

Kelly M. Davis

From: Bruce Gay
Sent: Saturday, September 20, 2025 8:43 AM
To: Kelly M. Davis
Subject: FW: [WPLC Announcements] The Price and Politics of Ebooks and Audiobooks | Did You Know?
Attachments: ATT00001.txt

Can you include this in the Board agenda next meeting? I think it's a nice overview of some of the ebook issues.



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From: Announcements <announcements-bounces@lists.wplclists.info> **On Behalf Of** wplc-info--- via Announcements
Sent: Friday, September 19, 2025 12:42 PM
To: announcements@wplclists.info
Subject: [WPLC Announcements] The Price and Politics of Ebooks and Audiobooks | Did You Know?

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A version of this message appears on the WPLC Blog this week:

In this installment of the "Did You Know?" series from WPLC, we want to spotlight some information that library staff might be able to use with patrons who have questions related to long wait times, especially in Wisconsin's Digital Library/Libby.

"Why is the wait time so long for the book I want to read?"

"Why are books #1-5 in this series available, but #6-10 are missing?"

"Why can't the library just buy ebooks from Amazon like I can?"

These are some of the most common questions heard from library patrons regarding Wisconsin's Digital Library. Although the collection contains over 350,000 items, the current average waiting period for items is over 80 days. It is important to understand the many factors at play that affect prices and availability of digital books for libraries. In this post, we provide an overview for readers.

Ebooks and Digital Audiobooks cost more for libraries than for individual consumers because of how licensing models work in the publishing industry. Here's a clear breakdown of why this happens:

1. **Libraries Don't "Buy" Ebooks — They License Them**

When a consumer buys an ebook, they get a personal license for their own use, usually indefinitely.

Libraries, however, must purchase special licenses that allow them to lend the ebook to multiple users (one at a time). These licenses are more expensive and often come with usage restrictions.

2. **Publisher Licensing Models Are More Restrictive**

Most publishers offer libraries one of the following models:

One Copy/One User: Only one person can borrow the ebook at a time. Prices are often 3–5x the consumer price.

Metered Access: The license expires after a set number of checkouts (e.g. 26 borrows) or after a certain time (e.g. 2 years).

Simultaneous Use: Allows multiple checkouts at once, but the price is often considerably more expensive than other models

These models are meant to mimic the limitations of physical books, where wear and tear or availability would limit access.

3. **Revenue Concerns from Publishers**

Publishers worry that:

Library lending might cannibalize sales (e.g., people borrowing instead of buying).

Digital books don't degrade like physical books, so they could be circulated an unlimited amount of times without needing replacement.

To compensate, publishers charge significantly higher prices to libraries to recoup the perceived lost revenue.

4. **Control Over Access and Data**

With digital books, publishers can:

Control lending terms.

Track usage data.

Adjust pricing and terms over time.

This level of control allows them to charge libraries more dynamically — something they can't do as easily with physical books. Amazon owns Audible, the subscription audiobook service for consumers and has negotiated exclusive rights to many titles from popular authors. What does this mean for libraries? We are unable to acquire these titles at all as digital audiobooks.

Why This Matters

- Access Inequality: Libraries struggle to afford digital collections, especially smaller ones.
- Budget Strain: Libraries can't stretch their budgets as far with high ebook prices.
- Public Good vs. Private Profit: Raises ethical questions about equitable access to information.

What Can Libraries and Patrons Do?

Follow Groups that Advocate and Educate:

Readers First: [ReadersFirst](#) is an organization of nearly 300 libraries representing 200 million readers dedicated to ensuring access to free and easy-to-use eBook content.

Thanks for reading!

URLs from this message: <https://www.livebrary.com/econtentFAQs>

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