

Publisher Limits Number of eBooks to Be Sold to Public Libraries

Public libraries are facing yet another hurdle. MacMillan, one of the big-five publishers, has placed an embargo on libraries for ebook purchases. Ebooks are books that readers can access and read via the internet. This means that the wait list for that bestseller you put on hold will be much longer.

Over the past few years, ebook acquisitions have changed dramatically. We might think of these changes as occurring in three distinct phases:

- Initially, libraries could purchase multiple copies of ebooks and have access to those titles forever. The purchase price was approximately \$84 per copy.
- Later, libraries could purchase multiple copies at a lower initial cost, but lost access to the title after two years. At that time, they would have to repurchase a title, dependent on current interest in the book. This system was good in that patrons could have access to the new title within a reasonable amount of time. The downside was that only continually popular titles would be repurchased, causing an issue for authors with moderate popularity. This shift has fundamentally changed the kinds of books being offered to library patrons, giving priority to popularity without consideration of quality.
- Now we are in a situation in which libraries are either prohibited from purchasing any copies of an ebook for the first eight weeks following release or select libraries can only purchase one copy.

There are a number of implications for libraries in these changing policies. Initially, patrons will either have to wait unreasonable amounts of time to check out an ebook or purchase a copy of their own, which creates a fundamental inequity among readers. This system further marginalizes already disadvantaged members of our community, most notably those who could not otherwise afford to purchase a copy of a title. It further disadvantages those with disabilities because ebooks are adaptable for use by those with visual impairment, learning issues, dyslexia, and fine motor limitations. This limitation directly contradicts the mission of public libraries to serve patrons of all demographics and income brackets. As libraries pay three to four times what an individual reader would pay for a title, the argument that publishers are not gaining adequate return is unreasonable. Additionally, these titles often appear on discount ebook websites for as little as \$.99, further negating the argument that libraries unfairly undermine the income potential for publishers.

The long-term consequences of these changes are equally concerning. Under this system it is likely that only blockbuster books will be held by libraries in ebook form. This will fundamentally limit access to a wide assortment of reading material for library patrons. So frequently what is popular is not necessarily what a generation would select to represent itself.

According to Debi Stears, Collection Development Manager for the Washoe County Library System, “Last year 16,870 Washoe County residents checked out 489,642 ebooks and downloadable audiobooks from our collection. We now check out more adult fiction titles electronically than from the shelves of all our branches combined. This year almost 42% of our materials budget will go towards the purchase of licenses for ebooks. Just a few years ago those

licenses were permanent, and we could continue to lend out those titles year after year. Publishers are now offering temporary licenses, typically expiring after two years. As licenses expire we will face difficult choices about which expired titles we will be able to renew.”

To illustrate this issue, consider a problem currently being faced by the library. At this time there are 107 holds for Nora Roberts’s new book, *Rise of Magicks*. The library was allowed to purchase only one copy. At this rate, only a few patrons will be able to read for the first eight weeks.

If you are as concerned about this issue as we are, I urge you to make your voices heard. Go to www.ebooksforall.org, sign the petition, and let publishers know that you value equitable distribution of reading materials for all readers.

Sincerely,

Wayne Holland

Chair, Washoe County Library Board of Trustees
On behalf of the Washoe County Library Board of Trustees