



Swarming a Book Online

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It is a largely sympathetic portrait. For instance, Mr. Sullivan seeks to refute the popular notion that the singer had troubling relationships with young boys. Jackson was found not guilty of child-molesting in a criminal trial in 2005.

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Yet even before the book was officially published on Nov. 13, the rapid response team declared, "It's time for action!"

Within two weeks, the book had [nearly 100 anonymous one-star reviews](#) that included such comments as: "A disgrace and a disgusting insult to the greatest artist and entertainer the world has ever known." "There is not one actual fact in this book." "Sullivan seeks to criticize Michael's spending habits? It's none of his business what Michael spent his money on." "Michael Jackson has dedicated his entire life to helping others. He doesn't deserve this." "The audacity to term Michael Jackson's life a 'train wreck' is nothing less than evil and uneducated."

For several days in late November, Amazon stopped selling physical copies of the book after buyers said copies were defective, in a development first reported by [The Portland Oregonian](#). Mr. Entrekin said Amazon was the only sales outlet that had received such complaints.

The fans took the credit for removing the book from sale. "Book stopped selling," one of them noted in a Nov. 26 post on the Facebook page. "MJ fans we have done it again!!! Who's BAD!!!"

About that time, other readers started leaving positive reviews of the book and criticizing the negative reviews, turning the review forum into a full-scale brawl. The fans labeled these reviewers "haters," saying: "Do not fight with the haters but we need you to focus on the book and leave negative reviews of the book. Rate it with one star. We do not want the book rating to go up."

It also encouraged the fans to report "the MJ hating trolls" to Amazon for making "inappropriate and personal" attacks against those who left negative reviews.

Tom Mesereau, the Los Angeles criminal defense lawyer who became a hero among Jackson fans when he successfully represented the singer in his molesting case, was a major source for Mr. Sullivan. In early December, he made [a YouTube video](#) calling the attacks on "Untouchable" a "disgusting, sophisticated, Hollywood-style P.R. campaign."

In reality, the campaign is being run a long way from Hollywood. An administrator for the rapid response team, who identified himself as Steve Pollard, said five people run the Facebook site and Twitter efforts, only three of them in the United States. Going after "Untouchable" was "a moral responsibility," said Mr. Pollard, a 52-year-old resident of



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Detroit. He explained, "If you were to drive by a graveyard and see someone steal a corpse in order to make a profit, you would feel some responsibility to do something."

He said that the response team did not tell fans what to say in their Amazon reviews and that they did not try to have the book removed, despite messages to the contrary on the Facebook page. But he added in an e-mail that some of the favorable reviews of "Untouchable" "were removed (I think) because they were attacks against fans and not reviews of his book. We reported the attacks of course."

Mr. Pinch, the Cornell researcher, said he got the sense that "Amazon is hoping that all these problems with positive and negative reviews will go away." He added: "But as more and more abuses come to light, the overall effect will be a slow undermining of the process. There are so many ways to game the system."

Grove distributed 16,000 copies of "Untouchable." Nielsen BookScan, which tracks sales in most outlets, counted only 3,000 copies sold. For a time this month, "Untouchable" was being outsold on Amazon by a book on Jackson's body language, "Behind the Mask."

That book, published by the author, had something going for it that "Untouchable" did not: the endorsement of the fans. "Michael Jackson would be pleased that such an objective book was written about him," one reviewer wrote on Amazon.

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