

Publisher puts new limits on library e-books

March 8 2011, By Dahleen Glanton

The public library has long attracted avid readers with an unrivaled pitch: Check out a best-selling book for free and renew it multiple times.

But as more people ditch printed books in favor of e-books that can be downloaded directly to a computer, the rules are changing.

As of Monday, HarperCollins, publisher of authors such as Anne Rice, Sarah Palin and Michael Crichton, does not allow its e-books to be checked out from a library more than 26 times.

After that, the license on the e-book will expire, and libraries will have to decide whether to buy a new one.

For library users, that could mean longer waits for popular titles, tighter limits on how many times an e-book can be renewed and the possibility that e-books that are not repurchased would be available at the library for only about a year.

Librarians across the country are outraged and fear other publishers could adopt a similar model. Some have organized a boycott of books published by HarperCollins. They argue the restrictions place an additional burden on financially strapped public libraries, some of which have reduced their inventories because of budget constraints.

The added expenditures on e-books, they said, will make it more difficult to compete in an industry that is quickly becoming dominated by electronic readers such as the [iPad](#), the Nook and the Kindle.

"This strikes at the heart of what we do," said Chicago [Public Library](#) Commissioner Mary Dempsey, who described [electronic media](#) as the new virtual library. "With limited financial resources affecting all libraries across America, people are asking, 'Why would you do this?' "

For HarperCollins, it is about balancing the benefits to publishers, authors and libraries in a rapidly growing segment of the publishing industry that has left many newspapers, magazines and booksellers scrambling to catch up.

Nearly 10 years ago, when HarperCollins began offering e-books to libraries, the number of e-readers was too small to measure, the company said. Now, it is projected that more than 40 million e-reading devices will be in use in the U.S. this year.

"We have serious concerns that our previous e-book policy, selling e-books to libraries in perpetuity, if left unchanged, would undermine the emerging e-book eco-system, hurt the growing e-book channel, place additional pressure on physical bookstores, and in the end lead to a decrease in book sales and royalties paid to authors," HarperCollins said in a statement.

Librarians also have serious concerns. At the Naperville (Ill.) Public Library, the new policy would be an additional strain on a materials budget that has shrunk by about \$200,000 in the past three years, said deputy director Julie Rothenfluh.

"It's a balancing act for us," Rothenfluh said. "We have to be that much more careful to make sure what we purchase provides the best benefit to our users."

For most libraries, e-books are only a small percentage of the items circulated but represent the fastest-growing segment.

Librarians said HarperCollins' decision failed to factor in the role libraries play in promoting reading, which benefits the book industry. Some said the publisher should have included librarians in discussions about the checkout limit.

E-book checkouts are "a growing percentage, and it definitely reflects a trend that people want to take their e-reader and upload it free of charge with books from the library," said Steve Sposato, assistant director for collection development at Chicago libraries. "That's why it's important for us to be part of the conversation rather than just have it imposed on us."

HarperCollins, the country's second-largest publisher, is among about 1,000 publishers that offer e-books. Some publishers, including Simon & Schuster and Macmillan, do not offer e-books to libraries.

Libraries do not directly provide e-books to the public. But library cardholders can go to their library's website to browse digital selections provided by a third party and download them to their computer for free.

They can then be transferred to an e-reader. Apps for mobile devices allow e-books to be downloaded directly.

In most cases the third-party provider is a company called OverDrive, which provides e-books to some 13,000 libraries around the world. The company last week began listing HarperCollins' collection in a separate catalogue, in an effort to avoid confusion with books that can be checked out indefinitely.

Like the time limit on printed library books, most e-books are active for three weeks. After that, they are no longer available on the device and must be downloaded again.

According to librarians, the procedure should be the same for e-books and printed books.

"When we purchase a print copy, we get to keep it for as long as we want," said Audra Caplan, president of the Public Library Association. "It may eventually wear out or not circulate, but that's our choice."

Not all librarians are decrying HarperCollins' policy. Jason Kuhl, library operations director at Arlington Heights (Ill.) Memorial Library, said the new requirements might not be the financial drain some predict.

"Many times, books don't circulate 26 times. What we see with popular books is a surge once it comes out, and once everyone has read it, the interest wanes and we liquidate them," Kuhl said. "We will always buy a lot of copies upfront. With e-books, we won't necessarily replace every one of them."

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