

# Boosting ebooks, protecting copyright

## A case study from Iran



**Majid Ghasemi, CEO, Fidibo**

I always wondered why most books I had in my library were illegal copies.

Iran has never signed the Bern Convention and has no effective copyright legislation. As I grew more uncomfortable about reading pirated materials, I wondered if other readers felt the same.

Three years ago, while still a student, I was lucky enough to meet Mehdi Firouzan, CEO of Book City, Iran's biggest book chain. He comes from a well-known family and has a track record of supporting new ideas. We discussed the climate for copyright and how to provide access to legal copies. At the end of the conversation, Mr Firouzan agreed to invest in the Fidibo project.

Fidibo is designed to shift the focus of copyright away from governments and publishers, towards readers. Illegal networks will never be eradicated: even countries with strong copyright laws experience high levels of piracy and illegal downloads. What matters is providing enough legal copies to keep the industry alive.

This vision defined the Fidibo campaign. Surprisingly, in just one week 16,000 people signed up, tying a ribbon to their hands with the label "No illegal downloading".

It generated significant media coverage and provoked a lot of discussion between readers. A live show on national TV allocated 45 minutes to discussing our campaign and the issue of copyright for Iranian publishing.



**Fidibo ribbon campaign**

Feedback from the campaign showed that, contrary to expectations, readers are prepared to pay for licensed content. The challenge is providing access to legal copies. So we developed our own e-book distribution channel.

We spent two years developing this channel. It took such a long time because of two main factors:

1. Persian language was not supported by Adobe SDK and DRM
2. Iranian publishers had created their book files using previous-generation local software that made any conversion process extremely difficult.

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During this period we developed the necessary technology, including rendering Persian epub, a kind of DRM and a cost efficient system for conversion.

The next step was the most critical one. The distribution channel was ready and readers were willing to pay for licensed content... but where was the licensed content?

As I mentioned at the start, most books which are published in Persian are not licensed. To fix this problem without any law in support of copyright seemed impossible. We took a radical decision by announcing that Fidibo, as a channel for licensed content, would pay copyright direct to the rights holder; but how could a start-up be able to make these payments on behalf of a whole industry?

To enable copyright payments, we reduced the publisher's share to 50% of the book price and set aside a percentage for copyright. So if a book cost \$10, \$5 would go to the Iranian publisher and the remaining \$5 would be shared between Fidibo and the copyright owner.

To convince publishers to accept these terms, Fidibo offered them a free e-book conversion service. It means that unlike publishers elsewhere, Iranian publishers do not have to pay to convert their titles to e-book formats.



Presenting Fidibo to publishers

We found other ways to motivate publishers to participate. Because of the lack of copyright protection, foreign language titles often exist in multiple translations, offered by multiple publishers. We told publishers that if their translation was licensed, Fidibo would never carry any rival translations.

Through offering exclusivity in e-book distribution and by increasing the number of Fidibo members and customers, we make it a viable proposition for publishers to acquire book rights which can then be offered as licensed translations.

It's important to emphasise that Fidibo isn't seeking to change international publishers' copyright processes. We have simply provided a local solution to a historical problem in Iran's publishing industry. To reiterate, the main reason Fidibo was founded was to create a channel to distribute licensed content to meet readers' ethical concerns and to generate as much copyright revenue as possible in order to develop Iran's fragile book ecosystem.

At the start, there was skepticism about whether our approach could work. Today however, over 120 publishers have signed up. The Fidibo model has proven itself; respect for copyright is growing.

It's my belief that in order for copyright to be protected, even in countries with strong copyright laws, the reader is key. When you consider the growth of online illegal distribution networks and user behavior globally, it's clear that a legal framework is not enough. The best way to ensure respect for copyright is through raising reader awareness and via their loyalty to the book industry.

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With that in mind, we believe Fidibo can be relevant far beyond Iran and the Middle East, and we plan to extend our campaign internationally. There is a real need among readers to know that what they are reading is legal.

We invite publishers, authors, associations, and readers to join us and help make it an international campaign for readers who want to read legally.

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