

Literature Review

Our team then conducted a literature Review to get a better understanding of the research that has already been done, and other content relevant to the people we would be interviewing. While we conducted our literature review, we were recruiting participants, finding our field sites, and compiling the questions for our semi structured interviews.

Public Libraries have a long history of offering innovation in digital versions of traditional collections. “The New York public Library has offered downloadable e-books, e-audiobooks, e-music and e-video since 2004.” (Platt, 2011, p. 247), which predates the commercial launch of the Kindle by three years. Most of the Big Five publishers did not even begin selling eBooks to libraries until the early 2010’s. In fact, only 20 of the top 30 Adult Fiction and Non-Fiction titles were available in e-book format to the library market in March 2011, despite being liable for purchase. (Platt, 2011, p.252). In 2012, the first eBook that could be lent to user loaded on a kindle device were launched by Overdrive, if the library patron laded the book through the Amazon website.

Much research focused on digital material use in public libraries from 2011-2012 focused on publisher willingness to sell their catalogs to libraries and under which models. Additionally, in 2014 the “digital user experience in the library world frustrates people into the arms of retailers”. (Davis, 2014, p.65) with 23% of people who tried to download an eBook failing in 2011.(Mangan, 2017, p.19)

One constant of the past 20 years has been the debate between resource allocation in libraries between print collections and digital collections as “some argued for the purity of the physical book as a hallmark of the traditional library experience...” (Larose, 2021, p. 4). And while digital landing is now considered a vital part of nearly every library’s mission, “recent reading habits study by the PEW Research Centre as well as records of book sales from retailers suggests there is still a preference for print materials by the public.” (Larose, 2021, p. 9). In more recent surveys and interviews, researchers note “” aesthetics’ and ‘romantic’....memories relates to personal reading history.” (Spjeldnaes and Karlsen, 2024, p. 4814) and that “Being in favor of digital books for daily reading does not exclude the love of paper and analogue reading” (Spjeldnaes and Karlsen, 2024, p. 4814).

While the initial push for digital lending in libraries focused on eBooks services, in observation of the marketplace and in accordance with their community’s needs, demand has again shifted. As eBooks have plateaued in popularity (Crosby 2019, 607), audiobooks use has begun rapid growth.

While publishers may only recently be marketing and publishing their full catalogs in the audiobook format, libraries have been collecting these material for lending for years, from cassette tapes to compact discs, to stand-alone MP3 players called Playaways. On a similar path

was Audible, originally known as the Audible Mobile Player, which required items to be downloaded from a specific site and loaded onto a proprietary player. (Goncalves and Silvia, 2024).

While costs of acquiring eBooks have long been a problem, as noted in a 2014 study finding that academic eBooks cost nearly twice as much as their print equivalent (Larose, 2021, p. 4) and again when finding “a single electronic copy of Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* costs libraries US\$90, several times what a print copy would cost.” (Mangan, 2017, p. 17). More recently, in 2021 after finding that “some e-books are 20 times more expensive than the print equivalent, and many are three to ten times more expensive,” frustrated librarians used the hashtag #ebookso to share information about these price disparities (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 4) and “it quickly became clear that libraries in all sectors and geographical regions were facing similar challenges in securing access to e-books for their patrons” (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 2)

Libraries are also having trouble navigating licensing terms that vary by publisher. An increasing number of publishers primarily offer their content through metered access, where libraries purchase a certain number of checkouts, or time period in which they can offer a digital item to their users (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 257). Not only does this model cost more for each circulation than libraries can typically get from a physical book, but these terms also require extra staff time to manage books whose license has expired and determine whether to repurchase an item (Larose, 2021, p. 4). Library vendors may also add or remove titles without notice in many vendor agreements (Larose, 2021, p. 4). Libraries are adapting to these shifting demands while facing shrinking budgets (Larose, 2021, p. 5). However, unlimited simultaneous access that allows unrestricted checkouts is the most expensive model for libraries to support (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 257).

Alternatively, models in which library users have access to a wide catalog but are charged a fee from US\$0.50 to above US\$44.99 also have their drawbacks. (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 257). Then there is the model of one copy, one user that follows that of physical items. (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 257).

As a result, in Ireland one “major cause of dissatisfaction with public libraries’ digital content amongst its users is the selection of e-book titles” (Mangan, 2017, p. 16) and that the “selection of e-book titles” (Mangan, 2017, p. 16) and that the “selection of e-book titles provided by a public library cannot match that of print titles but this is not only due to the disparity of the budget allocated to e-book titles in relation to print titles (Mangan, 2017, p. 16). In Toronto, “popular titles often have several holds and long wait times.” (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 257).

The dissatisfaction with availability of titles is not limited to one demographic, with “the opinions canvassed from older people regarding Irish public libraries was a desire for a greater variety of e-books.” (Mangan, 2017, p. 18).

There are many ways that libraries have tried to innovate not only in their own building, but between institutions to stretch budgets and meet local demand. For example. Irish Libraries have a national contract with the vendor Borrow Box with the Irish government investing €400,00 in eBooks from 2019-2020 (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 4). However, even with that investment “users nationwide have access to the service, most of the most popular titles are consistently on loan” (Mangan, 2017, p. 29) and “e-book usage soared by up to 300%.” (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 4). However, beyond the 30 most popular titles, more of the backlist titles are available, but the app displays most popular titles first. (Mangan, 2017, p. 29).

With the rapid adoption has come an increase in library holds. Many libraries are changing their holds ratios (number of copies purchased for a set number of holds on a title) to better fit their budget (Gordon et al. 2014) (Ridenour and Jeong, 2016, p. 145). There are many angles to investigate the ways libraries might analyze the ways their collections are being used from examining whether or not lending periods should be the same for all types of materials and finding that “Despite the increased consumption speed of reading, data collected showed no statistical difference between circulation time of e-books and audiobooks. This could be because listening has distinct advantages among them, the ability of users to “read” audiobooks while multitasking” (Ridenour and Jeong, 2016, p. 141) or correlation between length of books and wait times of hold lists (Ridenour and Jeong, 2016, p. 141). Simplifying the process of obtaining a library card may entice new users to access library materials. (Larose, 2021, p. 8)

Libraries are well aware of the costs associated with quality digitization and understand that more expensive features in digital books will add cost, but many libraries find that eBooks are often PDF scans of physical books. (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 3) despite publishers’ instance that the rising costs of digital materials are based on ‘enhanced functionality’ of e-books, and the work that goes into constantly editing them and keeping them up to date, as the reasons why the price disparities exist.” (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 3). They also found that the cost of eBooks produced by local publishers were closer to those of the print equivalent. International publishers’ eBooks had a much higher disparity between print and eBook costs (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 4). The librarians maintain that while they want to pay their share, they wonder what is fair when “the Publishers Association reported a 14% increase in profits in the academic publishing market for the UK alone” in 2022 (Anderson and McCauley, 2022, p. 6) Research has also gone into ways to negotiate with publishers based on statistics. “The library [Toronto] spends up to US \$10,700 per year on metered access e-books that are never opened by users.” (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 255) and “These cost implications would be even higher when the post-checkout

non-usage of e-books and e-audiobooks of other lending models are considered as 62 per cent of unopened e-book and 95 per cent of unopened e-audiobooks in 2017 were attributed to one copy/one user lending models.” (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 261). With the increase in popularity of digital lending services, so has the number of checkouts of digital materials that have never been used. (Lieu and Zhao, 2019, p. 255)

Increasingly, as library staff become overwhelmed by the impossibility of meeting demand with their budgets, library staff issue pleas to library users to better follow a set of best practices. However, the same study that established that between 10 and 15% of library digital items that are checked out do not even get opened also theorized that these same users wait until the checkout time is passed and items are automatically renewed rather than more provocatively returning items to make them available to other users.

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