

December, 2020

The Electronic Academic Library: Licensing Resources Versus Ownership and Implications for Access

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title, *Fortune & Glory*, so both the eBook and audiobook are metered for two years. Previous titles in the series have circulated over 1,000 times in both formats with as many as 25 eBook copies and 13 audiobook copies purchased per title and one to three copies still circulating. The current licenses for both the eBook and audiobook cost \$59.99. How many copies would you license?

- A 35-year old Nora Roberts romance published by Macmillan as an eBook must be licensed at \$40 for two years. If a customer requests it, would you license it?

Publishers offering copies that may be kept forever and charging close to the cover price help immensely in balancing the variety and size of an online collection and meeting demand from customers.

* Rothschild, J., 2020. *Hold On, Ebooks Cost HOW Much? The Inconvenient Truth About Library Ecollections / Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*. [online] Smartbitchestrashybooks.com. Available at: <<https://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2020/09/hold-on-ebooks-cost-how-much-the-inconvenient-truth-about-library-ecollections>> [Accessed 10 October 2020].

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Anyone visiting a contemporary college or university library will see that collections of books and research journals remain available. In some cases, they have been positioned and displayed to evoke fond memories of how a library should look and feel.

However, the physical collections of an academic library may prove very misleading to a casual observer. For instance, Criss Library at UNO took most of a century to acquire about 700,000 books. In just the last decade, the library has acquired access to over 1.2 million eBooks, including many residing in historical, archival databases. Particularly during this pandemic-afflicted year, use and check-outs of print books have plummeted, but eBooks have largely addressed any deficit in access to books.

In the mid-1990s, Criss Library subscribed to about 3,500 print periodicals (research journals, magazines, newspapers, etc.) In 2020 that number has fallen to precisely 137. However, the library now provides access to over 100,000 periodicals embedded in databases and on publishers' online platforms. Very few people at UNO use print periodicals anymore, and then usually only to find an ancient article that has not yet become available online.

Criss Library offers access to collections that would be almost unimaginable at a middle-sized, regional, state university campus twenty years ago. The UNO community clearly appreciates the convenience of access to electronic resources from campus or home, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The electronic library never closes except for the occasional maintenance window that may confound a night owl who studies between 1 AM and 5 AM on a Sunday morning.

College and university libraries commonly spend between 75% and 85% of their acquisition budgets on electronic resources. This is a natural consequence of redeploying budgets toward electronic resources, but it also reflects the cost of purchasing them. Prices for individual eBooks are often several times higher than the original print book. Book publishers, like record companies, remain concerned that online access

will badly affect their physical sales. Libraries often purchase large collections of eBooks to gain leverage that drives down the cost-per-eBook, but eBooks remain an expensive proposition.

Prices for electronic research journals may prove startling. Those who search publishers' sites without first logging in via the library often encounter a pay wall. Prices for individual articles typically run between \$30 and \$50 for those unaffiliated with a subscribing institution. Libraries intervene on behalf of students and faculty by purchasing accounts for many databases and publishers' sites, so that the costs are borne by the libraries. One should note that access to the articles is not free, but rather paid for by some combination of institutional support, tuition, and student fees. Still, the leverage provided by a library account makes more resources available than anyone could likely afford on her own.

All this electronic access sounds well and good for the library and its community, but what about the unaffiliated? This is where the news is less heartening. When a library purchases an electronic resource, it actually purchases a license which permits use within certain restrictions. A library does not own electronic resources; rather, it licenses them, and this can have concerning implications for access.

Off-campus access provides the most common example of a license restriction. Current students, faculty, and staff may connect to electronic resources from off-campus locations by logging in through a portal or account provided by the library. In most cases, an unaffiliated person may visit the library in person and use electronic resources on public access computers. However, this is not guaranteed. Criss Library has thousands of eBooks that are paid for on a per use basis. The library cannot afford to pay for access for everyone, so even inside the library these eBooks require a library login.

License restrictions can bedevil access even for affiliates. For example, an eBook may permit only one to three people to use it simultaneously. Such a limitation can hinder a professor who

wants all her students to read a chapter before the next class.

Libraries have long offered access to books and articles via Interlibrary Loan, which can assist unaffiliated users who are hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Interlibrary Loan can typically send a copy of a chapter from an eBook, but it cannot send the entire eBook. This restriction derives from both licensing and digital-rights-management protocols embedded in the software needed to view the eBook. As libraries purchase fewer print books and rely more on eBooks, we can foresee a time when it may prove difficult to acquire a book via Interlibrary Loan. The concern may be amplified should an eBook be the only edition published.

When purchasing large collections of eBooks or other electronic resources, academic libraries benefit from bargaining leverage. Publishers and distributors have generally been agreeable to prices that lower the cost-per-item. However, a potential downside of package purchases becomes apparent when budgets are stressed. Cutting a package means losing a lot of access, and should the bulk of a library's acquisitions reside in a small number of packages, little flexibility may remain to avoid opening large chasms in the library's collections.

The contemporary academic library stands testament to the remarkable transformation of access to published resources. It is doubtful that anyone would care to return entirely to the era of print and microfilm. Even so, for the unaffiliated or for those whose institutions face severe budget constraints, participation in the new era of electronic resources may prove limited and frustrating. The divide between the haves and have-nots remains, world without end.

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For more about the annual meeting see:
<https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/annual-meeting-2020.html>