

Equitable Public Access to E-Books and E-Audiobooks

Executive Summary

Strathcona County Library (SCL) is committed to providing access to all kinds of resources in whatever format works best for our patrons, whether that is print, e-books, or e-audiobook format. SCL and the Canadian Urban Libraries Council are advocating for better public access to digital content and for better pricing for digital content for public libraries. Five multinational publishers are limited Canadian libraries' access to digital content, and when the content is available, making it prohibitively expensive for libraries to acquire. This is standing in the way of equitable public access to digital content for seniors, new Canadians, lower income families, and youth. Support is requested from Council in seeking changes for better public access to digital content and for better pricing.

Background

Digital content is the fastest growing area of borrowing in public libraries, and usage continues to increase year over year. However, multinational publishers' restrictive lending models and high prices create a significant challenge to public libraries being able to provide universal access to digital content.

Not only does this mean longer wait times for patrons, it also creates a barrier for patrons who cannot afford to purchase digital content, and patrons with visual and learning disabilities who may use or rely on e-books for the ease of changing font size.

Five major publishers control 80 per cent of the U.S. trade publishing industry: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. These publishers already charge public libraries excessively high prices for e-books. In some cases, libraries are charged three to five times the consumer price. Now there are more and more restrictive lending models being implemented that jeopardize the ability of public libraries to offer universal access. By way of example, Canadian author Louise Penny's book *Kingdom of the Blind* is available to libraries for \$13 as a paperback, \$22 in hard cover and \$60 in e-book form. The \$60 cost would allow the e-book to be checked out 52 times or for 2 years - whichever happens first, without the library 'owning' the item. A paper edition would be expected to last 3 to 4 years at a substantially reduced cost. The book is currently not available to Canadian libraries in e-audiobook format due to exclusive licensing models that are not offered to public libraries.

E-audiobooks are an obvious choice for English language learners and for Canadians with low literacy skills, but public libraries cannot purchase many titles in this format due to high prices and exclusive licensing to subscription services.

Studies have shown that library users are engaged readers who are more likely to buy books than non-library users. Libraries support the marketing of e-books and e-audiobooks (and their authors) through events, programs, reading lists, and library communications. Libraries are a critical connectors between authors and readers. For example, at the Library's recent Fall Feast of Words, attendance at all seven author readings was 407 people, and members of the Friends of

the Strathcona County Library Society volunteered to man the book sales tables after each event. We fundamentally believe in supporting the publishing industry and authors, yet public libraries are also have a role in leveling the playing field for people who cannot afford to purchase content.

We Need Your Support

The library community has attempted to work with major publishers to develop a purchasing model that works for both sides for over a decade, but with little success. Our Library wants to work with the Federal government to find a solution that would benefit library patrons and Canadian authors so that public libraries can buy and lend digital content.

We want to add Strathcona County Council's voice to that of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC), the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), the American Library Association (ALA), public library leaders, and other key stakeholders who have joined together in opposition to restrictive policies and high prices that restricts access to digital content.

Canadian municipalities who have passed a motion of support for this advocacy effort include:

- Barrie
- Burlington
- Cambridge
- Edmonton
- Kitchener
- Markham
- Milton
- Mississauga
- Okanagan
- Ottawa
- Pickering
- Richmond
- St. Catharines
- Surrey
- Toronto
- Vaughan