

The Politics of Amazon

By F.I. Goldhaber

For years I have questioned the power that book buyers and sellers have abdicated to Amazon. On Sunday, April 12, yet another example of Amazon's abuse of that power came to light.

This "glitch," as Amazon has disingenuously tried to label it, did not begin on April 12. It became public then because a blog post caught the attention of author Neil Gaimon, who has more than 300,000 Twitter (see sidebar) followers, spawning what became known as #amazonfail.

More than 57,000 books disappeared from Amazon searches because Amazon removed sales rankings from books it classified as adult. "As the largest bookstore in the world, if a book does not appear in its lists or its search results, the book practically disappears," Avi Rappoport wrote for *Information Today, Inc.* "When a category is flagged adult, the system automatically suppresses the sales rank and the main search results for all items in that category."

A significant number of the "adult" books that lost rankings had LGBT connections. This included mainstream books by LGBT authors, children's and YA books with LGBT characters, biographies and memoirs of LGBT personalities along with fiction and non-fiction books about anything related to feminism, sexuality, and

erotica.

Some glaring discrepancies emerged. Customers could still find collections of Playboy centerfolds, but not *Heather Has Two Mommies*. An autobiography of a gay male stripper (who's now a college professor) disappeared. The memoir of a straight male porn star did not. For more than 24 hours, searching for "homosexuality" brought up *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality, You Don't Have to Be Gay, For The Bible Tells Me So, and Can Homosexuality Be Healed?* in the top five.

DVDs and other media also lost rankings. Mark A. Michaels, co-author of *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, reported that one of his explicit, instructional, tantric DVDs was (and remains) de-ranked and the other was not "which just illustrates the arbitrary nature of this 'policy.' It's clear by now that these new restrictions are the product of design and not accident."

Evidence has emerged that delisting certain "adult" books started more than a year ago. Francine Saint Marie's (author of LAMBDA Notable Book, *The Secret Keeping*) battle to get Amazon to restore her Kindle rankings and royalty payments began in January of 2008. "Censorship was clearly built into Amazon-Kindle's digital-text-platform years ago when it was programmed to constantly crawl itself for

Twitter is a rapidly growing social networking site which is transforming the way information is shared on the Internet. A couple of good introductory articles: "Finding Utility in the Jumble of Tweeted Thoughts" <http://bit.ly/3wo6y5> and "Ignore Twitter? Major brands learn they'd better respond" <http://bit.ly/OgYcD>

Some history and commentary about #amazonfail from authors, newspapers, business publications, and bloggers in approximately date order:

- * Amazon Throws its Weight Around: <http://tinyurl.com/d5p5h4>
- * BookLocker.com, class action antitrust lawsuit agasint Amazon: <http://tinyurl.com/de5byr>
- * Mark R. Proust's original post: <http://twurl.nl/yq6i7i>
- * Amazon de-ranks National Book Award winner <http://tinyurl.com/da8nye>
- * Amazon's blames a glitch: <http://tinyurl.com/cvem9d>
- * Journalism professor's memoir removed in February: <http://tinyurl.com/dyfbvu>
- * #Amazonfail and the politics of anti-corporate cyberactivism: <http://tinyurl.com/c9y7fp>
- * Susie Bright questions policy: <http://tinyurl.com/c5l7ny>
- * Open Letter to Amazon: <http://twurl.nl/8jcjp1>
- * Call to Boycott Amazon: <http://twurl.nl/uqua65>
- * Blogs and Twitter Coin "AmazonFail" (Wall Street Journal): <http://tinyurl.com/ccdxs4>
- * Lilith Saintcrow: Still Not A Glitch, But A Policy #amazonfail <http://tinyurl.com/cbgd5c> and Glitch, Monoculture, Profit <http://tinyurl.com/c28gfx>
- * Amazon Says Error Removed Listings" (New York Times): <http://tinyurl.com/cqkoe7>
- * Amazon blames a French employee: <http://twurl.nl/rwex6z>
- * Amazon calls mistake 'embarrassing and ham-fisted': <http://twurl.nl/liavsc>
- * Salon.com: Amazon continues to fail: <http://twurl.nl/szd4bd>
- * Amazon experimenting with content dole out: <http://twurl.nl/huitom>
- * Amazon has the power to make or break a book (UK Guardian): <http://tinyurl.com/cokazh>
- * Amazon's Conflicting Censorship Stories Show Problems: <http://twurl.nl/rii0dy>
- * Amazon's "Glitch" Myth Debunked: <http://tinyurl.com/cft7b>
- * Richard Eoin Nash: <http://twurl.nl/71mij1>
- * Vroman's Bookstore: <http://tinyurl.com/d4h63q>
- * Dear Author: Why Amazon's Explanation Is None At All: <http://twurl.nl/ufe4po>
- * How Amazon bowed to blogosphere over 'adult content': <http://twurl.nl/btgctq>
- * Information Today, Inc: <http://tinyurl.com/cnj54u>

new content and trip the automatic censors whenever it found certain keywords that Amazon's leadership had designated as forbidden. ... those dirty words (like 'gay' and 'lesbian' as well as 'erotic' or 'sexuality' or 'adult') will still cast you into the great Kindle abyss for all eternity."

A no-longer available article from August 27, 2008, still shows up in

search engines with the description "Amazon.com is hiding the sales rank on certain risqué books if they become too popular."

Bloggers and reporters have lashed out against the LGBT community and the "angry left" for making an "issue" of a "technical glitch." But, Amazon customer service

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representatives told Brooke Warner, an editor at Seal Press, that Amazon “has been experimenting with the way they dole out content” and they told Mark R. Proust, publisher of YA books with LGBT characters, “In consideration of our entire customer base, we exclude ‘adult’ material from appearing in some searches and best seller lists.” Those are talking points developed by PR people for customers service representatives to use. As author Lilith Saintcrow pointed out in her blog: “Talking points in place for a specific complaint is not a glitch. It is a marker of a policy.”

“In a world where whiteness and straightness are ‘norms’ ... it is always the GLBTQ books, the queer books, the non-normative books that get caught in the glitches,” wrote Richard Eoin Nash, former editorial director of Soft Skull Press.

Amazon still has not provided a plausible explanation for how 57,000 books lost searchability. Nor has it issued an apology. As of this writing, some of those books have not been re-listed.

Discrimination against positive LGBT books is only one example of Amazon riding roughshod over writers and publishers. Some others include:

* Last year, Amazon attempted to force small publishers to use its own POD (Print on Demand) services resulting in a class action lawsuit. <http://bit.ly/cjINh>

* Earlier this year, Amazon, without any no-

tice, deleted hundreds of reviews by authors who mentioned their own titles, according to John Kremer, author of *1001 Ways to Market Your Books*.

* Recently, Amazon instituted a policy of only allowing someone “who has purchased items from Amazon” to write reviews, apparently the only online bookseller to do so.

* Some of Amazon’s reduced prices on books comes from the pockets of authors and publishers via mandated concessions.

* Amazon designed Kindle to prevent reading e-books purchased from Amazon on other devices and reading books purchased from a competitor on Kindle. In January, Amazon announced it will no longer sell e-books in any format except Kindle and Mobipocket (which it also owns).

While Amazon has provided opportunities for authors, especially of small press and self-published books, to get their work in front of a wider audience, the question is at what cost?

“Having grown so large and unresponsive, it’s also now seen as a behemoth, crushing independent local stores, able to control what is available for purchase,” Rappoport wrote.

As long as book buyers give Amazon their money and authors point readers to Amazon’s websites, this problem will only worsen. Some developments designed to increase Amazon’s marketplace power include:

* Jeff Bezos has invested heavily in Twitter, participating in a funding round which rumors put at \$15 million.

* Shortly after #ama-

zonfail, Amazon purchased Stanza, the iPhone reader which allows customers to read Kindle books without purchasing the \$359 machine.

* Last year Amazon acquired Victoria, BC-based AbeBooks, an online marketplace for used, rare, and out-of-print books.

* Amazon owns Internet Movie Database (IMDb), a resource for information about movies and television shows. In April, Amazon announced it will rent high definition movies and sell HD television shows.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. I’m not even sure it represents the iceberg’s tip. Stephen Ju, a U.S. investment analyst estimates that Amazon may now be “facilitating” almost a third of all e-commerce in the U.S.

“Now is the perfect time to think about whether you want to trust one company to dominate the book market, or any market, for that matter,” wrote Patrick Brown, webmaster of Vroman’s Bookstore, Southern California’s oldest and largest independent. “It’s actually your freedom that’s at stake here ... fixing the notorious ‘glitch,’ won’t change that. Because your freedom was at stake long before this recent de-listing experiment.”

“Amazon has enormous power, a near-monopoly,” said Michaels. “This is a pernicious form of corporate censorship. Amazon secretly tags certain materials as adult, gives no notice to authors [or producers] and provides no recourse for challenging that designation. This uproar may have been caused by a technical error that led to the inclusion of

many additional books in the ‘adult’ category, but the censorial attitude itself, the utter lack of transparency, and the continuing failure to respond in a meaningful way are the real issues.”

The sidebar has a comprehensive (but by no means complete) list of resources discussing this issue. I recommend all authors educate themselves on the long-term cost of using Amazon to buy and sell books. Personally, I will not buy books there and I have removed links from my websites to Amazon except for anthologies that are not available anywhere else.

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most writers do. You want to make your book perfect. The bad news is that it is not possible. You will never achieve this. And neither will anyone else on earth. One of the many reasons you should never go back and reread your work once it is in print, is that you’ll find things that can be improved on now that it’s too late to do anything about them.

Secondly, perfectionism can be cured or at least lived with. Another motto which might be useful posted in your work space as is one I live by: “My best is good enough.” This doesn’t mean you won’t improve your work. Or revise. Your best fourth draft will be better than your best first draft. But on any given day, your best is good enough. Seriously. I swear this is true. Your best is good

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