

“Librarian’s Shelf” by Jill Owens

Digital Rights Management Affects Access

Staff at the library often hears questions about why “everyone” can’t download an e-book at once from OverDrive. Almost always technology is blamed. Patrons just can’t believe that in this day and age “they” can’t figure out how to make a title accessible to more people at the same time. In such cases, the issue is not technological capability, but DRM, or digital rights management. Libraries and other users have to pay for access to ‘copies’ of digital media just as they do for print books.

The gatekeeper of access is often not technology, but money. Creators of content and publishers still have to make a living and so e-material must be paid for just like more tangible media. Titles are still owned even though they are downloadable.

A year ago Columbus Public Library added e-books to the already held popular audio book downloads available through Overdrive (the digital distributor used by many Nebraska libraries, including Columbus Public). Demand exceeded the e-book holdings and the Nebraska Library Commission has been adding titles as fast as member libraries’ budgets will allow. According to the Nebraska Library Commission, “The opening day [July 13, 2010] collection contained 168 titles with 171 copies. Today the collection contains 1,740 titles and 1,832 copies.”

According to a librarian at the Nebraska Library Commission, “DRM basically is what protects copyrighted files and keeps them from being used in ways that violate the terms under which they were provided. For example, it’s DRM that causes our OverDrive WMA audiobooks to expire after the checkout period is over.” Patrons who borrow e-books don’t get to keep them forever and use their library card to build their own private collection.

You must have a library or bookmobile card to check out one of our e-books. Columbus Public Library purchased access to the collection based on our legal service area (Platte County’s) population. DRM controls the access to these materials. We can only access as many “copies” as have been purchased. When the idea of e-books and other digital material dawned, librarians considered the possibilities of less physical work in collection management – the processing, shifting, repairing, carting, replacing, weeding, arranging...etcetera of space-demanding materials. Other factors like accessibility off-site and after hours, not to mention materials that return themselves (no tracking down overdue items) were seen as bonuses of the format.

As with print copies of popular books, sometimes patrons have to place a hold on an e-book. Hence the remarks that if technology can put a man on the moon, it should be able to let two people check out the same e-book at once.

Just as patrons are dreaming of unlimited accessibility and no holds, and library workers are dreaming of materials that don’t wear out, and collections to which more can be added without older items first being removed, along comes publisher HarperCollins (HC).

Consumers, including libraries, are generally fair-minded folks who understand that one can’t get something for nothing. However, most feel that HC overstepped last winter when it announced that

access to a purchased title would be cut off after 26 uses. That is, the title would only be licensed for 26 uses before it would have to be purchased again.

Many books in library collections get used more than 26 times before their lives are over. Imagine purchasing a children's book for your family and when you reach for that favorite story for the 27th time at bedtime, it has simply vanished! HC plans to sell disappearing books. It could be difficult for collection managers to stay on top of self-weeding collections.

There are other ways of controlling e-access besides number of check-outs. NetLibrary books (also accessible with your library or bookmobile card) expire after 5 years regardless of how much or how little they are used. Because most of these titles are nonfiction, the information they contain is outdated anyway, so it is not as big of an issue to lose access to 5 year old medical treatment information (for example) as it is to lose access to a work of fiction. There are plenty of good novels that are over 5 years old. Also, NetLibrary books are purchased as collections rather than single titles and are more affordable than titles sold individually.

While some aspects of e-media are easier to manage than physical holdings, things like distribution and sharing of works can be more complicated. If I were to purchase a print book, I am free to hand it off to a friend, who can hand it off to someone else, who can sell it or donate it to the library. One cannot lend a downloadable to one's friend without handing off one's device and hoping that the borrowing or ownership period does not expire.

The library world and businesses like OverDrive consider this to be an "emerging issue." I believe that is a fancy way of saying it hasn't all been thought through, fought through, and sorted out yet. Increased popularity of e-books has made publishers strategize about how much the titles are worth. Those of us on the other side have to decide that as well. Consumers debate whether HC is being greedy or self-preserving.

Some consumers are boycotting HC's digital offerings, while others are boycotting all HC purchases. Others are waiting to see the fallout, or looking to professional organizations for guidance. Battles like this will decide the future of digital media, and we hope, work out a solution that is fair to all concerned. It will be interesting to see if moves like HC's slow or halt the momentum of e-media's growth.

To check out an electronic book for your audio device or e-reader, click on the OverDrive icon found at <http://www.columbuslibrary.info/>. For information on some classic books whose copyrights have expired, see http://www.columbuslibrary.info/ls/08_17_08.htm or http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page.