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Libraries and Book Publishers

By Maureen Sullivan

One important role of libraries is to be stewards and repositories of information resources. Access to information in whatever form it is created and made available is a fundamental expectation of library users. Librarians are devoted to this principle. Libraries serve everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status. They are a key community resource where anyone can go to find information, borrow the newest book or more works by a favorite author, and find resources to support self-directed education and material that provides entertainment.

The explosion of content available in digital form has brought about significant changes in how content is created, published, and made available. For more than 20 years, libraries have provided digital resources to their user communities, including full text journal databases, data sets, and unique collections of materials made more readily available to the public through digitization. In fact, college and academic libraries spend a higher percentage of their collections budget on digital resources than on print. More recently, e-books in public libraries have become increasingly popular. The number of libraries that offer e-books has doubled in the past five years, and libraries report double- and triple-digit growth in circulation of these e-titles.

Unfortunately, the “big six” publishers of trade books—Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin, Random House, and Simon & Schuster—have been reluctant to sell the most popular fiction and nonfiction to public libraries, primarily due to the suspicion that library e-book lending will cut into consumer e-book sales. The American Library Association (ALA) has made e-book availability in public libraries a key priority and a matter of urgency for the Association, its 58,000 members and the communities they serve. Librarians are questioned every day about why access

to e-books is denied or constrained in the library, but not in the marketplace, where access is increasing and prices are dropping.

Librarians and publishers have worked together over the years to face the many changes brought on by technology and to achieve the goal of bringing authors and readers together. Librarians introduce authors and their works to readers of all ages. Libraries promote the discoverability of books in different forms (print, audio, and electronic) by recommending titles, sponsoring author talks, displaying titles in libraries and on library web sites, hosting book clubs and more. Librarians also contribute to the publishing ecosystem by teaching and encouraging literacy (including digital media literacy) and self-directed education.

As librarians, we understand that the revolution in digital content has brought new and serious challenges to publishers. The publishing community’s well-established way of doing business for print is being rewritten. Although the cost of producing and distributing e-books is lower than for print books, so too is the expected consumer price. Until recently, the publisher could count on significant revenue through hardback book sales. Consumer interest in the more expensive print version has waned. Publishers have had to negotiate new contracts and royalty agreements with many of their authors to obtain the rights to offer titles in the e-book format. Moreover, publishers have had to modify workflow, produce books in the variety of additional e-book formats, figure out how readers will discover books with a declining number of bookstores, and how to do business with the massive online retailers who now dominate e-book sales, often by selling e-books at a much lower price to drive consumers to their online stores.

For those publishers who do sell to libraries, contract terms, cost, and content availability are not optimal. Publishers use varying business models, complicating the library purchase of e-books. (Each of the big six publishers uses a different model, and Simon & Schuster’s model is to not sell to libraries at all.) Some publishers sell e-books to libraries for a limited time or for a limited number of loans, requiring libraries to buy the e-book again if they want to retain the copy. Other publishers charge libraries three to four times (or even more) the consumer price

for a library e-book. Still others place an embargo on the most recent or popular titles in their catalog, so libraries cannot purchase the titles at the time when they are most in demand. Such business models frustrate readers who do not understand why the print book is available at the library, but not the e-book.

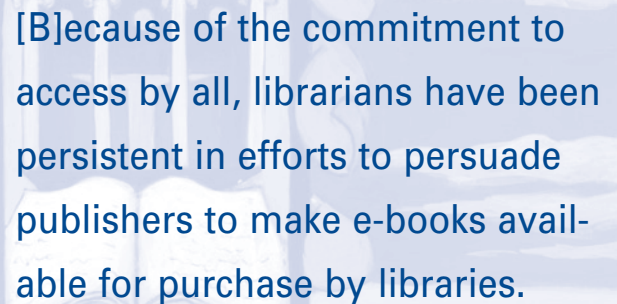
At the same time, because of the commitment to access by all, librarians have been persistent in efforts to persuade publishers to make e-books available for purchase by libraries. Libraries need access to e-books at a reasonable price to ensure that digital content in this form will be available to everyone in the communities they serve. Librarians know and appreciate the many publishers who have found ways to meet these challenges and continue to sell e-books to libraries. Libraries will pay reasonable prices and will continue to comply with the terms of the legal agreements they sign. Librarians want publishers to meet the challenges posed by the explosion of digital content. Libraries want to continue to be their customers. ALA and librarians across the country, however, do not accept the proposition that an e-book price that is many times the print price is justifiable or fair. This does not make sense. ALA will continue its efforts to persuade publishers that selling to libraries is in their—and everyone's—best interest. We encourage publishers to develop innovative approaches and to work with libraries to test pilot programs.

Although availability of e-books is the primary concern, libraries, and sometimes publishers, face other problems. Interoperability between e-readers and file formats is one source of frustration. Some file formats are proprietary or designed to tie a reader to a specific e-reader; for example, Nook users might not be able to download a Kindle book. To complicate matters, e-book distributors who store and provide access to e-books for libraries have varying interfaces. Some are not well integrated in the library's online catalog where users search and find library resources. Many library users who try to download library e-books from various vendor web sites and interfaces to their e-readers (with different file formats) require personal assistance. For people with print disabilities such as dyslexia or low or very limited vision, the majority of file formats and e-readers are not accessible. This is ironically at a time when digital technology, if properly designed and

implemented, would increase disabled user access to information by leaps and bounds.

Libraries also are concerned with user privacy since readers and reader behavior can be so easily monitored, tracked, and stored. In the longer term, libraries are concerned about e-book preservation. E-book titles are much more likely to become obsolete and must be migrated to new formats to persist.

Yet, there is a tremendous strategic opportunity available to both publishers and libraries. The advances in technology should enable more possibilities to succeed than are recognized today. If publishers and librarians do not find ways to meet the challenges, some other entity will. Librarians nationwide are increasingly impatient and dissatisfied with the status quo, and the ALA will take more aggressive steps to address these pressing concerns. Our preference is to work together with publishers toward a solution that will satisfy their need for a financially viable business model while providing readers and library users with the access they expect.



[B]ecause of the commitment to access by all, librarians have been persistent in efforts to persuade publishers to make e-books available for purchase by libraries.

There has been progress. Three of the big six publishers—Hachette, Penguin, and Macmillan—have initiated pilot library e-book programs. These are steps in the right direction. Innovative endeavors by cutting-edge libraries continue to arise and expand. But libraries must be realistic. In this time of exploration and experimentation, not every development will be in favor of libraries and not every new initiative or project will succeed.

We at ALA appreciate the efforts of Tom Allen and Tina Jordan of the Association of American Publishers (AAP) for their work to enable us to meet

with publishers in AAP forums and with individual publishers. These meetings have been frank, cordial, and productive discussions that have fostered greater understanding of the challenges. They also have helped to clarify areas of disagreement and led to a shared commitment to continue to communicate.

The world is in the midst of a revolution in digital publishing in which everything is changing and becoming more complex and interconnected. The e-book path from author to library involves multiple intermediate entities, such as agents, distributors, and retailers, whose concerns must be included in order to effectively address publisher-library issues. Technological advances provide, at least in theory, the potential for much improved library service in a world increasingly dominated by profit-driven information providers. Libraries and publishers must figure out how to convert this theory into practice by working together to leverage our strengths. For instance, the “buy it now” button option appearing in some libraries is generally viewed by librarians as an acceptable development. What other innovations might promote the common goal of bringing authors and readers together? As librarians, we will continue to seek ways to promote the discoverability and sales of books, in whatever format, that also advances what is best for America’s communities. 🌊



Maureen Sullivan is currently president of the American Library Association. She is a consultant to numerous libraries and a professor in the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

She is a past president of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and in 2010 was named by ACRL as the Academic/Research Librarian of the Year.



Portland Public Library, Congress Street, ca. 1900. Designed in the Romanesque revival style and built in 1888, it was a gift to the city from philanthropist James Baxter. The main library remained in the Baxter Building until 1978.



Portland Public Library, 5 Monument Square. The main library moved to this building in 1978. In 2010, extensive renovation and remodeling, designed by Scott Simons Architects, which added a larger computer center, a larger contained children's area and a new teen library, additional meeting rooms, a new auditorium and new gallery space.