

# The Hollowed-Out Bookstore: Amazon's Promotion of Empty Discourses in Their Online Bookstore

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## *Abstract*

Amazon is considered the world's largest bookstore but what kind of books hide on the 'darkest' digital shelves? By looking beyond the new titles and best-sellers, this paper finds evidence of a wasteland of titles composed of content-free titles, corrupted reprints, and dangerous misinformation. Changes to publishing in the twenty-first century and the pressure of the market on Amazon can help to explain how this wasteland formed, but this paper also explores how this wasteland provides for specific audiences who live in their own cultural bubbles.

## *Keywords*

Amazon; Book Publishing; Booksellers and Bookselling; Disinformation; Mass Media; Misinformation.

In August of 1835, the New York newspaper *The Sun* published a series of reports on the discovery of life on the moon. The articles claimed to base their descriptions on a report about a new type of telescope by the eminent British astronomer Sir John Herschel that appeared in the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*. The excerpts described bat-like humanoids who herded bison, goats, and unicorns and lived in sapphire temples with roofs of gold. Later articles even introduced bipedal tail-less beavers and a humanoid species living nearby in the 'Vale of Triads' that was larger than the furry man-bats and "less dark in color, and in every respect an improved variety of the race."<sup>1</sup> The series came to an abrupt end a month later due to an unfortunate accident when the telescope's giant lens was used during daylight and set the observatory on fire.

The articles caused an immediate boost in circulation of *The Sun*, one of New York's first penny papers. The paper sold 15,000 copies on the day the first article appeared and circulation peaked close to 20,000 copies a day by the time the man-bats appeared. This jump in sales gave it one of the largest circulations of any paper in the world and it caused other penny papers to reprint the stories as well. Most of these penny presses would also see an increase in daily circulation, which allowed the papers to charge higher ad rates that would generate more revenue. This in turn made these new inexpensive newspapers viable enough to compete alongside the more established and more expensive newspapers that were known to readers.

*The Sun* would confess to their hoax after a group of scientists contacted the paper looking to reprint the original journal articles. As Kevin Young has noted in his *New Yorker* article on this incident, *The Sun* misjudged the reception of the articles, which may have originally been intended as satire but were received as factual reporting. The paper was forced to admit to the obvious hoax within a month of publication (Young). Their confession in turn forced the other penny papers to admit that they had borrowed wholesale from *The Sun*.

In this current age of misinformation, one would hope to find a coda to this incident that showed how this hoax made newspaper readers more critical readers and pushed for journalists to adhere to an ethical framework in their reporting. While journalists did attempt to codify practices in the newsroom as the power of the daily newspaper grew, these fictions-as-fact would also continue to find their way into print as news for the next century and a half, in some cases generating a mascot for the paper as happened with the Bat Boy and the *Weekly World News* (Creighton). The moon hoax articles helped *The Sun* become one of the largest papers in New York and the paper maintained its increased circulation numbers even after they admitted the hoax. As a result of this success, the paper promoted Richard Adams Locke, the original

author of the moon articles, to an editorial position that allowed him to publish more hoaxes including one on a transatlantic balloon flight by Edgar Allan Poe in 1844.

This propensity to mask entertaining stories as news would come to be a staple for local papers looking to attract new readers in the newly settled territories of the United States. One can see the reliance on hoax articles in a local newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada around the time of the exploitation of Comstock Lode in the 1860s. At that paper, William Wright and Samuel Clemens, two failed miners turned newspaper men, engaged in a series of editorial one-upmanship of confabulation. Not only would these hoaxes launch Clemens's literary career, but they also provided him with the opportunity to try out the pen name Mark Twain. It turns out that misinformation has been a solid business model for American media for a very long time.

The story of this moon hoax has been well chronicled in Matthew Goodman's 2008 book *The Sun and the Moon* and Kevin Young's *Bunk*, both of which are available alongside millions of other books on Amazon.com, the world's largest bookstore.

Amazon has always promoted the sense that their customers could purchase any book ever published. This would eventually come to include those exclusive titles published only through their Kindle Publishing program. The company currently offers millions of titles including heavily discounted bestsellers, college textbook rentals, and, as we will explore in this paper, titles that cater to specific audiences looking for filtered realities and troubling ideologies. Amazon's large selection of books provides readers with hundreds of thousands of titles outside the best-seller list, which creates what Barry Schwartz has identified as the "paradox of choice" where too many options only push consumers to be more conservative in their choice of products (Schwartz). In terms of bookselling this means readers of thrillers stick to titles by authors like James Patterson as they know they have enjoyed his work in the past. It also means that customers who have purchased books on alternative medicine or climate denial in the past will continue to search for other titles in that category. Amazon's growth in the twenty-first century has relied on tracking their customers' purchases and using that data to suggest similar products, creating suggestion bubbles, something that has been well documented since the company's founding in 2004 (see Galloway, Rub, Smith, Stone, West). Amazon has become its own business ecosystem (Isckia) where customer tracking influences the marketing of third-party products. Amazon has used this ecosystem to usher in a new era of media consumption that does not simply promote popular printed content over 'culture,' but evaluates every customer's reading and viewing habits in order to appeal to consumers on both ends of Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production.

In the field of bookselling, Amazon is often portrayed as the juggernaut that influences the titles on best-seller lists and the price for print and e-books (West, 85–90), but behind their lists of top-selling titles is a very different world. It's a wasteland of titles that promote empty and dangerous arguments, but it's still a wasteland that Amazon regulates through their tracking of customers on the site. This paper will look past Amazon's front pages to explore three categories of books that exist in this wasteland: shoddy reprints, books of dangerous misinformation, and books of literal emptiness.

Before turning a telescope on Amazon's 'Vale of Triads' of reprints, emptiness, and misinformation, it is important to frame the company's rise in context to the changes that have happened within the larger publishing industry over the last quarter century. Much like the penny presses mentioned above, Amazon's rapid rise into retail dominance in North America came about because the company was able to rethink marketplaces. In terms of bookselling, they understood the influence of price on the consumers, but more importantly they also saw the value in automated personalized suggestions (Murray 59). Amazon was the first large bookseller to understand that readers aren't always looking for the best or most important information, but, as Laurence Lessig noted in a Ted Talk from 2007, were content with information that was "second best," provided it was accessible and reflected their view of the world (Lessig). While corporate publishers negotiated with Amazon to create discounts equivalent to print for the Kindle digital format, entrepreneurial authors and independent/small publishers rushed to publish inexpensive e-books and print-on-demand (POD) paperbacks that provided alternative worldviews that could compete for attention in a bookstore for the first time.

### **Changes in the Book Publishing Ecosystem**

The growth of self-published titles targeted towards specific ideologies that sell on Amazon came at a time when traditional book publishing was undergoing rapid change. Before Amazon began in 1994, the book-selling ecosystem consisted of two large chain bookstores, Barnes and Noble and Borders, that carried about 175,000 unique titles per store (Thompson 42) and roughly 1,000 independent bookstores that carried between 2,000 and 10,000 unique titles (Danzinger, Fitting). Barnes and Noble and Borders offered publishers promotion within the store through a co-op program where publishers could pay for placement of titles on endcaps, the displays found at the end of aisles, and on the front-of-the-store tables. This program ensured that the large book publishers who could afford to pay for promotion would control the limited visual space within the store. In comparison, independent bookstores had suggested titles and table displays that were often dictated

by the interests of the staff who selected what they liked instead of what the publishers wanted to push (Miller 96). Amazon's endless virtual space would eliminate the competition for space and allow every book to have the potential to be seen by any consumer (Rub 378). It offered the idea of equitable visibility within its online store. While Amazon would engage in co-op for their newsletters, they would court independent publishers in a way Barnes and Noble did not and create marketing space for those smaller titles. This is not necessarily due to the fact that Amazon had a better relationship with small publishers, but that their sales data pointed to an increased interest in titles from those publishers. Amazon's tracking of customer activity would be based on the interests of the reader and not on the financial influence of the publisher. This understanding of the customer would prove so successful that it would become a foundational part of Amazon subsidiaries including retailers Woot, Zappos, and Whole Foods as well as book-adjacent companies like Goodreads, Audible, Comixology, The Book Depository, and AbeBooks.

Amazon's focus on data has reshaped not only the face of retail but the methods of warehousing and distribution of consumer goods. Amazon now offers instantaneous delivery of digital movies, music, and books through their various digital storefronts and rapid delivery of physical goods. The company has developed a warehousing system that mixes automation and human workers together to create an efficient but exploitative fulfillment model (Delfanti, MacGillis) to achieve these rapid deliveries. While this paper will talk about the ideological wastelands found in Amazon's bookstore thanks to the promotion of fringe titles by search recommendations, it is also worth noting that their rapid growth of warehouses is changing the physical landscape outside major urban areas in America. This includes physical wastelands like the one immortalized in Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland* where workers live in RV camps near the Amazon warehouses in the American West.

Amazon's obsession with understanding their customer and the reliance on automated suggestions created a major accelerant for the growth of the virtual wasteland within Amazon's bookstore, but it would not have had books for that space if Amazon's rise hadn't coincided with a global publishing industry that was seeing an explosion in the number of titles produced. In a blog post from 2010, Leonid Taycher outlines how the staff at the Google Book Project derived an estimate of the total number of books ever published. Google Book's estimate, which is based on their work with the library catalogs to which they had access, is around 130 million unique book titles published before 2010 (Taycher).<sup>2</sup>

The first two decades of the twenty-first century would see the number of new titles added to that 130 million quickly rise from about 100,000 new titles in the US in 2000 to about 300,000 in 2010 (see figure 1). Over the next

decade traditional publishing's new title output would hover around 300,000 new titles annually (Bowker). While no other single country produces as many new titles as the United States, China's book industry has reported a similar annual output and the publishers within the European Union are releasing around 600,000 new titles annually (Federation of European Publishers). That means that the three largest publishing markets in the world produce roughly 12 million titles—roughly 10% of all titles previously published in the whole of human history—just in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

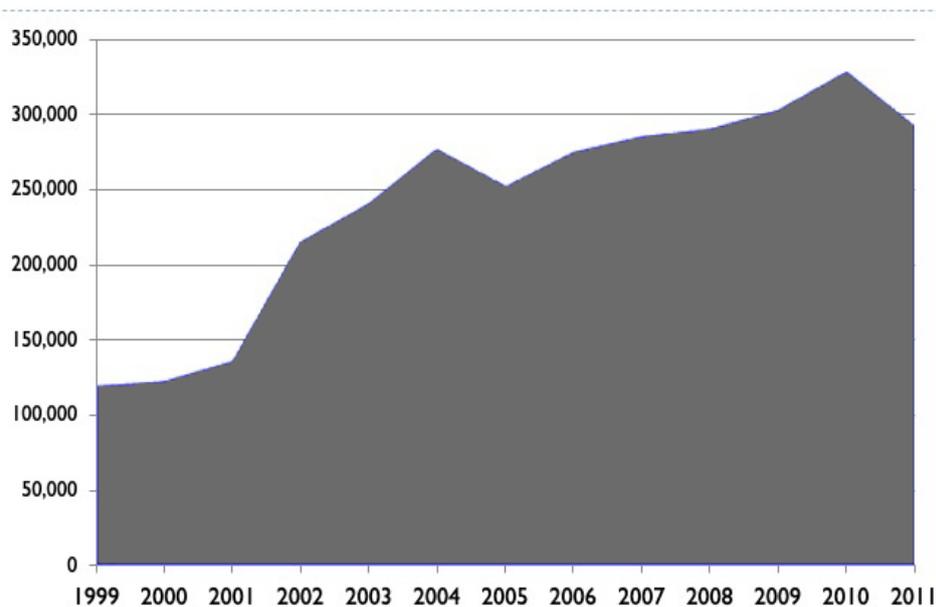


Figure 1: Between 1999 and 2010 the number of ISBNs used for titles by traditional publishers released grew from around 120,000 to over 300,000 titles (Bowker, "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2010-2015"). The traditional publishing industry would continue to publish between 250,000 to 300,000 annually over the next decade.

But the traditional publishing space is miniscule compared to what has happened in self-publishing spaces supported by Amazon. Bowker's report on ISBN usage also includes self-publishing services like CreateSpace, which would be acquired by Amazon and eventually become part of their Kindle program. CreateSpace went from 35,000 ISBNs in 2010 to 423,718 in 2015 to 1.4 million in 2018. Add to that the output of companies like Smashword and Lulu who reported around 100,000 titles per year and the hundreds of smaller publishing service providers and the service providers outside the traditional publishing industry have conservatively used an additional 10 to 12 million ISBNs in the last decade (see figure 2). And these estimates are only for titles released with ISBNs, something Amazon no longer requires for publications on their site.

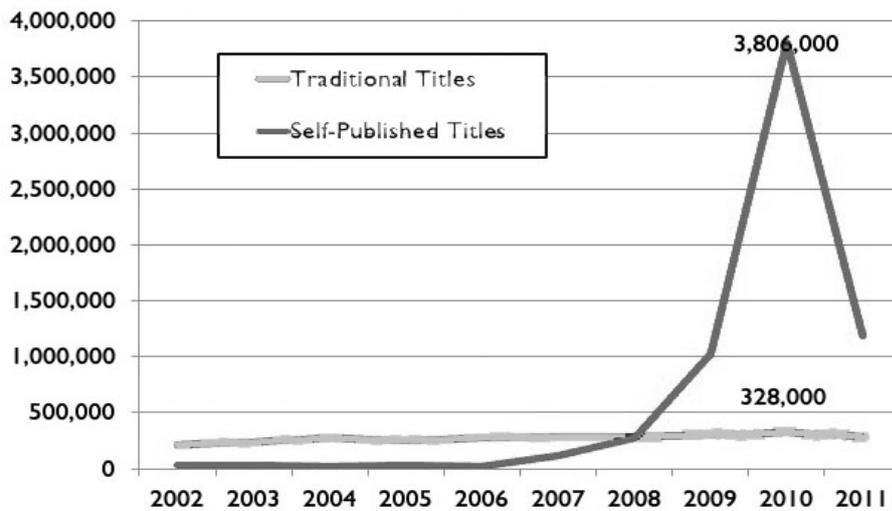


Figure 2: Traditional publishing's use of ISBNs remained consistent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but self-publishing's use of ISBN went from a few hundred per year to close to 4 million in 2010. The number dropped in 2011 when Amazon changed their requirements for unique identifiers (Bowker, "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2010-2015").

For self-publishing authors in the United States, Amazon offers an alternative to the ISBN with their ASIN (Amazon Standard Identification Number) that the company uses to manage all products for sale on their platform. An ASIN can offer self-publishing authors significant savings as it allows them to forego the cost of an ISBN which can be anywhere between \$29 and \$129. (Bowker) The ASIN also locks the book into Amazon's ecosystem as most other book retailers in the United States still require an ISBN. Unfortunately, Amazon does not publish any data on the number of books without ISBNs in its Kindle service. The only insight we have on this information comes from research done by companies like the defunct authroearnings.com website which estimated that at least one million titles annually were published without ISBNs on the Kindle format (Thompson, *Book Wars* 262).

### Amazon's Shelf: Low-Content Books

Within the millions and millions of titles produced over the last decade, only Amazon has been in the position to offer all of them for sale in its infinite bookstore, and thanks to an obsession with data collection on customer behavior since 1998, the company has a very strong suggestion engine to help guide customers to relevant titles (Smith and Linden). Unlike the independent bookstores in America where booksellers offer suggestions based on their knowledge of the title, Amazon's suggestion engine is an automated function on the site that relies on customer searches, purchases, and reviews to shape suggestions specifically to sell more books (Steiner). This reliance on customer

profiles for suggestions should cause valuable books to rise in the rankings and questionable titles to sink in Amazon's bookstore ratings to a point where customers would need to actively search for them. For the casual reader who purchased best-sellers and popular books, they will only see titles that fit these categories, but once a customer moves past the results of popular titles, they may find themselves in that wasteland of titles and encounter the first type of empty discourse book: the low-content book.

Low-content books are not new. Books that have either blank pages or pages designed for input from the user have been part of book publishing since the widespread adoption of the printing press (Gitelman 21). This category includes planners, and journals focused on everything from daily gratitude (*Good Days Start with Gratitude: A 52 Week Guide to Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude*) to creativity (*Destroy this Journal*). While these books are printed with empty pages, the author provides some content within the book to guide the reader on how to use the book. But there is a more recent variant where the empty pages are not there for self-improvement, but to use the book cover and spine to project a political or cultural viewpoint.

An example of this would be Michael J. Knowles's self-published *Reasons to Vote for Democrats: A Comprehensive Guide* (2017). The book's pages are blank except for running heads and page numbers. It became an Amazon bestseller and sold 70,000 copies in its first week of sales (Deahl). The book's popularity soon brought other politically motivated blank books to Amazon including *Reasons to Vote for Republicans: An Incomprehensible Guide* (2017) by Rosco Coltrane, *Why Trump Deserves Trust, Respect and Admiration* (2016) by David King, and *Everything Great About President Trump: Literally Everything* (2017). While this sub-category saw several titles centered around American politics after Knowles's book became a bestseller, this genre also includes titles like *Highway to Hell: The Dangers of Marijuana* (2017) and *Perks of Marriage* (2017) as well as books that trade upon pop culture jokes like *The Comprehensive Collection of Things that Jon Snow Knows* (2016) by S. Tarly.

This category is the truest form of empty discourse available at Amazon. These titles exist only to offer a title meant to reflect the reader's ideological position without providing any sustained argument or support for that position. This concept of book as agitprop has been the focus of a series of videos by comedian and talk show host Scott Rogowsky that show him riding the New York mass transit system while holding up books with provocative fake covers including *If I Did it, How I would have Done 9/11*, by George W. Bush, *Definitely not Porn: So What Are you Looking At? Mind Your Own Business*, and *Human Taxidermy: A Beginner's Guide*. Some of these fake titles have, in fact, become real titles of blank books available for sale at Amazon.<sup>3</sup>

A similar but much smaller category available on Amazon are books that aren't quite blank but use a limited vocabulary. These are often found in the joke or satire categories and include the 119-page memoir, *My Journey North, The Autobiography of Hodor* (see figure 3) or the 100-page *Moist: A Book Full of Moist* by JG. The goal of these titles, like those used by Rogowsky above, are designed to reference Internet memes and appeal to customers at Amazon who are savvy enough to be in on the joke.

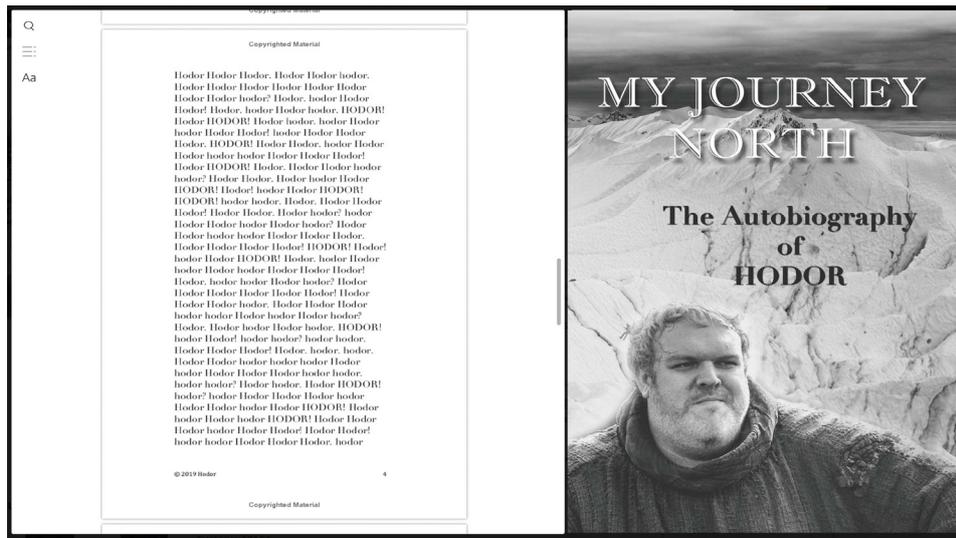


Figure 3: An interior page design and cover for *My Journey North: The Autobiography of Hodor* (Hodor 4).

Thanks to the advances in POD and distribution made by Amazon, these low-content books are easy to produce in limited quantities and do not require a large upfront capital investment that was once necessary for warehousing and distributing printed material. They are also able to use Amazon's search engine to appeal to customers who may be searching for similar ideological or cultural content on Amazon and may find these books amusing and inexpensive enough to add to their cart. That signals to Amazon that these books and whatever other products were purchased are somehow associated together by customers who fit a certain profile, making it so the books will appear as suggestions for other customers. The results of this awareness have given these books a strong sales record including the Knowles title mentioned above and Hodor's memoir which has sold about 3,000 copies.

**Amazon's Shelf: Public Domain Titles**

I would now like to move from books with no content in them to those titles available at Amazon that are straightforward reprints of public domain material. Amazon's rules for self-publishing prohibits direct reproduction of public domain material, but it does allow for publishers to sell obscure public

domain content or what they call differentiated work that includes annotations, new translations and illustrations (Publishing Public Domain Content). If, as noted in the previous section, content creators have found a way to sell books without any content, they have also found a way to repackage previously published content that is out-of-date or disproven in a way that will appeal to the right audience. In the case studies below, it is clear that the publication of the work is not about the restoration or reintroduction of forgotten texts with scholarly introductions and contextual notes. It's about using freely available digitized public domain content to create large collections to sell on Amazon and to organizations.

In the previously mentioned 2009 report on ISBN usage, Bowker identified publishers who focused specifically on public domain publishing. This list included BiblioBazaar (273,000 ISBNs), Books LCC (224,460 ISBNs) and Kissinger Publishing (190,175 ISBNs). In total, Bowker recorded 764,448 new ISBNs from nontraditional publishers in 2009 and, as noted in a post on the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association's *Writer Beware* website, of those ISBNs, 687,500 were for reprints of public domain content (Strauss).

BiblioLabs, which was responsible for over a third of those reprints in 2009, would partner with the British Library to launch the British Library's 19th Century Historical Collection App on the iPad that would offer users access to 45,000 of their digitized titles. Two years later, the company signed agreements with EBSCO Information Services to offer EBSCO customers the use of the BiblioBoard Library and BiblioBoard Creator, which contain the content tied to those registered ISBNs from 2009.

While we can trace how BiblioBazaar converted their 273,000 registered ISBNs into large collections licensed out to libraries around the world, there are other public domain reprinters like Forgotten Books who register ISBNs specifically to sell directly to consumers on Amazon. A current search of this publisher on Amazon returns over 70,000 books, almost all of which are straightforward POD copies of scanned material. It is clear from the search results on Amazon that the company uses an automated process to scan and create their content. It also becomes apparent that the company uses that automated process to fill in the descriptions and metadata for Amazon from their scanned content. Take for example Edward L. Wheeler's play *Deadwood Dick, a Road Agent*. When searching for Wheeler on Amazon, a customer may encounter the Forgotten Book version of the book, titled *Ps Z We Ih Rijfflod A Road-A(Ient!)*, the uncorrected text for the title generated by an OCR scan of a library book (see figure 4). On the title page of the library book is a call number covering the first three letters of the title. The call number for the book is **PS 635. Z9 W562**, which provides the first few characters for the title listed on Amazon. The poor quality of the title page is representative

of the rest of the interior of the print book which has very lightly printed text that is hard to parse, something that would be readily apparent to the reader through Amazon's "look inside" feature, if the title offered that option. This then becomes an inferior reprint of a public domain work that represents the rare case of a publisher making it harder to find a book on Amazon as academics and researchers who are searching for an inexpensive reprint of Wheeler's play may not be able to discover it through the search function. This book, which is the only version currently available in print on Amazon, can be found only through an author search or if Amazon suggests it as a similar title to another book. This kind of title becomes part of Amazon's wasteland as it adds to Amazon's list of potential titles but becomes very difficult to not only find on Amazon due to bad metadata and is of a very low quality in terms of production value.

The screenshot shows the Amazon product page for the book "Ps Z We Ih Rijfflod a Road-A(lent! A Road-Agent! A Drama Cf the G-Old Min (Classic Reprint) Paperback – July 13, 2012" by Edward L. Wheeler. The page features a book cover on the left, a title and author section, a price tag of \$9.04, and a description. The description text is highly garbled and appears to be the result of a corrupted OCR process. The page also includes a "Buy Now" button, a "prime" logo, and a "See all formats and editions" link.

Figure 4: Forgotten Book's Amazon page for Edward L. Wheeler's *Deadwood Dick: A Road Agent*. The information on the book is the result of a corrupt OCR scanning process (<https://www.amazon.com/Rijfflod-Road-Road-Agent-Classic-Reprint/dp/B008VIBWGE>).

An additional group of publishers that are worth considering when talking about public domain reprints who add a bulk of titles to Amazon's catalog with very little valuable content are those publishers who focus on the large corpus of non-copyrighted content from Wikipedia. For example, Focus On Publishing currently offers over 3,000 Kindle e-books all of which are generated directly from Wikipedia. The titles cost \$.99 and are released under the same Creative Commons license as the original content. The titles indicate that the company performs some editorial work as they collect similar subject matter into collections that run several hundred pages and have unwieldy titles that indicate the content within. One such example from Focus On's English grammar collection is the 330-page *Focus On: 50 Most*

*Popular Rhetorical Techniques: Metonymy, Irony, Rhetorical Question, Modes of Persuasion, Parable, Allusion, Slippery Slope, Description, ... Rose is a rose is a rose is a Rose, etc.* The interior of the book imitates Wikipedia entries in an e-book format where each “chapter” begins with a boxed list of contents, just like on Wikipedia, and ends with notes (see figure 5). While the books bear a striking resemblance to the original Wikipedia entries in design, the actual content has not been updated since 2018, capturing a snapshot of a Wikipedia entry and presenting it as publishable information. Much like the bulky reference material that often became outdated upon publication, these collections of entries from Wikipedia create a pool of hundreds of titles within Amazon’s catalog that offer dated and potentially dangerous information right next to vetted material from traditional publishers that was created with the intention of being a book and not a living encyclopedia.

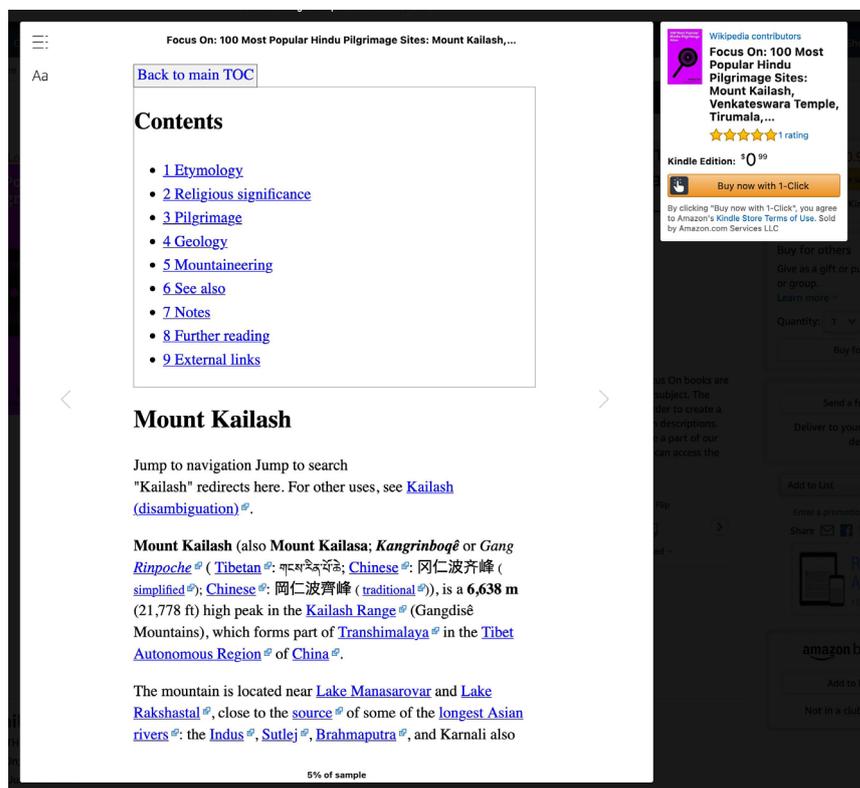


Figure 5: An example of the interior design of Focus On titles. The design reflects the source material from Wikipedia (<https://www.amazon.com/Focus-Pilgrimage-Venkateswara-Padmanabhaswamy-Manasarovar-ebook/dp/B07DNGD4TH?asin=B07DNGD4TH&revisionId=f9d611df&format=2&depth=1>).

Another facet of Focus On’s publishing program that is worth mentioning is that the company also provides several dozen collections on alternative and homeopathic medicine including the massive *Focus On: 100 Most Popular Alternative Medicines: Kombucha, Acupuncture, Apple Cider Vinegar, Chiropractic, Isolation Tank, Alkaline Diet, Bloodletting, ... Diet, Craniosacral*

*Therapy, etc.*, which comes in at 1,061 pages. These titles not only gather potentially dangerous misinformation, but they also separate that information from the Wikipedia framework which will also offer alternative entries and counterpoints to the information presented. In fact, by adding these titles into the Amazon ecosystem, Focus On has created an opportunity for more titles on questionable medical practices to become more discoverable through Amazon's similar title list. Expand this model past alternative medicine to the titles on firearms, conspiracy theories, and military strategies and one can quickly see how Amazon begins to promote thousands of books that promote misinformation and inflammatory content.

### **Amazon's Shelf: Misinformation and Dangerous Content**

The last and most problematic category in Amazon's wasteland of questionable content is one that links books that cover alternative histories, alternative medical advice, instructions on how to build bombs and even plans on running paramilitary organizations as similar titles on Amazon result pages. In the exploration of low-content and public domain work available at Amazon, it is important to reiterate that these titles are often, but not always, published outside the mainstream publishing industry by small presses or self-published authors and are often confined to specific categories that only appear to those customers doing a purposeful search for the material on Amazon (Rub 380). These titles rarely appear on the front pages of Amazon or on the top of search results, but they are the type of books that fill out the scrolling bar of suggested and similar titles that Amazon has created to promote content identified as relevant through their algorithm.

One of the most recent examples of this kind of content that did hit the front pages of Amazon and caused something of a public outcry is Joseph Mercola's *The Truth About COVID-19*. Mercola's book, which is traditionally published through a small publisher and discusses conspiracy theories about the origin and severity of COVID, prompted US Senator Elizabeth Warren to send a letter to Amazon about her concern that the company was promoting misinformation on the COVID pandemic after it became the top result for books on the pandemic at Amazon (Paz). Mercola's book offers us an example of how this type of misinformation offers a false sense of value to customers about the content of the book and then guides them to other titles of questionable, if not dangerous, content. As of the writing of this essay, the book is still available on Amazon where it has 5,984 reviews with 90% of them giving it a 5-star rating. On Amazon's list of related titles to Mercola's book is Peter Duesberg's *Inventing the AIDS Virus*, which was first published in 1996 as an argument that HIV does not cause AIDS. Outside the "related titles" result, Duesberg's book would be very hard to find on Amazon as it is out of print and is limited

to used book sales on Amazon, two things that lower a book's ranking on Amazon's result page. It also currently has a small number of reviews (121). This is not the type of book that should have a lot of visibility, but we find Amazon's algorithm has identified this as a title that would appeal to the thousands of customers that are reviewing and purchasing the Mercola book (see figure 6).

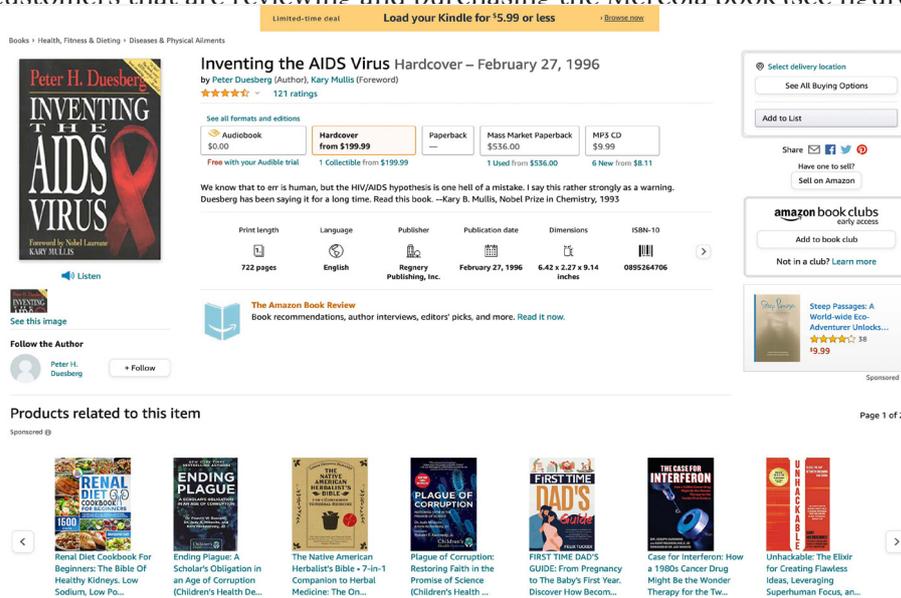


Figure 6: Duesberg's *Inventing the AIDS Virus* (1996) has limited buying options, but still has an 88% rating on the site (<https://www.amazon.com/Inventing-AIDS-Virus-Peter-Duesberg/dp/0895264706>).

It is worth noting that Amazon does remove problematic titles from their site, but it often feels like it does so only as a response to bad press. One such example is their response to a 2013 article by Jeremy Wilson at *The Kernel*. Wilson's article focused on the availability of "hundreds of e-books that celebrate graphic rape, incest, and 'forced sex' with young girls" in Amazon's Kindle service (Wilson). Amazon quickly purged those titles from their bookstore when the story gained traction with other media outlets. Amazon did another purge of controversial content in 2021 when it removed any product it associated with QAnon after the January 6, 2021 siege of the U.S. Capitol, noting that sellers on the site agree not to sell products that "promote, incite, or glorify hate or violence toward any person or group," (Weise). Amazon's announcement was made following similar statements from other social media companies. One of the books removed in the QAnon purge was William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978). *The Turner Diaries* had been available through Amazon's bookstore despite the fact that it has been identified as "the most influential work of white nationalist propaganda since the fall of Nazi Germany" and connected to over 200 murders and 40 terrorist attacks including the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh and the 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr. where the murderers stated they were

Other titles that are influential with white nationalists can still be purchased through Amazon. In a 2004 article for the Southern Poverty Law Center, Camille Jackson lists additional books in the white nationalist's library including Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905) (the source for D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*), Jean Raspail's anti-immigration novel, *The Camp of the Saints* (1975), John Ross's *Unintended Consequences* (1996), Ellen Williams's *Bedford: A World Version* (2000), Gerald James McManus's *Dark Millennium* (2001), Lloyd Lenard's *The Last Confederate Flag* (2001), and Ward Kendall's *Hold Back This Day* (2016). The US Amazon bookstore still lists these titles for sale and allows sellers to sell copies of these titles in both new and used editions.<sup>4</sup> Amazon in fact lists at least 10 editions of *The Clansman* for sale as well as copies of *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion*, dozens of editions and study guides of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Ted Kaczynski's *Unabomber Manifesto*, and 43 versions of the *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Andy Warhol. Once on the page for any of these titles, Amazon's search algorithm will also offer links to purchase the other titles, making it easy to build a white nationalist library in a few clicks, even if that library will no longer include a copy of *The Turner Diaries* from Amazon.

### Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this paper, Amazon's focus on understanding customer wants and delivering titles that fulfill those wants is part of the history of American bookselling. Their sales of almost any title including those on the American Library Association annual list of banned and challenged books could be viewed as an attempt to combat book censorship in America like that on display at the 2022 book burning led by pastor Greg Locke (Anglesey). But it should be clear from the case of *The Turner Diaries* that Amazon is more open to removing titles if they might disrupt the company's stock price. Their ban on QAnon-related titles happened only after consumers started to call for boycotts of companies who offered QAnon a voice. The availability of questionable content on the site is tied to Amazon's understanding that their customers are the audience for this content. We have seen how Pierce's book, which is clearly marketed as a work of fiction, has been banned while Mercola and other authors who offer potentially harmful medical advice sold as non-fiction continue to appear in suggest lists and search results. In fact, Mercola's book, which was published by the well-established Chelsea Green Publishing company, is highly reviewed on Amazon, making it more visible on the site.

By relying on Amazon for printing and distribution, the small publishers who produce books of questionable content are able to utilize Amazon's ecosystem to sell to their audience without the need to create and support distribution. Amazon, in turn, is able to profit from the readers

of these books not just through the sale of some bound pages but through tracking their search behaviors and seeing what they buy. Amazon is not just a storefront, it is an influencer of social discourse and has helped to push “the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor [to] pervade the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate,” which Habermas notes replaces public debate with consumption, causing “the web of public communication to unravel into acts of individuated receptions, however uniform in mode” (Habermas 161). By privatizing the cultural arbitration that has been part of public discourse (Striphas 406) and masking it with an air of scientific objectivity associated with the mathematics behind programs like algorithms (Murray 57), Amazon has created a space where they get to choose the public discourse that their customers see at the company’s bookstore. Like American newspapers of the early nineteenth century, the value of the content for Amazon is not in the content itself but in the ability to grow users. It was a dangerous precedent set by the singular newspaper companies of the nineteenth century, but it is even more dangerous when used by a company that uses the consumption of that written content to track purchases and reinforce their customers’ ideological worldview. When that tracking is then connected to a whole host of services including movies (Prime), television programs (Prime), virtual assistantship (Alexa), audio content (Audible), and even home security (ring), we can see the company’s potential to limit their customers’ access to information in a way that creates a virtual filter hiding the American wasteland that surrounds them.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> While most of the articles on this hoax fixate on the man-bats, Kevin Young explores the idea of this as an abolitionist signal from the paper but shows how the language used to describe those living in the ‘Vale of Triads’ complicates that premise.

<sup>2</sup> Like almost anything else that revolves around the history of the printed word, the reliance on libraries is complicated. Google’s estimate does not include books from non-digitized archives, or those titles lost to time and human conflict. Historians do not have an estimate for how many codices were burned by Catholic priests during the colonization of the indigenous people of North and South America. There is also a lack of information on the publications from small and pulp publishers who sold cheap books outside the established book trade in the two decades after World War II or the companies who never submitted copies of their books to the Library of Congress for copyright registration.

<sup>3</sup> As of the writing of this paper, there are 11 different version of blank notebooks that have the words “Human Taxidermy” as the main title on the cover of the book similar in style to the one used by Rogowsky.

<sup>4</sup> These titles do not often appear in the top search results for either author name or title. Like other books in Amazon’s bookstore, they exist for the reader willing to search them out either by scrolling through pages of results or doing an advanced search on author and title.

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