

THE LOWDOWN ON AUDIO DOWNLOADS

The downloadable landscape, plus what works, what doesn't for libraries and patrons

By Beth Farrell

"It has been hugely popular—we are having trouble keeping up with the demand," says Mary Knapp, Madison Public Library, WI. "We have several patrons who drove over 70 miles one way and paid the nonresident fee just so they could [acquire library cards to] use it," marvels Earlene Molker, Richland Public Library, WA. What high-demand library service could inspire public library patrons to drive nearly 150 miles and pay nonresident fees? Downloadable audiobooks.

First offered to public libraries in 2004, downloadable audiobooks have grown by leaps and bounds. According to the Audio Publishers Association, their sales today account for 21 percent of the spoken-word audio market. Leading downloadable audiobook provider OverDrive reported a whopping 70 percent increase in checkouts from 2008 to 2009. With EBSCO's recent acquisition and planned growth of NetLibrary's e-content and with Ingram Digital newly having jumped aboard with its MyiLibrary Audio platform, downloadable audiobooks have nowhere to go but up.

It hasn't been easy, however. WMA. DRM. MP3. AAC. File extensions small on letters but very big on consequences for librarians, consumers, and the audiobook industry at large.

LJ audio reviewer Beth Farrell, Collection Development Manager, Portage County District Library (PCDL), Garrettsville, OH, purchases audiobooks in multiple formats for PCDL. Read her collection development article on self-help audios, "Mind, Body, & Soul" (LJ 8/09, p. 36-38), at www.libraryjournal.com

Public librarians across the country shared the issues they have with downloadable audiobook pricing, compatibility, and usability in an informal survey conducted via Publib. To see how the major downloadable audiobook distributors address those concerns, I also spoke with representatives from OverDrive, Ingram Digital, and NetLibrary. In some instances, progress has been made; in others, not, though the limitations don't always come from the distributors but from the publishers themselves.

The fundamentals

Patrons can search for a title on their library's stand-alone downloadable audiobook web site, check it out with their library card number or a username/password, then download it onto their home or library computer (and/or onto a smartphone, wirelessly, in the case of OverDrive). They can also transfer the title from their computer to a compatible portable media player or smartphone via a USB connection. Once the loan period is up—poof!—the audiobook is returned, i.e., access expires.

Check out, download—in some cases, transfer—then play. Nothing to it, right? Wrong! Certainly, the advantages for libraries of the downloadable format over the physical one are numerous: 24/7 service to patrons, speedy turnaround on orders, no physical media to break, no wasted time spent on the holds shelf, no overdue or billed items. But while libraries have endured plenty of audiobook format changes over the years—from LPs to cassettes to CDs to MP3-CDs to preloaded digi-

TABLE 1 HOW THREE MAJOR DOWNLOADABLE AUDIO DISTRIBUTORS STACK UP

	OVERDRIVE	INGRAM DIGITAL	NETLIBRARY
No. of audiobooks available for purchase	38,000	8,025	16,293 (some require subscription to unlimited-access plan)
No. of titles that can be transferred to iPods/iPhones	38,000	8,025	over 5,636 (requires subscription to unlimited-access plan)
No. of titles that can be downloaded onto Macs	11,000	8,025	over 5,636 (requires subscription to unlimited-access plan)
No. of partner publishers	140	40–50	25–30
Holds allowed?	yes	yes	yes
Can library purchase title prior to street date to build holds?	yes	yes, but limited selection	coming soon
Can consortia purchase?	yes	yes	yes
Can individual libraries select their own collections inside consortia?	yes	yes	yes
Annual service/access fee	set fee, regardless of size	based on population served	based on population served
Cost of unlimited-access title set	varies depending on size of title set	N/A	varies depending on library type and circulation or population served
Loan period options	library can choose, can also allow patron to select from different loan periods (e.g., seven or 14 days)	library can choose, can also allow patron to select between different loan periods (e.g., seven or 14 days)	21 days is default, but libraries can choose a lower loan period
MARC records	complete MARC by arrangement with OCLC, \$1.50 per title; OverDrive supplies raw metadata for free	free for OCLC members, fee for others	free
Ordering database	OverDrive's Content Reserve, the collection development/reporting portal	Ingram Library Services acquisition product coming soon to iPage	TitleSelect, NetLibrary's collection development catalog
PR assistance	fully customizable print materials and web graphics	partially customizable print materials	partially customizable print materials
Training	web-based training for all library staff, live refresher training	web-based training for selectors and library administrators upon request	web-based training for library administrators
Web browser requirements	all major browsers including Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Google Chrome, and Safari	newer versions of Internet Explorer, Firefox, and Safari	Internet Explorer 5.5–7.0; Netscape 6.2–8.1.3; Firefox 1.0–2.0; Opera 7.0–9.2
Windows desktop requirements	Windows 98 SE (or newer); OverDrive Media Console; Windows Media Player 9 series (or newer). iTunes and Windows XP (or newer) required for transfer to Apple device; additional requirements for transfer to Zune device	Windows XP or later; Ingram Media Manager; Windows Media Player 9 (or newer) or iTunes version 7.6.2.9 (or newer)	Windows (98 SE, Me, 2000, XP); NetLibrary Media Player or Microsoft Windows Media Player 9–11 or Nullsoft Winamp 5.5–5.5; iTunes for transfer to Apple device
Mac system requirements	OverDrive Media Console for Mac; Mac OS 10.4.9 (or newer); iTunes v7.6.2.9 (or newer) if transferring to an Apple device	Ingram Media Manager; Mac OS X 10.4.1 or later; iTunes 7.7 or later (if transferring to an Apple device)	any Mac operating system supporting the latest version of Firefox
Smartphone download requirements	Android v1.5 (or newer) and OverDrive Media Console (OMC) for Android; BlackBerry v.4.5 (or newer) and OMC for BlackBerry; Windows Mobile 5 (or newer) and OMC for Windows Mobile	N/A	N/A

tal—we've never before faced audiobook issues like those introduced by downloadables.

As one Washington State public librarian puts it, "All players and readers are different and everyone has a different problem." (To be fair, however, if my 72-year-old mother can manage to download two to three audiobooks per week onto her Creative Zen, the situation can only be so bad.)

Plays well with others...not!

In the early days of downloadable audio, OverDrive and NetLibrary required patrons to download digital rights management (DRM)-protected Windows Media Audio (WMA) files to a computer running Microsoft Windows and Windows Media Player. (Digital media distributors employ DRM technologies—often at the insistence of publishers and authors—to protect intellectual property by preventing end users from copying or converting copyrighted material to other formats.)

While iPods, the most popular line of portable media players, could play Advanced Audio Coding (AAC) and MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (MP3)-formatted files, they were unable to play DRM-protected WMA files. Despite this incompatibility, many brave libraries sold on the benefits of downloadable audiobooks dove into the market.

Today, OverDrive, NetLibrary, and Ingram Digital each offers libraries thousands of iPod/iPhone-compatible audiobooks, though DRM technologies still frustrate many end users. "There has to be an easier way to do the initial download process," says a Wisconsin public librarian who would like to see "more MP3-formatted titles, less WMA or any other proprietary format." (A webcomic satirizing the matter recently generated much heated online discussion—see "Webcomic Takes on Audiobook DRM" at www.libraryjournal.com.)

Circulation models

Two circulation models for building downloadable audiobook collections currently exist: one copy, one download and unlimited access. According to *LJ* collection management editor Barbara Genco's 2009 survey, "It's Been Geometric!"

WMA. DRM. MP3. AAC. FILE EXTENSIONS SMALL ON LETTERS BUT VERY BIG ON CONSEQUENCES FOR LIBRARIANS, CONSUMERS, AND THE AUDIOBOOK INDUSTRY

(bit.ly/bgenco), 82.9 percent of the survey's 41 public library respondents employ both models, while 58.5 percent prefer unlimited access.

However, very few audiobook publishers allow unlimited access to their titles, so while OverDrive, Ingram Digital, and NetLibrary all offer titles in the one copy, one download model, the selection of unlimited-access titles is more sparse. (Both OverDrive and NetLibrary offer sets of unlimited-access titles from Blackstone Audio and Tantor Audio. NetLibrary is the sole source for Recorded Books unlimited-access content, while OverDrive additionally offers unlimited-access title sets from Matrix Media, Rooftop Media, and Colonial Radio Theatre.)

THE E-AUDIO THREE

OverDrive: The market leader

With some 38,000 titles (from 140 publishers) and 20 million downloads to date, Cleveland-based OverDrive is the leading distributor of downloadable audiobooks to public libraries

OverDrive
leading digital media services

worldwide, providing services to 10,000 of them (figure includes libraries within consortia/larger systems). It has been aggressive

in pushing for e-content from publishers in user-desired formats compatible with popular devices.

Its collection development features include a download standing-order plan, a holds manager, and Community Reserve, a digital tool enabling libraries to upload and share local content such as historical documents and educational materials. Tracking performance is simplified by real-time usage reports, which Penny Ramirez, Crystal Park Public Library, IL, attests are both "easy to access and provide lots of information."

In 2009, OverDrive updated its MediaConsole so that virtually all of its 38,000 WMA audiobooks could be downloaded to a PC and then converted to a format playable on Apple devices, giving it the largest collection of iPod/iPhone-compatible audiobooks for libraries. (Note: Though these WMA audiobooks do play on Apple devices, only OverDrive's 11,000 MP3-format audiobooks can be downloaded onto Macs.) OverDrive supports thousands of mobile listening devices and is the only one of the three companies profiled here to offer wireless download to smartphones.

Cost is a sore point

The cost of a downloadable audio service is usually twofold, comprised of 1) an access/service fee and 2) the cost per title or per unlimited-access title set. The annual or monthly access/service fee covers initial setup costs, ongoing tech support (most Publib survey respondents spoke well of all three vendors in this area), and staff training as well as the cost of hosting the library's web site.

As an example, Ingram Digital's annual access/service fee, which applies both to its downloadable audiobook and ebook collections, ranges from \$750 to \$4500 for public and academic libraries. (Cost is based on population served for public libraries and FTE for academic libraries; consortia pricing is negotiated based on numerous factors.) Additionally, libraries committing to the MyiLibrary 12-month purchasing program get their access/service fees waived for that year.

Generally, the more you pay in access/service fees, the more customizable your site. Vendors oversee site customization, though one San Diego public librarian says this is something he feels libraries "should be able to do...ourselves." While OverDrive may be the most expensive option for many libraries, it also offers the most extensive initial and ongoing site customization service. With their lower access/service fees, Ingram Digital and NetLibrary deliver a much more "out of the box" product.

Downloadable audiobook prices themselves vary wildly: an individual title can cost anywhere from \$25 to \$100, depending on its length and publisher, while unlimited-access title

In late April, OverDrive released an audiobook app for the iPhone. Marketing director David Burleigh says the company is now working on application programming interfaces (APIs) for developers to create apps that can be integrated with OverDrive-powered library web sites.

Ingram Digital: The new kid on the block

Nashville-based Ingram Digital jumped into the downloadable audiobook arena in May 2009 with its MyiLibrary Audio platform (see Audio NewsBriefs, *LJ* 6/15/09). Now, its catalog of 8,025 titles (from roughly 45 publishers) is accessed by 300 public library systems nationwide; all of its titles can be downloaded to both Macs and PCs and also are compatible with iPods, iPhones, and various other mobile devices.



ingram digital

Ingram Digital audiobooks can also be transferred to a memory chip such as a Secure Digital (SD), microSD, or miniSD memory card, then played on personal digital assistants (PDAs), smartphones, Windows Mobile phones, and Pocket PC PDAs.

Through the MyiLibrary Audio's collection development tool Suggest a Title, patrons visiting a partner library's site can view a complete list of Ingram Digital's offerings and generate purchase requests by simply clicking on titles their library doesn't own. MyiLibrary Audio also streamlines the holds process by immediately checking out a title to a patron's bookshelf as soon as it becomes available and then sending a notification that the title is ready for download.

Sales manager Patrick Moore reports that enhancements to the

sets can range in cost from hundreds to thousands of dollars. What's more, the downloadable edition of an audiobook can cost less, as much, or even more than its CD counterpart, a reality one Illinois public librarian calls "extremely frustrating."

Take Adriana Trigiani's *Brava Valentine*, for example. A CD recording of that title is available in retail packaging from HarperAudio for \$39.99 (most libraries would get a discount on top of that from their jobbers) and in library packaging from Books on Tape (BOT) for \$100 (standing-order customers could expect a 20 percent discount), while a public library would have to shell out \$95 to get that same recording in downloadable format from OverDrive or Ingram Digital, albeit with some limited opportunities for discounts.

Some publishers are lowering prices

The pricing discrepancy between library-edition and retail-edition CDs exists because audio rights to each are often purchased separately, and library-edition rights, as BBC Audiobooks America (BBCAA) marketing director Michele Cobb says, typically include "compensating the author more heavily with an understanding that the title will be listened to by multiple people."

With regard to downloadables, Cobb notes that audio publishers' highest costs—for recording rights, actual recording costs, and rights to use jacket art corresponding to the print edition—do not go away in the digital arena. She does acknowledge, however, that the downloadable format eliminates replacement CD obligations; BBCAA, she points out, discounts all its library-edition downloadable titles, often by as much as 30–50 percent less than the cost of the library-edition CD.

BOT recently began marking down its library-edition CDs

MyiLibrary Audio web site—e.g., choice of featured subject lists—are in the works. And by 2011, he says, librarians can expect to see apps for smartphones, and library selectors will be able to order downloadable titles via Ingram's ipage ordering database, which many of them already use. Ingram additionally plans to include downloadable content on standing-order programs.

NetLibrary: Under (very) new management

In March 2010, OCLC announced the sale of its NetLibrary division—its ebook and e-audiobook platform as well as its service and operations—to database aggregator EBSCO. (Read coverage of the acquisition at www.libraryjournal.com.)

OCLC and EBSCO are working together to ensure a smooth transition for the 1400 public library sites on NetLibrary

(subscription content remains accessible through www.netlibrary.org). According to EBSCO PR manager Kathleen McEvoy, the company will be growing its e-

audiobook (and ebook) offerings, as well as adding to and modifying its existing purchase subscription options.

Currently, NetLibrary offers 16,293 MP3- and WMA-formatted titles from nearly 30 publishers; it is the sole source for downloadable titles from audiobook industry giant Recorded Books (RB). Its Media Center enables one-click download and transfer of titles to PCs, iPods/iPhones, and mobile listening devices from Creative Labs, Samsung, Sony, and others.

McEvoy says EBSCO is soliciting feedback from librarians and planning usability testing "to improve the NetLibrary platform and begin to incorporate...e-audiobooks into the EBSCOhost platform."



to retail-edition cost, though marketing director Cheryl Herman reports the company currently has no plans to reduce downloadable audio prices: "audiobook downloads are still an emerging format...but [we] do review prices regularly and will continue to monitor trends in the marketplace."

One Houston public librarian expresses the feeling of many that pricing models for libraries need to be expanded. "Given the economic downturn and its impact on library budgets," he says, "downloadable books may price themselves out of the library market."

What's right for your library

Which downloadable audiobook provider is right for your library can depend on factors ranging from your budget to your patron base. While OverDrive affords the widest selection of titles, many audio publishers offer some or all of their content to all three distributors. Libraries shopping for a downloadable audio distributor should always ask for a complete and updated list of available publishers.

Test drive, brace for change

Those in the market for a distributor should also definitely "test drive" the download experience, as each vendor approaches the transaction in a very different way—though, much like the technology on which it is based, everything in the downloadable audiobook industry is subject to change, at lightning speeds. (For a detailed breakdown of all three vendors' requirements and offerings as of March 2010, see the chart on p. 27; for an overview of recent and forthcoming developments among the three, see the sidebar beginning on p. 28.) ■

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