke off funding. The central bank last week expanded a dollar credit line in coordination with the U.S. Federal Reserve and other major central banks.

But the E.C.B. cannot rescue failed banks or help weakened banks to rebuild their capital reserves. Mr. Weinberg of High Frequency Economics said that euro zone governments should be establishing funds ''to assure the public that resources are available to prevent banks from failing no matter how big the hit to their individual capital bases.''

''It is mega-urgent,'' Mr. Weinberg, ''and I think this is the gist of what Geithner told them: protect the banks.''

Niki Kitsantonis contributed reporting from Athens, and Steven Castle contributed from Wroclaw, Poland.

Hundreds demonstrate against solar firm in China

BEIJING

BY SHARON LAFRANIERE

In a fresh indication of growing public anger over pollution, hundreds of demonstrators in the eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang on Sunday were camped outside a solar panel manufacturing plant that stands accused of contaminating a nearby river.

The demonstration was the latest move in a four-day protest that has sometimes turned violent.

The unrest began on Thursday when about 500 villagers gathered outside the plant, in Haining, about 125 kilometers, or nearly 80 miles, southwest of Shanghai. Some protesters stormed the five-year-old factory compound, overturning eight company vehicles, smashing windows and destroying offices. The next day, four police cars were damaged.

The factory is owned by JinkoSolar Holding, a Chinese company. It has more than 10,000 employees, is listed on the New York Stock Exchange and reported second-quarter revenue of 2.3 billion renminbi, or about $360 million. Some investment analysts described the company last year as a promising upstart in the solar-energy products business.

''Return our lives to us. Stay away from Jinko,'' read one protest banner that was photographed by a news agency. Company officials could not be reached for comment on the unrest.

According to Chinese news reports, villagers claimed that runoff from solid waste laced with fluoride and improperly stored at the plant was swept into the nearby river after heavy rainfall on Aug. 26. They said that a sea of dead fish rose to the surface, covering hundreds of square meters of water.

Pigs whose sties had been washed with river water also were reported to have died. The China News Agency reported that government inspectors later found that the water contained ten times the acceptable amount of fluoride.

The Haining demonstrations follow a mass demonstration last month in Dalian, in northeastern China, in which 12,000 people protested a new chemical plant that produces paraxylene, a toxic chemical used to make polyester products. Government officials promised to relocate the plant after the protest.

Ma Jun, director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs in Beijing said in an interview last month that protests over pollution were on the rise.

''People have a growing awareness of the damage caused by environmental pollution and a growing sense of rights,'' he said. ''There are an increasing number of cases that can be characterized as 'not in my backyard.' ''

According to Chinese news reports, the solar-panel plant had been faulted for improper waste disposal in April, and the government had ordered the company to suspend production until it constructed a facility to store solid waste safely.

The factory sits 100 meters from an elementary school and 300 meters from a kindergarten, said a report by National Business Daily, a newspaper in Beijing. A few protesters were reported to have been arrested on charges of theft or vandalism.

Mia Li contributed from Beijing.