

How American Public Libraries Are Making E-books Available to Patrons

Heather L. Tiffany

Valdosta State University

### Abstract

As e-reading devices grow in popularity, owners of e-readers turn to public libraries as a source for additional e-books. Recent library literature has often focused on the many challenges of successfully incorporating e-books into the library collection, and yet a 2010 ALA report indicates that approximately 5,400 public libraries offer e-books. Clearly, a number of public libraries are incorporating e-books with at least some degree of success. This quantitative study will focus on American public libraries with service populations ranging from less than 5,000 to more than 100,000, and will mark the first time that public libraries with populations of less than 25,000 are included in studies of e-book use. Examination of 200 randomly selected library websites will show what e-book vendors these libraries are using as well as how e-books are being promoted to library patrons. Although the main focus will be downloadable e-books, the study will also include web-based e-books and e-reader lending programs.

### How American Public Libraries Are Making E-books Available to Patrons

The 2010 State of America's Public Libraries Report indicated that "about 5,400 public libraries now offer e-books" (American, 2010, p. 24). Currently, however, libraries across the country are facing serious deficits and budget cuts. Those libraries which do not provide e-books may point to shrinking budgets to justify their decision. At the same time, many libraries which offer e-books might justify their e-book program with patron demand as well as high circulation statistics (Ellis 2011; Genco 2009; McKnight, C., Dearnley, J., & Morris, A. 2008). The purpose of this study is to discover how American public libraries are making e-books available to their patrons. In particular, the study will show which vendors libraries tend to use, which publishers libraries directly purchase e-books from, and the methods libraries use to promote and make patrons aware of e-books in their collections. The study will also determine whether libraries, both e-book lenders and those that do not own or lease any e-books, direct their patrons to sources of free e-books.

### **Literature Review**

E-books have been a source of interest to librarians for more than 20 years, with increasing attention over the past decade. As patron demand has grown, an interest in studies to determine user satisfaction with downloadable e-books and web-based e-books has increased. A number of libraries have experimented with loaning out e-reading devices; however, only academic institutions issued formal reports of this practice. Many of these studies of e-reader loans focused on Amazon's Kindle (Clark 2009; Rodzilla 2009), but other institutions loaned devices such as the Sony Reader (Behler 2009) or iPod touch (Mallett 2010).

While many studies exist for the use of e-books in academic institutions, very few studies address e-books in public libraries. In addition, most studies of e-book use in public libraries took place outside of the United States. Duncan (2010) presents results of an e-book survey

completed by members of an Australian public library, while McKnight, Dearnley, & Morris (2008) present user responses to public library e-books in Essex, UK. Although these and similar studies provided interesting data, they are not completely applicable to American public libraries because copyright laws, consumer habits, cultures, and other factors differ. One particularly important study conducted in the United States presented the results of a survey taken by 41 participating urban public libraries, including such data as vendors, circulation models, and funding (Genco 2009). A work by Polanka (2011) contains an entire chapter focused on e-books and public libraries, including circulation statistics for large e-lending libraries, discussions of e-book vendors, and a case study for a Kindle lending program.

The review of the literature indicates that more studies are needed to determine the use of e-books by public libraries in the United States. Although the study by Genco (2009) addressed issues pertinent to e-book loans in public libraries, there are gaps in that study. In particular, of the 41 responding libraries, none served populations of less than 25,000 and only three respondents had a materials budget of less than \$900K. Studies need to be conducted to determine what is being done by the smaller public libraries not yet covered in any study. Libraries with a service area of less than 25,000 account for approximately 78% of all public libraries in the United States. It is clear that the use of e-books in public libraries will not be properly represented until these smaller libraries are also included in the literature.

### **Definitions**

E-books are books produced in an electronic format. For the purpose of this study, e-books will not include electronic audio books. Downloadable e-books are those that can be saved or downloaded to an e-reading device or computer, while web-based e-books are those that must be viewed in an internet browser. Web-based e-books usually include any e-reference

material but may also include non-reference titles. E-book vendors, also known as aggregators or providers, are those companies that provide e-books from various publishers to libraries, with books being either leased or owned. The vendor usually provides a platform for viewing, checking out, or downloading titles. In some cases, e-books may also be purchased outright from the publisher, but these books usually do not come with software or support for patron checkout. E-readers or e-reading devices are those devices on which an e-book can be read. Dedicated e-readers (such as the Kindle or Nook) are those devices intended exclusively for reading e-books, but e-reading devices can also include those used for other functions, such as an iPad, personal digital assistant (PDA), or mobile phone (Peck 2010; Perenson 2010).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to determine what vendors libraries are using to obtain e-books, whether vendor types differ by service population size, whether most e-books are being obtained through consortia, and how libraries make patrons aware of available e-book titles. Because data will be divided by service population size, libraries wishing to start an e-book program will be able to determine what vendors and methods have been successfully used by libraries of similar size. This study will identify patterns in e-book use, as well as any unique methods being used by individual libraries. As a descriptive quantitative study, data will be analyzed to discover patterns and similarities for libraries of similar size as well as libraries overall. The study's value to the field of library and information science is to present a clear picture of e-book use in public libraries of all sizes. In addition, the study will be useful to individual practitioners thinking about beginning an e-book collection at their library by providing examples of vendors, programs, and methods being used by similar-sized libraries.

### **Methodology**

Data will be collected from 200 public libraries in the United States. Fifty libraries will be chosen from each of four population categories: libraries serving a population of less than 5,000, libraries serving a population of 5,000-24,999, libraries serving a population of 25,000-99,999, and libraries serving a population of more than 100,000. A list of libraries will be compiled from the results of the most recent Public Libraries Survey located on the Institute of Museum and Library Services website (Institute 2010). This publication can be organized by population category, after which libraries will be selected randomly from within their population category using systematic sampling.

Data for each library will be located using the individual library's website and online catalog. The majority of public libraries have a website, and if an individual library does not have a site, the system or consortium it belongs to probably does. In addition, if a library offers e-books, they will be extremely likely to make sure this information is clearly accessible on their site. Because many libraries subscribe to Overdrive as a state or regional consortium, group Overdrive sites will be examined, as each contains a list of member libraries. Similar searches will be conducted for e-book vendors accessible to a library only through a state or consortium. If a website or data cannot be located for a particular library, the library director or library manager will be contacted via e-mail or phone. Each library website will be examined for:

- An e-book category with links to various vendors as well as patron instructions
- Downloadable e-books
- Web-based e-books
- Specific e-book vendors used to lease and mediate content
- E-reader lending programs

- Catalog links to e-books
- Website links to sources of free e-books (not owned by library)

Because most data will be located without the need to wait for librarian response, the data collection will not take long, and is proposed to occur during June 2011.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to identify patterns for the various population categories, a chart will be employed. A sample is given in Table 1, but categories will likely change as additional e-book vendors are identified or if it is determined that libraries purchase directly from specific publishers rather than vendors.

Table 1

#### *Sample Data Collection Chart*

<b>Library Name</b>	<b>Population Category</b>	<b>Overdrive</b>	<b>NetLibrary</b>	<b>Ebrary</b>	<b>MyiLibrary</b>	<b>Web-based e-books</b>	<b>E-books listed in catalog</b>
Huntsville-Madison County Public Library	100K+	X	X				X

Once data has been collected for all libraries, the chart will be examined for patterns. Specifically, the chart will be used to determine whether each population category has any correlations. For example, a population category may be examined for presence of e-books in any form as well as the most used e-book vendor(s). Population categories will also be compared to each other to determine the most commonly used e-book vendors, the prevalence of incorporating e-books into the library catalog and any other useful and applicable patterns or findings.

### **Conclusion**

Because studies of e-book use in American public libraries have been extremely limited, it is essential for a larger study to be carried out. Since this study will cover libraries of all population sizes, it will likely provide useful data for smaller libraries throughout the country. It is hoped that this study will have wide benefits for all public libraries, both those with current e-book collections and those without. Current e-book owning libraries may identify new vendors, publishers, or methods that would be of use. Libraries without any e-books will be able to determine which vendors or methods might be most useful to them based on data obtained from libraries with similar service populations. In addition, librarians might be able to use the data in this study to present a better case for the inclusion of e-books in the collection to a library board or funding agency.



## References

- American Library Association (2010). *The State of America's Libraries – 2010*. Retrieved from [http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/mediapresscenter/americaslibraries/ALA\\_Report\\_2010-ATI001-NEW1.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/mediapresscenter/americaslibraries/ALA_Report_2010-ATI001-NEW1.pdf)
- Behler, A. (2009). E-readers in action. *American Libraries*, 40(10), 56-59.
- Clark, D. T. (2009). Lending Kindle e-book readers: First results from the Texas A&M University project. *Collection Building*, 28(4), 146-149.
- Duncan, R. (2010). Ebooks and beyond: The challenge for public libraries. *APLIS*, 23(2), 44-55.
- Ellis, J. (2011, February 25). E-books are a hot story at libraries. *USA Today*, p. 3A.
- Genco, B. A. (2009, August). *It's been geometric! Documenting the growth and acceptance of ebooks in America's urban public libraries*. Paper presented at World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, Milan, Italy. Retrieved from <http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/papers/ifla75/212-genco-en.pdf>
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (2010). *Public libraries survey: Fiscal year 2008*. (IMLS-2010-PLS-02). Retrieved from <http://harvester.census.gov/imls/publib.asp>
- Mallett, E. (2010). A screen too far? Findings from an e-book reader pilot. *Serials*, 23(2), 140-144.
- McKnight, C., Dearnley, J., & Morris, A. (2008). Making e-books available through public libraries: Some user reactions. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 40(1), 31-43.
- Pawlowski, A. (2011). E-books in the public library. In S. Polanka (Ed.), *No Shelf Required: E-books in Libraries*. (pp. 55-74). Chicago: American Library Association.
- Peck, G. A. (2010). The brave new world of e-publishing. *Seybold Report*, 10(4), 2-5.
- Perenson, M. J. (2010). The e-reader wars. *PC World*, 28(10), 12-13.

Rodzilla, J. (2009). The portable e-book: Issues with e-book reading devices in the library.

*Serials* 22(3), S6-S10.