Popular E-Content at The New York Public Library: Seven Years of Success

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The New York Public Library (NYPL) has seen tremendous growth in demand from our patrons for popular e-content in recent years. This article illustrates some of the Library’s key successes and challenges surrounding popular-interest e-content in the context of the evolving U.S. marketplace. NYPL began offering e-content via ebooks.nypl.org in 2004, when it entered into partnership with Overdrive, the primary e-content vendor to U.S. public libraries. That year the Library offered a start-up collection consisting of 5,992 e-books bringing in 5,227 checkouts. For the 12 months leading up to March of 2011, this same site brought in 387,959 checkouts from a collection in excess of 59,000 items. These statistics, when combined with the rest of NYPL’s popular digital offerings, rank the Library’s popular e-content collection #2 in circulation among its 90 circulating locations. The content marketplace is complex and evolving. If there is one constant theme throughout our experience since 2004, it is that forward momentum has steadily increased – not just in technology, but in the availability of attractive content and the level at which consumers are embracing an e-literate lifestyle.

Keywords: New York Public Library; e-books

1 Introduction

In March of 2011, one of the major trade publishing houses in the United States, HarperCollins, implemented a new licensing model for e-books they release to the Library market: each copy would be allowed to circulate up to 26 times, after which it would need to be relicensed by the library for an additional 26 uses. The reaction to this among the library community in the U.S. mimicked the recent ‘Facebook Revolutions’ of the Middle East as librarians across the country immediately took to social networking sites to decry the announcement. By the end of the day, publishing insiders were eagerly following the Twitter hashtag #hcod to see which librarians were advocating a boycott of HarperCollins. A few days later the story made the mainstream media, exposing the publisher’s move to the general public (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/business/media/15libraries.html>) and prompting the American Library Association to issue a statement criticizing the restriction (<http://www.ala.org/districtdispatch/?p=5749>). While public libraries in the U.S. had been offering e-books for years, it was this single move by HarperCollins that galvanized all parties in the U.S. public library e-book industry to converse openly about the impact and availability of popular library content in the digital age, the needs of authors, publishers, and wholesalers, and most importantly, the future of public library collections as demand for popular content in digital format increases.

2 Tremendous Growth in Demand for Popular e-Content

At The New York Public Library (NYPL), we have seen tremendous growth in demand from our patrons for popular e-content in recent years. The following illustrates some of the Library’s key successes and challenges surrounding popular-interest e-content in the context of the evolving U.S. marketplace. The content providers of this material at NYPL include Overdrive (ebooks.nypl.org), offering a wide range of e-content types; Tumblebooks (www.tumblebooks.com), an online children’s e-book site; BookFlix (bkflix.grolier.com), a Scholastic site offering online book and video content to young users; and Freegal (www.freegalmusic.com), a music downloading site. Use of NYPL’s research works,
titles from academic publishers, serials, commercially aggregated research content, and digitized historical collections are not reflected in this article.

At this point it is useful to remind the reader that in conversation, ‘e-book’ is sometimes used as a blanket concept to refer to any generally published item that can be found, acquired, circulated, and experienced by our patrons either online or downloaded to a device. In more specific terms there are distinct categories of such material that our patrons use every day and they include downloadable e-books, e-audiobooks, e-video, e-music, and online only e-books which are often hybrids that might involve multimedia aspects or be retrieved as part of an aggregated research database such as Gale Ready Reference titles. NYPL offers each of these categories and for purposes of this article I will either use the specific category when necessary or the term ‘e-content’ to refer to the range of categories at once.

NYPL began offering e-content via ebooks.nypl.org in 2004, when it entered into partnership with Overdrive, the primary e-content vendor to U.S. public libraries. That year the Library offered a start-up collection consisting of 4,729 Adobe PDF format e-books and 1,263 Mobipocket format e-books. Initial use was tentative, 1,727 unique patrons checked out 4,504 of the PDF e-books, and 723 of the Mobipocket during that calendar year. It was a careful start that proved to be a solid foundation, the following year we added more e-books as well as e-audiobooks and e-music. The number of patrons jumped to 9,731 and overall circulation increased to 70,906, of which 20,957 were e-audiobook loans, highlighting a strong interest in that format from an urban population that spends a significant portion of time traveling on foot, bus, subway or train with mp3 players and iPods.

In 2006 we added just under 300 e-videos to the collection but of the 133,297 e-content circulations that year, only 6,934 were e-video and 4,348 e-music formats. We attribute this low use not to low demand, commercially available online music and video are very popular in the U.S., but instead as a reaction to the nature of the e-video and e-music content available to the library market. 5 years later, studios and distributors of popular music and video are hesitant to release their digital content to libraries, not just out of fear of piracy, but over concerns of competition with lucrative retail and rental outlets. The e-video titles currently available to libraries therefore tend to be older classic films, low-budget movies, foreign films, documentaries, and personal development non-fiction such as yoga and self-help titles. While important to have in our collections, none of these categories generate large demand. A similar assessment can be attributed to available e-music titles, although in the last year progress has been made with two important music distributors, which will be explained shortly.

E-books and e-audiobooks continue to drive use on this site. For the 12 months leading up through March of 2011, the ebooks.nypl.org website has seen 387,959 downloadable e-content circulations, an increase of 34.7% over the previous 12 months.

In 2007 NYPL subscribed to Tumblebooks, an online database of children’s read-along talking picture books, audiobooks, puzzles and games. A very simple to use site that directly engages the child reader, we saw 159,992 uses of it in the 12 months leading up through March of 2008, but it quickly became very popular and for the same period through March of 2011, NYPL has recorded 1,199,269 uses.

In 2008 we added Scholastic’s BookFlix. Similar in format to Tumblebooks in that it is an online subscription that does not allow downloading, this collection consists of typical selections of picture books, each paired with a related video for young children. Use of this collection, because it is small, narrow, and not frequently updated by Scholastic, can be considered consistent. Its first 12 months generated 56,724 uses while for the 12 months ending in March of 2011 it was 64,636. This represents a respectable 14% increase over 2½ years, but does not approach the 50.4% increase in patron use of ebooks.nypl.org in the same time periods.

3 Current Content Drives Use

During these years NYPL piloted subscriptions with two content providers that were not renewed: MyLibraryDV, an e-video service offered by Recorded Books and NetLibrary Ebooks. Neither collection performed well in terms of popular, current content and both were plagued by technical support issues that many patrons found difficult to overcome. Use remained low and with the increased pressures on the materials budget in recent years, the Library opted to focus on platforms that performed well and offered the greatest opportunity content-wise.

If thought of as a ‘virtual branch’, circulation of popular e-content over the 12 months ending in March of 2011 would rank it #2 among NYPL’s 90 circulating sites. To what do we attribute its success? Three factors: desirable content, wide-spread adoption of e-content by consumers, and increasingly easier compatibility with popular consumer devices.

Public libraries have long known popular content drives use, in both physical and e-formats. Throughout the fall publishing season of 2010, NYPL’s branch libraries experienced record-breaking circulation counts in excess of 2 million per month largely driven by an increased focus on acquiring many copies of current, popular titles. We see the same trend on our ebooks.nypl.org site. The first few years of usage were relatively low not just because devices were not as sophisticated or as widely available as they are today, but because major trade publishers were initially reluctant to release their bestsellers to the library e-content market. Instead they released older classic, bestseller and midlist titles that they felt would be safe to test with libraries. As the ‘one copy-one user’ circulation model proved itself in Overdrive’s carefully controlled circulation mechanism, and steady requests from libraries and advocacy by Overdrive for more current titles increased, some of the trade publishers expanded their library offerings to include new bestseller authors. This resulted in the Library being able to offer content that would draw in users beyond the early-adopter group. Offe-
ring new titles by John Grisham, Danielle Steel, and James Patterson motivated more patrons to learn the navigation and download procedures involved in checking out an e-book or e-audiobook from NYPL. Our collection development librarians regularly check for new bestsellers as well as high holds ratios on current titles, of which they’ll purchase additional copies. This careful attention to providing new content people want has helped us build a e-patron database that as of today includes 77,424 patrons, 57% of which have been active within the last two years.

In September of 2010, Overdrive began adding a selection of classic public domain titles from Project Gutenberg to their catalog, which NYPL added to ebooks.nypl.org. In the first 7 months, performance of the Gutenberg titles gave further evidence that popular content is driving NYPL’s e-content use. By the end of March 2011, the Gutenberg collection of 6,500 titles, each of which are DRM-free and more easily downloadable than a regular DRM-enabled book, had seen 13,382 uses. This is a respectable turn-over rate of approximately 2-to-1. The most popular title is Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, with 42 uses to date. During that same period the popular collection saw 238,072 uses across 59,149 copies for a turn-over ratio of approximately 4-to-1. The titles driving demand within this clearly matched print bestseller lists with the top 3 spots going to Steig Larsson’s “The Girl...” trilogy. In fact The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is the most popular title in our ebooks.nypl.org collection with 1588 uses across 171 copies, a turn-over ratio of approximately 9-to-1.

This trend mirrors that enjoyed on the retail side of the e-content marketplace. Over the past two years, the e-content category has consistently shown the highest percentage growth on U.S. trade publishers reports, growing over 200% in February to surpass trade paperbacks (http://www.thebookseller.com/news/us-e-book-surge-takes-formatlead.html). This is not just because good, interesting content is available, it is also because more and more consumers have adopted e-reading devices. In the U.S., apart from laptops, home computers, and smart phones, the Amazon Kindle, the Barnes & Noble Nook, the Apple iPad, and the Sony E-Reader are widely available and popular. Overdrive has developed compatibility with all of these which has allowed NYPL to promote its popular e-content more broadly on www.nypl.org, on Facebook, and via Twitter (<@nypl>). We know device compatibility drives use because our patrons convey the importance through anecdotal feedback and we have seen it demonstrated in use statistics. Since ebooks.nypl.org’s inception, patrons with iPods regularly contacted our online support team to inquire when e-audiobooks would be compatible with their devices. The year Overdrive launched its iPod-compatible WMA e-audiobooks, NYPL’s circulation of that format jumped 49.4% to 80,155. With the launch of the iPad2 in late 2010, our ebooks.nypl.org circulation spiked again, specifically during the weeks after Christmas, when many patrons unwrapped new e-readers as gifts and immediately went to NYPL’s website to try them out. The three weeks leading up to the holiday averaged 8,500 circulations a week, while the three weeks following averaged 9,814.

The success of e-content use at NYPL, coupled with the continued rapid development in the e-content marketplace, brings a new set of challenges that we must address as an institution, but also, with our peers, as profession and a functional segment in the supply chain that connects new books to readers.

4 Learning to Accommodate New Popular e-Content Formats

One of the earliest challenges was learning to accommodate new popular e-content formats into our workflows. As stated earlier, in our first year we offered two e-book formats: Adobe PDF and Mobipocket. Today in addition to those formats we offer Adobe EPUB e-books, Overdrive mp3 e-audiobooks, Overdrive WMA e-audiobooks, Overdrive e-music, Overdrive e-video, Tumblebooks online read-alongs, Scholastic online read-alongs and e-videos, and Freegal Music mp3 song files. This adds complexity to each step of a library’s selection-to-shelf process. Right at the first step, our collection development librarians must effectively balance purchase decisions surrounding a title across a greater selection of formats, with a materials budget that in recent years has grown tighter. For instance, a new bestseller title that is regularly purchased in print, large print, and audio-book formats, must now be accommodated in e-book and e-audiobook formats. The recent industry standardization to EPUB e-book format that will work across a great array of reading devices will alay some of this format spread going forward, but because patron demand does drive much of NYPL’s circulating purchases, and demand is still high for print copies, the additional e-content formats have impacted the number of copies traditionally purchased in print. In our first 12 months NYPL allotted approximately $ 180,000 to popular e-content. In the last 12 months, NYPL has spent $ 386,000.

Acquisitions and Cataloging adapted quickly to the new formats. Purchase orders for new titles from Overdrive are processed quickly and it is no infrequent that an order placed in the morning can result in the title being available in ebooks.nypl.org later that day or the day following. We acquire MARC records from our e-content vendors and load them into our online catalog (catalog.nypl.org) for patrons to find alongside our physical materials. Interestingly, vendor data from the 12 months through March of 2011 show of the top 5 patron referrals to ebooks.nypl.org the online catalog is a distant third (93,841) behind Google (219,679) and our main website www.nypl.org (349,038). #4 is our Children’s website <kids.nypl.org> (47,528) and #5 is the Overdrive site itself <search.overdrive.com> (23,459). The average number of monthly page requests on ebooks.nypl.org is 1,883,034 across 109,479 average monthly patron sessions. The average patron spends 7:42 minutes surveying an average of 17 pages.

Unauthenticated
The variety of e-content formats has had the most impact directly on our patrons. As a library, we see our main role at this stage as a content provider, NYPL does not currently lend dedicated e-reader devices. Along with most public libraries in the U.S., we do provide access to computers and laptops onsite in our branches. These function well for online e-content delivered via the web, such as Tumblebooks and BookFlix, but the controlled nature of the checkout mechanism in ebooks.nypl.org currently precludes downloading its e-content to a device from public workstations. Patrons must do so from their own PC, laptop, smartphone, or tablet reader, meaning the vast majority of usage comes from offsite. Obviously, this is a benefit to the patron because our e-content collection serves as a 24/7 virtual branch and readers do not have to leave their home, office or school to find and check-out a library book. In fact, vendor data shows NYPL’s e-circulations often peak on Sunday and Monday evenings between 7 p.m. and Midnight, hours when most of our facilities are closed.

The impact of this is felt most acutely in our 24/7 telephone and online chat reference group, AskNYPL. This staff is the group that most often interacts with the patron who is attempting to download an e-book to a new device and needs assistance. While we provide staff training and have recently moved staff with greater technical expertise into this group, it is still a challenge to help these patrons achieve this new level of literacy — how to open an e-book. Promoting reading and literacy are traditional core services of a public library, yet we have not needed to invest much time in teaching people how to physically open a book. Upon picking up a book, it is almost instinctual for a person to open it and flip through its pages, it is not difficult technology. NYPL’s experience with e-books is that the variety of devices and formats make the e-content version of this act far less intuitive, and it is not uncommon for a reader with a new device to contact the library for help checking out, downloading, and opening the title on their device. Depending on the patron’s level of need, this interaction can take a few minutes or up to 20 minutes, and sometimes involve multiple phone calls. In an age when libraries are facing budget challenges year after year, devoting staff resources to this can be costly. Still, it is necessary if we are to aid the reading public in reaching a comfortable level of e-literacy. At NYPL, we offer public programs and blog posts to help instruct in the use of these materials, and we worked with Overdrive to pilot a process in which AskNYPL staff can forward a patron in need of technical assistance directly to a patron-direct support team at the vendor. We expect the training will be ongoing as a new, regular service public libraries will provide. To date, the patron-direct support pilot has been successful in alleviating AskNYPL resources and we expect to continue leveraging this as well.

5 Access to Good Content

Another challenge the library patron faces is the amount of work it takes to browse our e-content collections in a manner that lets them discover works they may be interested in from across our service providers. In a physical library, any single shelf can represent materials from a variety of resources, meaning patrons can easily browse the shelves according to their interest in topic or format without needing to understand the difference in publishers, wholesalers, or method of acquisition. Yet our e-content collections, by their nature, are separate entities that are divided by these latter categories and live under separate links on <www.nypl.org/ebooks>. We do add the vendors’ MARC records to our catalog in an attempt to create a single venue for discovery, but as stated earlier we’ve already found that most users bypass the catalog completely and are directed to these collections directly from the Library’s website or from Google. This behavior is reinforced because authentication and check-out functionality is maintained within each vendor’s product, bypassing the Library’s own circulation system associated with the catalog. Therefore, as it stands today, a patron wishing to use materials from each of our collections from home must re-authenticate with their library card number for each different e-content platform they access, a cumbersome process that we should not expect our patrons to endure. NYPL is currently engaged in a strategy that would ultimately utilize a single discovery tool encompassing the wide variety of our popular e-content and digital platforms and would allow a patron to authenticate a single time and from their point of view, seamlessly process circulation transactions through that single interface.

The biggest challenge NYPL continues to face is a mirror reflection of its biggest success: access to good content. With Amazon’s announcement in April of 2011 that it is partnering with Overdrive to allow Kindle users to check-out e-books from their local library, one of the major access points for library patrons will have been opened. For libraries that invest in robust e-book collections, the access for Kindle patrons will help solidify the public libraries’ value within their communities. Yet there remain three significant content gaps that we need to pursue: the remaining trade publishers who do not license e-books to libraries, e-video, and e-music.

As with any public library, many of our patrons use best-seller lists to help them decide what to read next. NYPL’s collection development librarians carefully review these lists to make sure all titles are available in as many formats as possible in our collections. Perhaps the most important best-seller list to us is that of the New York Times. On any given Sunday, a New Yorker can open this list, go to our library catalog, and find print copies of all titles on the list available to check out or reserve. Yet regularly, when applied to e-books, NYPL is missing an average of 30% of the titles. This is because of the six major trade publishers that contribute the most to this list, HarperCollins, Random House, Penguin, Hachette, MacMillan and Simon & Schuster, the last three do not release their new e-book titles to the library market. Patrons can find the e-books on retail websites, they can often find the e-audiobook version in ebooks.nypl.org, but they cannot find the e-book version. This confuses the patron, and creates gaps in our e-book collection. When NYPL meets with publishers, we communicate the popularity of our e-content, the marketing exposure their titles
receive not just from the page hits, but from our active programming, readers’ advisory activities, and extensive use of blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr to promote interesting titles. We also point out that if consumer demand for print books declines enough in coming years for publishers to produce more titles in e-book format only, they will lose a significant revenue stream if those titles are not available for libraries to acquire.

We also communicate that creating an arbitrary use limit such as HarperCollins has done will add a significant workload as each copy reaches the limit and must be reassessed for relicensing by collection development staff. Last year NYPL added over 1 million items to our collections and experience circulation in excess of 2 million per month, meaning the reassessment workload at our scale could easily grow to be unsupportable. The result would be we would only have enough resources to relicense titles our patrons are demanding most, the bestsellers. The quality mid-list, wonderful first novelist, and backlist titles that public libraries have traditionally championed could fade away from public view as they reach their use limits.

E-video and e-music are two formats that have also been lacking from public library collections. As mentioned before, older ‘safe’ titles have been available, but our statistics at NYPL tell us that people would much rather have access to new, currently popular titles. Luckily, in the past year, progress has been made with e-music distributors. Overdrive has developed a relationship that allows them to offer many of EMI’s popular music albums to our collections, and the vendor Library Ideas, LLC has partnered with Sony Music to create Freegal, a library service that allows patrons to download DRM-free song tracks from currently popular artists to their device. In January of 2011, NYPL began a pilot of the Freegal service in which we pay a subscription fee for a set number of song track downloads, and allow any single patron to download up to 3 tracks per week. It has proven very successful, we achieved 10,000 downloads in less than 8 weeks.

In our circulating physical collections this past year, non-print formats (DVDs, Music CDs, and Audiobooks) began to exceed print formats in use. In March of 2011, non-print accounted for 52.5 % of the month’s circulation. DVDs of popular movies, TV shows, and documentaries drive this use, especially as retail and rental outlets for DVDs diminish throughout New York City. We know Netflix, I-tunes, and other video sites that provide streaming or downloadable video content to consumers are very popular, we would like to be able to satisfy patrons’ demand for this content with similar services via the Library but according to our vendors, the studios and distributors are still hesitant to release new popular content to the library market. If format obsolescence continues to the point that these content creators shift away from manufacturing DVDs to online streaming or downloadable formats only, many NYPL library patrons who cannot currently afford to purchase this content on their own will look to the Library for content. If the content creators are not releasing their product to the library market by that point, many of those patrons will be without access completely, and the studios and distributors will see the significant source of revenue from libraries disappear.

The Future is Bright

The popular e-content environment is complex and evolving. The preceding points are just a few of the successes and concerns of NYPL. If there is one constant theme throughout our experience since 2004, it is that forward momentum has steadily increased – not just in technology, but in the availability of attractive content and the level at which consumers are embracing an e-literate lifestyle. We strive not just to react to this shift, not just to be prepared for it as it happens, but to be in front of it, promoting our e-content and welcoming patrons, authors and publishers into our collections. To do so is to acknowledge the use of our collections will change in the future. To do so is to acknowledge the expectations of our patrons will continue to grow in an online environment where they can quickly and easily veer elsewhere if the library does not meet their immediate needs. To do so is to acknowledge that a public library can seize the opportunity to shape some of this momentum in a manner that heightens our value to the community. For patrons of The New York Public Library, the future is bright.