

NY Times jumps into mini digital book market (Update)

December 13 2012, by Ryan Nakashima

The New York Times is getting into the business of selling bite-sized digital books based on its reporters' work, giving it entree into a growing market for inexpensive "e-singles" that can be read in a couple of hours.

The Times' first mini book will go on sale Monday. It's an 18,000-word piece about skiers caught in an avalanche by Times reporter John Branch. The story, called "Snow Fall," expands on an upcoming piece in Monday's newspaper.

It will sell for \$2.99 in Amazon.com's Kindle store, Apple's iBooks, and on Barnes & Noble's Nook.

E-singles fall somewhere between magazine pieces, which can top out at around 10,000 words, and full-length books, which can run around 100,000 words.

The product meets the rising demand for content as people buy tablet computers like the iPad and Kindle Fire in increasing numbers. IHS expects global shipments of tablets to hit 120 million this year, just two short years after the iPad jumpstarted the category in April 2010. Tablet shipments are expected to hit 340 million in 2016.

And people aren't just watching movies and surfing the Web on their mobile devices. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism said in October that half of U.S. adults own a tablet or smartphone, and two thirds of them get news on their device.

The quick turnaround of digital publishing means non-fiction work remains timely.

Gerald Marzorati, the Times' editor for editorial development, said the company is betting the new format will make long-form journalism easy to read and reach people who don't visit the Times' website or read the newspaper.

"We're going to really experiment in the first year with different sorts of forms—long essays, long narratives," he said. "We may even try collections. We're just sort of experimenting with this form and we'll see if getting something at a very reasonable price in book form is something that appeals to people."

Amazon is considered the pioneer of the short-format digital book. It launched Kindle Singles in January 2011. In September this year, it said it had sold 3.5 million Kindle Singles so far. Others have followed suit. Apple calls the format Quick Reads and Barnes & Noble calls them Nook Snaps.

The Times is partnering with one of the early innovators in the space, a San Francisco startup called Byliner Inc., which has published nearly 50 short-form titles in its 16-month existence.

Among its hits are "Lifeboat No. 8," a story about the sinking of the Titanic by Elizabeth Kaye and Jon Krakauer's "Three Cups of Deceit." Kaye's book made its way to the top of the New York Times e-book bestseller list.

Two of Byliner's cofounders, John Tayman and Mark Bryant, both worked previously as editors at The New York Times Sports Magazine, making the pair an easy pick as the newspaper's inaugural partners.

Byliner has published the work of Times reporters before, including Jonathan Mahler, a New York Times Magazine writer who wrote "Death Comes to Happy Valley" about Joe Paterno and the sexual abuse scandal at Penn State.

"We're a company that values great writing and great writers, as does the Times," said Tayman. "It's a perfect combination for us both."

In addition to new original work, the Times is mining its archives to create curated selections of articles assembled into mini e-book narratives about a topic or event, a product it's calling TimesFiles.

For that offering, it is partnering with Vook, another startup, based in New York, to publish 25 titles on Monday such as "The Life and Writing of Nora Ephron" and "George Steinbrenner and the Yankees."

Vook's vice president of business development, Matthew Cavnar, calls the launch "the first powerful entry into this marketplace" by a newspaper company so far.

The Times published just one such e-book before this launch, called "Open Secrets," a collection of 93 articles about the cache of sensitive U.S. State Department documents made public by Wikileaks, in January 2011.

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