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Michael Giltz | BIO | I'M A FAN OF THIS BLOGGER

Why Buy Stephen Colbert's Book Once When You Can Buy It Three Times?

Posted October 5, 2007 | 01:26 PM (EST)

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The publishing industry is suffering and an article in the [New York Times](#) on TV comic [Stephen Colbert's](#) new book explains why. The story focused on the audio version of his book *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, which is already on sale at iTunes and [Audible.com](#) even before the hardcover hits bookstores on Tuesday, October 9.

One of the suits says the audio book is so creative and different that, "I would think that you would buy the book and the audio because they are really different." In other words, he expects fans of Colbert to buy the hardcover book for \$27, then buy the audio book for about \$16 and while you're at it, when a downloadable version becomes available for your [Sony Reader](#) or computer or Blackberry, maybe you'd be willing to pay another \$25 or so for that version. He's not alone. Even when the audio book isn't somewhat different from the hardcover, they expect fans of a book to buy it twice.

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Imagine if the music industry demanded you buy one copy of your album for playing on your home stereo, another for your car, another for your iPod and so on. You wouldn't do it, would you? But the book industry - which publishes more than 100,000 titles a year - thinks it's perfectly reasonable to expect you to do it

for books. Except you're not even buying books in hardcover: specialty and independent bookstores are disappearing and sales are flat or down in most categories.

Every industry wants to mimic the success of the DVD, one of the most successful products in history. Books add in reader's guides and author interviews and think that is akin to the DVD extras. Some even include public domain DVDs with movie versions of classic novels like *Jane Eyre* and *A Tale Of Two Cities* and the like, as if people who read books really would rather be watching movies.

But the lessons of the DVD are simple. It offered far superior picture and sound to VHS, contained

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extras unavailable or impractical on tape (like commentary tracks) and it did it at a MUCH lower price.

But the book industry doesn't think prices are too high - it thinks prices aren't high enough. How else to explain why the book industry is turning its back on inexpensive mass market paperbacks, just like the music industry turned its back on the single until iTunes proved sales of singles could be a billion dollar industry.

But publishers are besotted with "trade paperbacks," the slightly larger version of mass market paperbacks (the "airport" books that are light and easy to carry and still around when it comes to names like Stephen King and genres like romance). Publishers tricked authors into thinking trade paperbacks are more "prestigious" than mass market books and now many books aren't published in mass market at all, while others don't come out for years. Trade paperbacks can easily cost \$15 or more, even for books that are 20, 30, or 50 years old or more. Publishers insist people don't like mass market paperbacks and really want to spend twice as much on a trade paperback. Obviously, it's been a long time since they actually had to pay for a book.

And to top it off, when the book industry has new extras they can add to the value of a book like audio and downloadable versions, they want to charge you almost as much for that as the book itself. How excited would people be about commentary tracks or deleted scenes from *Transformers* if they had to pay \$20 extra to get them after buying the DVD?

So here's what the book industry needs to do. Bring back the mass market paperback for all titles and keep the price low, say \$7. Package them as attractively as you do the trade paperbacks and hardcover editions.

Now here's the tricky part. Audio books are a valid niche market, that brings in money. Downloadable books could be a revenue stream in the future. Tough. You need to make the book more attractive and that means offering more extras for the same (or lower) price. Everyone who buys a hardcover book should get free access to the audio version and the downloadable text. Imagine buying a book and being able to get the audio edition for listening in your car or iPod and an easily portable downloadable version for your Blackberry or laptop or electronic reader. Happily, with the Internet, making these available will cost very little. Once you've made a copy, it's easy to share with the world.

Suddenly, people might see the \$25 or more they pay for a hardcover book as a decent value. With a lot more ways to catch up on the book they bought, people would be encouraged to read more books and more often. Finding cheap, attractive paperbacks always available would continue that trend. Stephen Colbert's fans will be laughing at his jokes on the subway, in the car, on a plane, at work on their lunch hour and at home - and without having to spend \$65 for the pleasure of buying the same book again and again and again.

So have you ever bought a book in two different formats (ie hardcover and audio)? Would you be more likely to buy a book if it came with the extras of audio and downloadable text? Would you rather buy a trade paperback for \$16 instead of a mass market paperback for \$7? And have you ever been surprised by the price of a book and decided not to buy it?

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kellyrrrl [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of kellyrrrl](#) [permalink](#)

When I read Lewis Black's book last year I could NOT read a single word without his voice in my head. It was great!

Reading stimulates the imagination far more than audio or visual input. One of the reasons that reading makes you smarter is because you use parts of your brain which are becoming NUMB in our current society. You imagine the scenery and characters visually and audibly and that is something that cannot and should not be replaced

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 04:10 PM on 10/06/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I agree nothing replaces reading a good book. But the more you read, the more you want to read and if some people want to listen to a book while commuting -- when they couldn't read anyway -- what's the harm? And a well-read book is a fine entertainment in and of itself -- such as Jim Dale's marvelous work on Harry Potter. How else can a family sit together and enjoy a book all at the same time? None of this would displace reading itself and I'm certain it would lead to more reading. IN any case, whatever your preference -- be it an eBook or an audio file or a hard copy -- booksellers should recharge their industry by making all of them available for one low price.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:57 PM on 10/08/2007

BJNemeth [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of BJNemeth](#) [permalink](#)

With the media spotlight on Hollywood and the music industry, I hadn't even thought about taking a closer look at the publishing industry's distribution efforts in the online age.

Like the RIAA and Hollywood, I expect major publishers are more fearful of online distribution than anything else, but they have an ace in the hole -- reading a physical book is an experience that can't easily be duplicated online (yet). However, I think if they were to follow your advice, and offer "packages" of hardcover, PDF, and audio versions, it might help spur additional sales. (Provided they don't get stupid greedy -- since the PDF and audiobook don't add physical costs, keep the hardcover price the same.)

With iPods and other mp3 music players becoming ubiquitous, the publishing industry has been slow to

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Your suggestion of bundling different formats together is a perfect way to get more people to experiment with audiobooks -- and I think a good number of them will become hooked (as I have).

Michael, thanks for a thought-provoking article with interesting analysis.

FWIW, I plan to buy the audiobook version of Colbert's book from the iTunes Store before a long flight to Europe next week.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:03 PM on 10/06/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Thanks for reading. The iPod explosion and easy availability of downloadable text files and MP3s (for very little cost) means booksellers should absolutely NOT raise prices. Add value to books, don't try and squeeze out more money from a diminishing audience. The Colbert audiobook is a good buy -- too bad you won't have the hardback version waiting at home when you get back. Have a safe flight.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:59 PM on 10/08/2007

bunkle \$am [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of bunkle \\$am](#) [permalink](#)

P-u-b-l-i-c L-i-b-r-a-r-y.

I-n-t-e-r L-i-b-r-a-r-y L-o-a-n.

F-r-e-e.

Got brains?

Or got terminal buyititis?

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:22 AM on 10/06/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Libraries are great and a wonderful resource for anyone who doesn't feel the need to build their own personal library or is short on cash. But in a consumer crazed society, I think getting people to be avid readers (whether via the library or bookstores) is a lot better use of their money and time than \$200 sneakers, designer clothes, the latest digital camera or doohickey, the fifth sequel to a bad movie or just about anything else you can name.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:06 PM on 10/06/2007

bn [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of bn](#) [permalink](#)

If I buy Stephen Colbert's new book it will be the audio version. If he records it himself it will be in 'character' and that adds depth to the reading, much like Tyler Perry's 'Madea'. Other books I either buy hard copies or PDF's...

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 11:36 PM on 10/05/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

You've got a good point. Colbert did record it himself, along with Amy Sedaris, Jon Stewart and other contributors, so I'm sure it will have more appeal than most audio books to the casual reader. But why should you have to choose? Or more importantly, why should the book industry force you to choose? Wouldn't you rather get a hardcover copy AND access to the audio version AND access to a PDF? Wouldn't that make the \$20 or so you're going to pay seem like a much better deal? It worked with DVDs.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:01 PM on 10/06/2007

Newfycrat [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Newfycrat](#) [permalink](#)

As someone who has perhaps bought more audio books than most because my MIL has macular degeneration, how good the audio book is (after, of course, how well the book is written) has everything to do with how good the reader is. We listened to one book whose author read it so badly, we never talk about the book, only how horrible she read it. On the other hand, some books I bought for my MIL

(who now thankfully can borrow them by mail for free) I bought because I knew the book was good and the reader/actor made them even better. Those books were a joy to listen to and had I first bought the CD, I never would have bought the book. Although audio books are normally way overpriced, I do understand the necessary value added by getting a good actor to read it. A bad reader can completely ruin the book. I would pay more for a package of book and audio combined - but not significantly more. If it were not for my MIL, I would not have gotten many of the books I did in audio, the surprise was how much better some of these books were in the audio version than when I read them myself. The industry should really try more for this audience if book sales are in that much decline.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:21 PM on 10/06/2007

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CriminallySane [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of CriminallySane](#) [permalink](#)

"Imagine if the music industry demanded you buy one copy of your album for playing on your home stereo, another for your car, another for your iPod and so on. You wouldn't do it, would you?"

They don't? Remember, the RIAA tried to ban audio cassettes, some labels tried to install "anti-piracy" rootkits that would ostensibly prevent copying CDs, and in actuality rendered people's computers open to intrusion, and are actively suing and harassing people who may or may not have downloaded or shared MP3 tracks.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 02:06 PM on 10/05/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Yep I was one of the people with the terrific Neil Diamond album I couldn't legally rip and play on my iPod because of their software. And like the movie industry -- which was frightened of the VCR and the DVD and downloads -- the music industry and every other industry tends to be frightened of new technology until they are forced to realize it's good for business. But for now, most CDs can in fact be played on any system at home or in your car or boat or laptop and ripped and put onto a media device like an iPod or take individual tracks and make a mix tape and so on. But as for people who steal music they haven't bought via illegal sharing online, the record companies can and should knuckle down. But the best way is not lawsuits but easy, dependable, inexpensive online services like iTunes that give people what they want.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:02 PM on 10/05/2007

blueraven [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of blueraven](#) [permalink](#)

This is one arena where Baen Books is doing itself and readers a favor. Now, they're releasing electronic versions of their library for free both online and in CD form inserted in different books they print instead of audio books, but they're still providing customers a choice. And darned if people aren't more willing to buy the hard copy once they've read the PDF. I know I've been happier buying their material new based on that little perk alone.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:40 PM on 10/05/2007

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

That's the sort of innovation a tiny company like Baen must do. Unfortunately, a major house isn't smart enough to catch on that audio and downloadable versions should be bonuses for buying a book instead of a revenue stream that forces fans of an author to either have to choose (do I want a physical copy of the new John Grisham or an audio version to listen to on my trip) or in rare circumstances pay for both.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:04 PM on 10/05/2007

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