

If COVID19 drove any point home for Vermont public libraries, it's the huge challenge of meeting our communities' appetite for e-content. While my library building was closed in 2020 and into 2021, I, like many of my fellow librarians, shifted nearly all of my collection purchasing to ebooks and downloadable audio. These formats are available 24/7 for community members who have both an internet connection and a device on which to read / listen - which are obviously barriers for plenty of people. During the nearly two years since the pandemic arrived in Vermont, the digital content landscape has evolved in ways that create additional barriers, and the conditions weren't favorable to begin with. Here are some things that impact libraries' ability to serve:

1. Overdrive has by far the greatest marketshare when it comes to leasing ebooks and downloadable audio to libraries. During the past two years, Overdrive has acquired several major digital content providers, reducing competition in the market even more. In Vermont, most public libraries contract with Overdrive as members of the Green Mountain Library Consortium, to share both the cost of and access to a leased collection of ebooks and audio. Some libraries, my own included, also lease content from Overdrive for use by that library's patrons. Just as with physical books, ebooks and audio can only be used by one person at a time.
2. Unlike physical books, which libraries own and therefore can keep for as long as they like and sell if they choose, e-content is leased. Of the 20 titles I recently added to Kimball Library's Overdrive collection, 9 have a lease period of 12 months, 6 are in the collection for 24 months, and only 3 will be available "forever." And by forever, I mean for as long as Kimball Library contracts with Overdrive. If we opt to leave their platform, none of the collection will be available for our users.
3. I leased those 20 titles at a cost of \$948.71, with prices ranging from \$15 to \$99.99. This constitutes 7.6% of the Library's annual budget for the adult collection. For \$300.74, I can purchase 17 of them as print books or compact disc audiobooks. (In fact, most of them are available in the physical format at the Library.) 3 are available only in digital form, a growing trend particularly in audiobooks but also in print books.
4. Amazon does not sell or lease digital content to libraries at all. As they make inroads as a publisher, not just a vendor, a larger proportion of books simply isn't available to library users.
5. The challenge of selecting e-content is huge, and for me is largely driven by which items my patrons have reserved in the shared Green Mountain Library Consortium collection. Because the prices are so high, the lease terms are so short, and my budget is so limited, my purchasing skews heavily toward best sellers - which means generally very mainstream writers and content. Publishers and reviewers have become somewhat better at highlighting diverse authors and content, and it's easy to create a more diverse physical collection. That falls away under the pressures of meeting the greatest demand by users of the digital collection.
6. Unlike physical books, ebooks and audio cannot be shared among Vermont libraries except through the Green Mountain Library Consortium. Interlibrary loan has been a great leveler of access to books and other materials - my community members can

borrow items that are in public, school, and academic libraries throughout Vermont and even from across the country. This is not an option for the e-content libraries lease.

There are a lot of reasons to be concerned about the transition of books from physical to digital formats. The largest professional organization in the country, the American Library Association, has been advocating for more equitable access to e-content for more than a decade, with no discernible effect. Prices continue to rise, competition is disappearing, and libraries continue to struggle to provide a diverse collection for their community members.

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**At-the-door services begin  
November 8, 2021 at the side  
door under the awning.**

**Monday-Friday 10am-5:30pm  
Saturday 10am-1pm**

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