



## Libraries are fighting to preserve your right to borrow e-books

By Jessamyn West

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**(CNN)** Librarians to publishers: Please take our money. Publishers to librarians: Drop dead.



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That's the upshot of Macmillan publishing's [recent decision](#) which represents yet another insult to libraries. For the first two months after a Macmillan book is published, a library can only buy one copy, at a discount. After eight weeks, they can purchase "expiring" e-book copies which need to be re-purchased after two years or 52 lends. As publishers struggle with the continuing shake-up of their business models, and work to find practical approaches to managing digital content in a marketplace overwhelmingly [dominated by Amazon](#), libraries are being portrayed as a problem, not a solution. Libraries agree there's a problem -- but we know it's not us.

Public libraries in the United States purchase a lot of e-books, and circulate e-books a lot. According to the Public Library Association, electronic material circulation in libraries has

been [expanding at a rate](#) of 30% per year; and public libraries [offered over 391 million e-books](#) to their patrons in 2017. Those library users also buy books; [over 60% of frequent library users](#) have also bought a book written by an author they first discovered in a library, according to Pew. Libraries offer [free display space](#) for books in over 16,000 locations nationwide. Even Macmillan [admits](#) that "Library reads are currently 45% of our total digital book reads." But instead of finding a way to work with libraries on an equitable win-win solution, Macmillan implemented a new and confusing model and blamed libraries for being successful at encouraging people to read their books.

Libraries don't just pay full price for e-books -- we pay [more than full price](#). We don't just buy one book -- in most cases, we buy a lot of books, trying to keep hold lists [down to reasonable numbers](#). We accept [renewable purchasing agreements](#) and limits on e-book lending, specifically because we understand that publishing is a business, and that there is value in authors and publishers getting paid for their work. At the same time, most of us are constrained by budgeting rules and high levels of reporting transparency about where your money goes. So, we want the terms to be fair, and we'd prefer a system that wasn't convoluted.

With print materials, book economics are simple. Once a library buys a book, [it can do whatever it wants with it](#): lend it, sell it, give it away, [loan it to another library](#) so *they* can lend it. We're much more restricted when it comes to e-books. To a patron, an e-book and a print book feel like similar things, just in different formats; to a library they're very different products. There's no inter-library loan for e-books. When an e-book is no longer circulating, we can't sell it at a book sale. When you're spending the public's money, these differences matter.

Library users know that you can make a copy of a digital file essentially for free. So when we tell them, "Sorry, there is only one copy of that e-book, and a waitlist of [over 200 people](#)," they ask the completely reasonable question, "Why?" In Macmillan's ideal world, that library patron would get frustrated with the library and go purchase the e-book instead. And maybe some people will do that. In the library's ideal world, we'd be able to buy more copies of the book, and even agree to short-term contracts, if it meant that more people had access to the books they wanted to read, when they wanted to read them. This was not an option on the table.

Macmillan did not at all enjoy it when Amazon [removed the "Buy"](#) button from their titles, and yet this is what they are trying to do to libraries.

Macmillan, complaining that libraries were "cannibalizing" their sales, tried to spin this move as one that "ensure[s] that the mission of libraries is supported." But our mission is not supported by having to spend staff time and energy on complex per-publisher agreements that inhibit our users' access to the content they want -- content that we are willing to pay for.

Their solution isn't just unsupportive, it doesn't even make sense. Allowing a library like the Los Angeles Public Library (which serves 18 million people) the same number of initial e-book copies as a rural Vermont library serving 1,200 people smacks of punishment, not support. And Macmillan's statement, saying that people can just borrow e-books from any library, [betrays a fundamental misunderstanding](#) of how public libraries work.

Macmillan [isn't the first](#) of the "big five" publishers to try to tweak their library sales model to

try to recoup more revenue, but they are the first to accuse libraries of being a problem for them and not a partner.

Steve Potash, the CEO of e-book digital distributor OverDrive, [came out with a statement](#) saying "publishers and authors are best served by offering multiple, flexible, and reasonable terms for libraries and schools to lend digital content." OverDrive runs the [Panorama Project](#), a data-driven research project which researches the impact of library holdings on, among other things, book sales. He offered [some actual data](#) on Macmillan's claims, and painted a different picture.

The American Library Association [has denounced](#) this model using strong language, but perhaps it's time for libraries to do more than grumpily go along with whatever gets foisted upon us. [Sixty-four percent](#) of US public libraries are members of consortia for e-book purchasing. Maybe it's time we got together and decided to spend more of the public's money with businesses who want to do business with us, who don't just consider us "[a thorny problem](#)," while also not understanding how we operate.

Lowering barriers to access to information for all Americans is a public good. Public libraries exist in large part because they are necessary to a functioning democracy. People who participate in civics and elect their own legislators require free access to impartial information so that they can stay informed. Creating barriers to that access -- barriers that disproportionately affect those who are hardest to serve -- is a short-sighted move, and highlights the very real conflicts between capitalism and community.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/02/opinions/libraries-fight-publishers-over-e-books-west/index.html>