



Michelle Snyder reads e-book at Central Library on lunch break, indicative of the soaring popularity of digital format. The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library offers 10,346 electronic volumes.
Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News file photo

Era of e-books has arrived

Libraries say usage is skyrocketing, as age-old tradition begins its descent

By Charity Vogel

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Christine Porto always thought of herself as the most bookish of bibliophiles.

"I'm what they call a book-lover," the 36-year-old South Buffalo woman confessed. "I love the feel of a book; I love the pages."

And yet Porto is also one of a growing number of people in Western New York dipping into electronic books and using the public library to do so.

New data from the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library shows that circulation of the system's 10,346 electronic volumes is skyrocketing -- at the same time that circulation of traditional materials has been remaining steady or dropping slightly.

Last month, library data showed that:

** In a four-day period after Christmas, library cardholders downloaded 3,028 library-owned electronic titles onto devices including home computers, cellphones and digital readers such as Nooks and Kindles.

** In a four-day period before the holidays, 1,889 titles were downloaded by users in various digital formats.

Those use levels show a significant increase from last year, when 1,503 titles were downloaded in the four days after the Christmas holiday, library officials said.

"It more than doubled," Library Director Mary Jean Jakubowski said of the post-holiday use. "Just in those four days, over 3,000 downloads occurred."

That's no surprise to Porto, who likes to read everything from horror novels to romance fiction in print editions and, now, on her phone.

"It's very convenient. And it's lightweight -- you don't have to carry around a [heavy] book," said Porto, who was reading on her Droid X cellphone at the Central Library last week. "Until recently -- I'm a total nerd -- I would always have a book in my purse, or carry one with me. But this is a convenience factor. If you have books in your phone, you always have new reading."

But the new e-books are not infinitely accessible to readers.

Just like print books, the library owns a certain number of copies of each digital title, meaning that only so many people can download it at one time.

The library system actually owns 8,498 separate e-titles, in categories ranging from popular materials to classics to scholarly materials. But there are 10,346 copies in the e-book system, due to the fact that there are multiple copies of some titles, library officials said.

Say you want to borrow "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett in an e-book format -- and many people did last year, when the novel was the most circulated fiction e-book in the system. If there are only 20 copies available and all 20 are "checked out" digitally, you must wait your turn just as with a print copy.

However, the e-book borrowing system does have some user-friendly features.

For instance, library cardholders may browse the e-book selections of the library at any hour of the day or night. There are no "open hours," as with library locations.

Also, the e-book system lets users place books on hold for future borrowing. So if a patron wants to read "The Help" but no copy is available, the patron can reserve the book the next time it becomes available. The patron is then notified by email when the book is ready to be checked out.

Patrons may read the e-books on iPads, Kindles, Nooks, BlackBerries and other smartphones, and also can simply download them to their computers.

Library officials called the growth in interest in e-books a new way to connect with patrons.

"The demand is there," said Jakubowski, who was reading her first e-book on her iPad last week. "And we provide services to meet the needs and demands of the residents of Erie County. This has been an exciting thing to watch."

Those demands for traditional library materials -- books, CDs, DVDs, periodicals, audiobooks and the like -- remain strong, with about 8 million items circulating from all 37 branches in the system in 2011, library officials said.

But between 2010 and last year, a slight drop in the total circulation of traditional materials was offset by a 387 percent increase in downloadable book circulation, resulting in an overall increase for the year of 0.7 percent in circulated materials, library data shows.

But Jakubowski said the familiar category of books is not falling behind.

Rather, she said, the system was dealing in 2011 with a cumulative loss of nearly 100 open hours each week, spread throughout the system's branches, and that also may have played into the small drops in circulation of traditional materials.

"Our accessibility for people to come in and get materials has been decreasing," Jakubowski said. "That makes a difference."

Thus, she believes that a direct tie cannot be made between the rise in e-books and the modest drop-off in book-driven circulation.

"It's unfair to say that it's related to the rise in e-books," Jakubowski said.

Still, it's clear that many people in Western New York are interested in trying out e-books and e-readers -- and if the libraries provide them an easy and inexpensive way to get digital books, they seem ready to take advantage.

Frank Ryan, 74, of Franklinville, received a Nook Color for Christmas and was learning how to use it last week. He said he looks forward to borrowing e-books from his outlying libraries in the Southern Tier, where such options also are available.

"It's handy," Ryan said. "There's a lot of nice things about it. I haven't really read anything on a screen yet, but it seems easy. You just slide your finger across."

Ilene Rothman, a physician who lives in East Concord, said she loves her Kindle and plans to try out the library's borrowing option for e-books.

"You have all your books in one place, and you always have it with you," Rothman said. "The one thing that I thought I'd miss is the handling of the books -- the feel of them. But you miss that for maybe the first day. It's just so convenient. And they're cheaper."

E-books currently cost the library an average of \$15 per title, library officials said. The average cost to the library for a new adult hardcover book is \$28, and \$18 for a new children's hardcover.

It remains to be seen how the value of e-books holds up over time and how publishers continue to negotiate their dealings with public libraries, library officials said.

"Are e-books a good bang for the buck, for the library? Yes, they are," Jakubowski said. "We're going to find the balance to meet that demand."

A few nitty-gritty details of the surge in popularity of e-readers remain to be fully worked out.

For instance, the library system here -- as libraries often do -- has long levied fines for patrons who keep books past their due dates.

With e-reader formats, there is no need to actually return the books, library officials said. They are automatically "returned" by electronic retrieval at the end of the borrowing period -- currently set for either seven or 14 days, not the three weeks allowed for print books -- meaning no overdue books and thus no late fees.

So are we entering an era when the thought of an overdue library fine will become a memory like the pay telephone booth?

Perhaps down the road.

Library officials, who acknowledge that they do use book fines to help pay the system's bills, say they still have to figure out how to go without that revenue.

But, they said, fines for late books were never meant to be a primary source of funds.

"Overdue fines are there as a deterrent," Jakubowski said. "They were never meant to be a revenue stream."

E-books by the numbers: At the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library

Total number of titles available: 8,498

Total e-book borrowing in 2011: 131,992

Days allowed to borrow electronic books: 7 or 14 **Ways to read e-books through the library system: Nook, Kindle, Sony Reader, BlackBerry, certain cellphones, as well as PCs and Macs**

cvogel@buffnews.com

Comments

SORT: NEWEST FIRST | OLDEST FIRST

""Our accessibility for people to come in and get materials has been decreasing," Jakubowski said. "That makes a difference." Thus, she believes that a direct tie cannot be made between the rise in e-books and the modest drop-off in book-driven circulation. "It's unfair to say that it's related to the rise in e-books," Jakubowski said." How can Jakubowski dispute the corollary of traditional book lending decreases as a result of e-book lending increases? E-books may not be the sole cause of the downward trend of traditional book-lending but to say there is no correlation between the two is inaccurate. Leisure or aesthetic book reading is declining across the nation. More people watch television for entertainment rather than reading books. Perhaps The Buffalo News could dig a bit further and ask the B&ECPL to provide the number of traditional book loans per branch in the last five years. Where are the greatest number of readers?

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[Total number of titles available: 8,498] I agree with what everyone is saying about enjoying the use of an actual paperbound book. I prefer it myself but there are a few considerations that make e-books a much superior form of dissemination - their low price and lack of any physical, space-consuming heft. This may not be as much of a consideration for others but I personally have over 24,000 digital titles and I can fit the entire library on several blu-ray data disks. Can you imagine how much room space and how many bookshelves would be needed to hold that library in non-digital form? Not to mention how difficult it would be to move that many titles - now I can carry an extensive library like that in my pocket! One other thing too - with paperbound books you're at the mercy of the printing typeset. With digital books you can view the print at whatever magnification is comfortable. Also, as e-books become more hyper-linked responsive they offer multi-media opportunities that could never exist in a printed book. All in all I think e-books are a terrific development.

RICK BRIDENBAKER, WEST SENECA, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 04:47 PM

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I'm old fashioned. I love books you don't have to plug into a wall to recharge. I love books that are signed by the author at local bookstores. Yes, the new eBooks are space savers, but if the power goes out, you can't recharge your Kindle. Will they ever have a huge eBook to replace my Art Books or Coffee Table Books? I doubt it. At least I know when I die, my paper books, like me, will turn into dust, while an eBook will lie in some dump site contaminating the land. See you at the next Book Sale.

PHILIP JAMES JAROSZ, BUFFALO, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 03:20 PM

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There is a huge library online called Project Gutenberg. It provides thousands of free books online, to thousands of people, without any expensive librarians. People like you, Norm, just don't know what they're talking about, all you need is a server for eBooks. It can all be done online, and you don't need a librarian to enter you into the queue to get the next download. The library system doesn't need to hire full librarians at \$35,000 and benefits and pension for people who just use the internet at the library, or who know which cd or book they want. It doesn't need a full librarian to do simple entries into the computer system that people can do online. The last time I went to the library on Elmwood near my house, there were almost as many workers as patrons. There were shelveers doing nothing, just pushing a cart with one book back and forth. Loving books has nothing to do with overstaffing libraries.

TIMOTHY DOMST, BUFFALO, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 02:06 PM

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@Beth. Thank you.

BOB CATALANO, DERBY, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 01:34 PM

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Good article, Charity. I think we are just beginning to see the tip of the iceberg here. The ramifications, of e-books and e-written matter of all types, to publishers, writers, students and indeed even newspapers and magazines are enormous. I am mindful of the process in the not too distant switch from celluloid film to digital photography. Those that embraced the new technology survived and prospered. Those who did not went the way of the "Buggy whip factory." Joseph X. Martin Amherst, N.Y.

JOSEPH MARTIN, WILLIAMSVILLE, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 01:17 PM

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This article speaks of the "descent" of traditional services when in fact there is no evidence of that at all here. See: <http://librariansassociation.org/2012/01/17/news-article-too-quick-to-dismiss-traditional-library-services/> @Bob - As a librarian that has worked at the library, though not in the purchasing department, I can tell you that the library buys "rights" to a certain number of digital copies of books and that the technology is locked down in such a way that allows one person to use one copy of a title at a time, much like print books. The cost is per copy I believe, not per checkout. And the library's website is actually accessible at all hours or should be except for a brief period at around 9pm when maintenance occurs.

BETH LEWITZKY, BUFFALO, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 12:58 PM

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I cut my reading teeth on once or twice weekly trips to the pre-move across to the plaza, North Park Branch Buffalo & Erie County Public Library with mom and sis. My parents were voracious readers and mom could have kept the branch going just by herself. PS #81 had trips there and the branch had a Friday after school program for youngsters. Darn the age limit; but there was something to be said for the move to the adult side and its borrowing privileges. The sights, sounds, aromas of my first library, the North Park Branch remain with me to this day and darn the insulation problems calling for abandoning it! The main branch downtown had its own plus-side to it; information stored in the old card system and floors containing everything from history to recipes. My first foray into Mexican cooking came from a recipe book above the main floor. But the move from childhood involved saying goodbye to the bicycle bringing me to the North Park branch, when the bus and later dad's 61 Rambler got me downtown. Nostalgia aside, the library is a special social institution; parchment, paper bound or now, electronic and hopefully, wont be caste aside given budget constraints and the thought that anyone with a PC and Internet connection is able to tap-into ALL the worlds wisdom depending upon the limitations of language spoken and/or information as yet downloaded into a data base. Do not abandon a public library to modernity. Sad to say, sooner or later the power goes out, but war, natural disaster, human folly and it is the repository of our knowledge allowing humanity to pick itself up by its knuckles and continue our journey to the stars. Im not the first to consider that possibility; the theme of Foundation Trilogy postulated a return to a universal dark age and the way back.

BARRY ZAVAH, ALPINE, TX on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 12:47 PM

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Is there any cost to download? If the library "owns" a title, why is it limited in the number of downloads? If you can send an email to a million people, why not a digital book? Contrary

to the story, the EC library web site is not open around the clock. I don't know why. It should be.

BOB CATALANO, DERBY, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 11:04 AM

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Librarians are always needed as libraries not only serve the community to take out books; hard copied or otherwise, but also as community centers for people to use computers to look for jobs, borrow music, videos, etc. Also, classes on literacy, storytelling and other public events take place. One needs to see the entire picture of these marvelous institutions.

JOHN GABNER, NIAGARA FALLS, NY on Tue Jan 17, 2012 at 09:50 AM

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