

EU probes allegations of price-fixing in e-books

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Visitors try out various e-book readers on display during the 62nd International Book Fair in Frankfurt am Main in 2010. The European Commission on Tuesday searched several European publishing houses suspected of fixing the price of e-books, a spokeswoman for the competition commissioner said.

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"The competition services Tuesday conducted inspections in publishing houses in several European Union countries due to suspicion of anti-competition practices in the pricing of e-books," said Amelia Torres, spokeswoman for Competition Commissioner Joaquin Almunia.

"We are not naming the publishing houses nor the countries because we are just at the beginning of the inquiry. We are not accusing anyone and

we do not have any proof," Torres said.

"We need to find out if our suspicions are confirmed," she added.

Digital or e-books are a growing sector in publishing, with the sale of e-books on the Internet already exceeding that of traditional books.

Several French publishing houses, including Albin Michel, Hachette, Flammarion and Gallimard, received visits Tuesday from officials of the [European Commission](#) and the [competition](#) services, the high-tech computer website 01net.com reported, citing the head of Albin Michel, Francis Esmenard.

He also accused the Amazon e-tailing giant of instigating the inquiry.

"This operation is controlled by Amazon. They are based in Luxembourg so they don't pay the VAT in France and they would like to be able to sell books at whatever price, like they do in the United States, selling bestsellers for 9.90 dollars," Esmenard said on the website.

The Commission's inquiry follows on from one opened last month in Britain over alleged e-book price-fixing there.

In the 1980s the Commission accepted that governments can fix the price of books on condition that it does not affect exchanges between member states. But [e-books](#) did not exist at that time.

However, an agreement among editors to fix the price of books is prohibited by European regulations, and if proven to be true could result in heavy fines.

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