

Amazon Erases Orwell Books From Kindle



Lucas Jackson/Reuters

A commuter using an Amazon Kindle while riding the subway in New York.

By **BRAD STONE**
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In [George Orwell's](#) "1984," government censors erase all traces of news articles embarrassing to Big Brother by sending them down an incineration chute called the "memory hole."

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On Friday, it was "1984" and another Orwell book, "Animal Farm," that were dropped down the memory hole — by [Amazon.com](#).

In a move that [angered customers](#) and generated waves of online pique, [Amazon](#) remotely deleted some digital editions of the books from the [Kindle](#) devices of readers who had bought

them.

An Amazon spokesman, Drew Herdener, said in an e-mail message that the books were added to the Kindle store by a company that did not have rights to them, using a self-service function. "When we were notified of this by the rights holder, we removed the illegal copies from our systems and from customers' devices, and refunded customers," he said.

Amazon effectively acknowledged that the deletions were a bad idea. "We are changing our systems so that in the future we will not remove books from customers' devices in these circumstances," Mr. Herdener said.

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Customers whose books were deleted indicated that MobileReference, a digital publisher, had sold them. An e-mail message to SoundTells, the company that owns MobileReference, was not immediately returned.

Digital books bought for the Kindle are sent to it over a wireless network. Amazon can also use that network to synchronize electronic books between devices — and apparently to make them vanish.

An authorized digital edition of “1984” from its American publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, was still available on the Kindle store Friday night, but there was no such version of “Animal Farm.”

People who bought the rescinded editions of the books reacted with indignation, while acknowledging the literary ironies involved. “Of all the books to recall,” said Charles Slater, an executive with a sheet-music retailer in Philadelphia, who bought the digital edition of “1984” for 99 cents last month. “I never imagined that Amazon actually had the right, the authority or even the ability to delete something that I had already purchased.”

Antoine Bruguier, an engineer in Silicon Valley, said he had noticed that his digital copy of “1984” appeared to be a scan of a paper edition of the book. “If this Kindle breaks, I won’t buy a new one, that’s for sure,” he said.

Amazon appears to have deleted other purchased e-books from Kindles recently. Customers commenting on Web forums [reported](#) the disappearance of digital editions of the [Harry Potter](#) books and the novels of [Ayn Rand](#) over similar issues.

Amazon’s published [terms of service agreement](#) for the Kindle does not appear to give the company the right to delete purchases after they have been made. It says Amazon grants customers the right to keep a “permanent copy of the applicable digital content.”

Retailers of physical goods cannot, of course, force their way into a customer’s home to take back a purchase, no matter how bootlegged it turns out to be. Yet Amazon appears to maintain a unique tether to the digital content it sells for the Kindle.

“It illustrates how few rights you have when you buy an e-book from Amazon,” said Bruce Schneier, chief security technology officer for British Telecom and an expert on computer security and commerce. “As a Kindle owner, I’m frustrated. I can’t lend people books and I can’t sell books that I’ve already read, and now it turns out that I can’t even count on still having my books tomorrow.”

Justin Gawronski, a 17-year-old from the Detroit area, was reading “1984” on his Kindle for a summer assignment and lost all his notes and annotations when the file vanished. “They didn’t just take a book back, they stole my work,” he said.

On the Internet, of course, there is no such thing as a memory hole. While the copyright on “1984” will not expire until 2044 in the United States, it has already expired in other countries, including Canada, Australia and Russia. Web sites in those countries offer digital copies of the book free to all comers.

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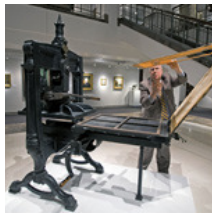


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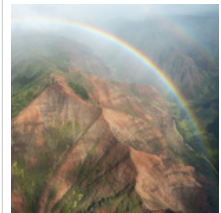
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