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Public libraries face digital lending crisis says local library?s CEO

In libraries, large and small, urban and rural, access to digital content like e-books and e-audiobooks has become an indispensable way library users learn, work, and interact. But as demand has skyrocketed, the price public libraries pay for that digital material is increasingly unsustainable.

Libraries are charged up to four times more for an e-book than if you, as a consumer, were to purchase it. Not only are libraries forced to pay such exorbitant prices, but they also don't own the material after purchasing it. Libraries are forced to license their titles, meaning access to these books expires after 12 to 24 months (or a certain arbitrary number of checkouts), which then forces libraries to repurchase e-books and e-audiobooks over and over again to meet demand. This is why the wait time can be months for very popular titles.

The Urban Libraries Council has identified this as ?the e-book crisis,? and together with libraries across North America are advocating for change. Libraries need ?The Big Five? publishers ? Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, Simon & Schuster, MacMillan, and HarperCollins ? to work with us to find a sustainable solution.

?Publishers, authors, and public libraries should be partners, but with the exponential growth in digital content demand, libraries are unable to provide and sustain access under current licensing models. The moment is ripe for large publishers to meet with libraries across North America, to hear our concerns, and address them, so we can continue building a mutually beneficial future for literacy and reading,? said Brooks Rainwater, President and CEO of Urban Libraries Council.

Libraries want to better serve their patrons, not gain unrestricted access ? but so far, the Big Five publishers have not worked with libraries for fairer terms. No model will be perfect, and publishing is a business. Authors should be paid fairly. But that does not mean libraries must be treated unfairly.

What does this mean for patrons of the Shelburne Public Library?

Wait times for e-content in Libby by Overdrive will remain very long, and while Hoopla provides books, movies, and TV series instantly, its pay-per-use model is increasingly unsustainable. As a result, library administration has made the difficult decision to reduce borrowing limits from five items per month to four per month in Hoopla, and may need to decrease this further in the future.

How can you help us maximize our digital collection?

Return items early when you can, so more people can read the book while we have a license for it.

? When you see a hold available, check it out right away or schedule it to deliver later if you don't have time to read it.

? Use the preview function in Hoopla to determine if you want a book instead of borrowing it only to discover it wasn't what you expected, because every borrow costs the library money.

Libraries work hard to provide access for everyone. At Shelburne Public Library, we are committed to evolving our services to meet the ever-changing needs of our patrons. That's one of the reasons libraries stay relevant in the digital age. We know providing free access to both physical and digital content is invaluable to our patrons. As we continue working on finding a balance, please have patience with us and, most importantly, keep supporting your library by borrowing books, attending programs, and getting a library card.

-This column was written by Shannon McGrady, CEO of the Shelburne Public Library, with credit to the research and advocacy of the Urban Libraries Council.