

Not slowing down quite yet: eBooks in public libraries

By Linda Woodcock.

This 2014 BC Library Conference session was a fact-filled review of the current state of the eBook in public libraries. eBooks have presented libraries with two significant challenges, that of availability of eBooks for public library purchase and that of making eBooks accessible and discoverable. Christina de Castell (Vancouver Public Library) has been closely involved with the efforts to improve the options for eBook delivery in public libraries through her work on the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) eBound project and the ReadersFirst organization. She covered four aspects of the topic: the growth in eBook usage, the outcome of the CULC eBound project, the changes to eBook sales models and improvements to accessibility and discoverability of eBooks.

The title of the session stems from the fact that though the industry has noted a slow -down in the rate of eBook growth, the library world, which tends to lag behind industry, is not slowing down just yet. Growth in eBook use at VPL has continued to be strong with eBook circulation up by 85% in 2013 over 2012. Other Canadian urban libraries are experiencing a similar rate of growth. In response, CULC libraries have more than doubled investment in eBooks/eAudio. De Castell noted, "device ownership is the key to use" and shared some statistics around ownership and corresponding readership of eBooks. Canadians own devices suitable for reading eBooks in large numbers, with 63% owning a smartphone, 34-42% owning a tablet, and 29% owning an ereader. (Media Tech Monitor 2013, BookNet Canada 2014). As device ownership grows so too does eBook readership, with 19% of Canadians having read an eBook in 2012, and 28% of Americans reading an eBook in 2013. (PEW Jan 2014).

De Castell then turned to a review of the eBook market, looking at publishing trends for digital versus print and at the very different models that publishers have adopted for the sale of eBooks to libraries. Of particular note is the fact that the availability of the publishers' print titles lists in digital format is still quite limited. Only 19% of Canadian publishers offered all of their print titles in digital format, with 28% of them offering as little as 1-25% of their print list in digital format. Turning to the nature of the market for sales

of eBooks to public libraries, De Castell reported that 61% of Canadian publishers sell eBook content to public libraries, with OverDrive and Ingram the dominant distributors.

"Advocacy work has been making a big difference," said de Castell. Looking at the big six publishers, significant progress has been made in the last two years. In 2012, only 2 of the 6 were selling eBooks to public libraries, whereas in 2014 all of the big six are offering eBooks to public libraries. Yet, the big six are still asking libraries to pay a heavy premium for eBooks, especially for perpetual use. Random House offers eBooks on a one copy/one user perpetual use licence but at triple the retail price for the eBook. Macmillan allows only a finite number of checkouts and charges libraries quadruple the retail price. These terms for acquiring digital publications present significant challenges for public libraries attempting to shift their collection development practices in order to serve users in the digital age.

In addition to the budgetary challenges, libraries have been tackling the technological challenges of discoverability and accessibility of eBooks. The CULC eBound project was aimed at finding a made-in-Canada solution to the issues around acquisition and discovery of eBooks in Canadian public libraries. A joint publisher-library task force was struck and an RFI and RFP were issued. Unfortunately after months of negotiations with potential vendors it was concluded that the project was not economically viable.

Other advocacy efforts have born promising results. ReadersFirst is a coalition of library staff from around the world. Their goal is to advocate for improved access to eBooks in the face both unequal access to the eBook market and a cumbersome user experience due to eBooks being organized and accessed according to who distributes them rather than by their genre or their subject matter. Calling for vendor standards, ReadersFirst applied pressure around three main principles: integrating access to eBooks in the library's main catalogue, improving the ease of downloading, and compatibility with all devices. In answer to this, OverDrive has now made an API available that enables libraries to integrate eBooks with their ILS catalogue or discovery layer.

EBSCO, Ingram and Gale are also making an API available. ReadersFirst has also published a guide which scores eBook providers across a number of criteria. As far as opening up the door to wider access to eBooks, a number of new providers are now on the scene including 3M Cloud Library, BiblioDigital and CanTook Station. More libraries are lending ereader devices, introducing this new format to the full spectrum of library users.

De Castell's presentation covered a lot of ground, clearly and concisely, illustrating both the challenges eBooks present to public libraries and the progress that has been made towards improving access to digital publications. Watch for further updates on the blog [Uncovering eBooks](#).

Further reading:

BookNet Canada report: [The State of Digital Publishing in Canada 2013](#) (PDF)

CULC news release: [Public Library eBook Lending Initiative – RFP Ends Without a Pilot](#) (PDF)

CULC White paper: [eBooks in 2014: Access and Licensing at Canadian Public Libraries](#) (PDF) by Christina de Castell. (This updates the White Paper that was originally published by CULC/CBUC in August 2011.)

[ReadersFirst Guide to Library E-Book Vendors](#) (PDF).

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