

# Comparison Points and Decision Points

This report is intended to provide enough information to help libraries, library consortia, and other organizations make informed decisions about whether to launch a digital audiobook service and, if so, what decision points will ensure that the service will be welcomed and used by the target population.

This chapter outlines the key comparison and decision points, then briefly describes, where information is available, how the current five major vendors of digital audiobook services for libraries compare. However, readers must remember that the marketplace is changing rapidly, with new suppliers and vendors entering the market and existing vendors revising and fine-tuning their systems and business models. Therefore, this information may soon be outdated.

## Collections

Ultimately, content should trump technology in a library's digital audiobook service. In other words, when all is said and done, most users of a digital audiobook service want to listen to a good audiobook, not fiddle with and master the technology. Therefore, this section looks at the master collections offered by the major vendors serving the library market.

## Overall Size

Size and quality are both important factors in evaluating digital audiobook master collections. However, the sad fact is that the master collections offered by digital audiobook vendors to the library market are not, at present, very large. Although Google, the Open Content Alliance, and other massive digitization projects busily and happily make digital versions of millions of print books, none

of the top five audiobook vendors have anywhere near 100,000 titles in their master collections. Audible, which has been at this business the longest, has the largest collection. The relatively small size and slow growth of these collections likely has slowed the adoption and diffusion of audiobook listening as a viable, enjoyable, useful option to readers.

### Audible

Audible has a master collection of more than 14,100 audiobooks.<sup>1</sup>

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary has approximately 4,000 titles. In mid-November 2006, it had 934 digital audiobooks in its core collection, with many others in various specialized collections.<sup>2</sup>

### OverDrive

As of mid-November 2006, OverDrive had 7,617 titles in its master collection of downloadable digital audiobooks.<sup>3</sup>

### Playaway

As of mid-November 2006, Playaway had approximately 165 titles that could be purchased directly from Playaway.<sup>4</sup>

Playaway also has agreements with other companies for distribution of its digital audiobooks on Playaway devices. For example, Recorded Books offers approximately 20 of Playaway's titles as a core collection.<sup>5</sup> Recorded Books also offers various continuous order plans that send out 6 of Playaway's adult titles, 4 of Playaway's children's/young adult titles, or both every quarter.<sup>6</sup> Follett Library Resources also began distributing Playaway audiobooks in 2006. As of October 2006, Follett offered approximately 100 Playaway titles.<sup>7</sup>

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

The TumbleTalkingBooks master collection contains approximately five hundred titles. Approximately sixty-five Tumble Read-Along titles, which combine audiobooks with a variable-font-size visual e-book, are included in the master collection.<sup>8</sup>

### Overlap within and across Master Collections

If an audiobook vendor offers selection of individual titles, its master collection may contain two or more audiobook renditions of the same basic text. This type of overlap is not always bad because it gives the selector an opportunity to compare prices and, if audio snippets are available, the voice talent of the narrator.

#### Audible

Because Audible has the largest master collection of the five vendors analyzed in this report, it has quite a few duplicate titles. When Audible's catalog of audiobooks is downloaded and sorted by title in spreadsheet software, users can see numerous titles have multiple unabridged versions available.<sup>9</sup> For example, just in the *Gr* section, a user can quickly spot duplicate versions of *Great Expectations* and *Green Eggs and Ham*.

#### NetLibrary

Because NetLibrary's audiobook service was built initially on content from Recorded Books—only recently expanding to include content from other suppliers—the number of duplicate titles probably is small or nil. For example, there is only one version of *Great Expectations*.<sup>10</sup>

#### OverDrive

There is some overlap within OverDrive's master collection. For example, as of late October 2006, the OverDrive master collection contained three directly competitive unabridged versions of *Great Expectations* (from Brilliance, Blackstone, and Books on Tape), not to mention the abridged version from Naxos of America and the abridged Spanish version from YOYO USA.<sup>11</sup>

#### Playaway

Because Playaway licenses its platform to several distributors, the issue of content overlap also comes up. According to Mike Belsito, a Playaway representative, there should be no content overlap between the titles available from Recorded Books and the titles available directly from Playaway (information from phone conversation with the author on October 27, 2006). There is some title overlap between Playaway direct and Follett Playaway.

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

Ron Zevy of TumbleBooks.com reports that TumbleTalkingBooks offers multiple versions of several classics,

such as *Around the World in 80 Days* (phone conversation with the author on November 15, 2006).

### Growth Rates

In addition to the overall size of a master collection, the growth rate can be a key indicator of its current and future worth to a particular library or library consortium and its audiobook users. Like a hungry lion, any collection that emphasizes frontlist material must be regularly fed copious amounts of new material. Audiobook aficionados hunger for new material from their favorite authors. For example, the Unabridged digital audiobook initiative ([www.unabridged.info](http://www.unabridged.info)) tries to complete and announce several purchase orders each month. When a new PO is announced, Unabridged often experiences a spurt in usage as users scramble for the new content and also for other digital audiobooks already in the collection.

*Unabridged Digital Audiobook Initiative*  
[www.unabridged.info](http://www.unabridged.info)

#### Audible

The weekly "Just Added" lists on the Audible Web site indicate that in late October and early November 2006, Audible was adding approximately fifty new titles per week. These titles included not only audiobooks, but also radio programs, performances, and other digital audio content.<sup>12</sup>

#### NetLibrary

According to Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary, that vendor recently added a significant number of titles from Blackstone, Books on Tape, Listen and Live, and other suppliers of audio content. It doubled the size of its master collection in the past six months (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

#### OverDrive

In 2006, OverDrive added 355 titles to its master collection in August, 239 titles in September, and 288 titles in October, for a monthly average of 294 over those three months. During the first ten months of 2006, OverDrive added a total of 2,737 new titles.<sup>13</sup>

#### Playaway

Although the Playaway master collection is small, the author's observations over time indicate that it has been growing rapidly. As recently as March 2006, its master collection contained fewer than 40 titles. Six months later it offered 147 titles. Of course, as any collection grows, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain such a rapid rate of growth.

## TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

No hard data could be obtained about the growth rate of the TumbleTalkingBooks collection, but observations by the author of its master title list over one year indicate a modest growth rate.

## Shrinkage Patterns and Rates

The opposite of growth rates for these master collections is the shrinkage patterns and rates. Shrinkage occurs when titles that, at one time, were available for purchase or lease have for some reason been removed from the master collection. This situation sometimes also occurs with electronic periodical and journal aggregators. Contract renewals with publishers and business-to-business aggregators turn sour, and content is removed from these massive databases of periodical literature.

The impact of master collection shrinkage on a library and its patrons can vary. If you lease digital audio titles, any titles removed from the vendor's master collection are no longer available to your patrons. If you purchase digital audiobooks, those copies remain in your collection, even if the title is no longer available from the vendor. However, if user demand increases, you will be unable to purchase additional copies. For example, a few high-demand titles in the Unabridged service no longer are available for purchase through OverDrive.

## Prerelease, Frontlist, Backlist, Public Domain

Any master collection of digital audiobooks can be analyzed according to the age of the content. One simple three-way method of slicing up a collection is into frontlist, backlist, and public-domain titles. Frontlist titles are those that have been recently published. Backlist titles are the older titles that are still protected by copyright. Public-domain works are no longer protected by copyright, although the specific audiobook production may still be covered by copyright. For the purposes of analyzing a master collection, however, it probably is better to analyze the age of the original work, not the publication date of the specific audiobook production.

Some audiobook vendors prominently display the publication date of a particular audiobook or may even trumpet the date it was added to the master collection. A library selector may need to do much more work to ascertain the actual first publication date of that work. For example, although digital audiobook XYZ may have been created in 2005 and thus qualify as a frontlist title, the book XYZ may have first been published, say, in 1957, which clearly places it in the backlist category.

Although a master collection with a relatively high percentage of true frontlist titles may be more valuable for libraries seeking to launch an audiobook service, the needs and preferences of populations will differ. Each library needs to compare its data about the various master

collections against data about the population it serves, especially the segment that would probably use a digital audiobook service.

Another question for potential vendors and suppliers is how soon after release of the printed version of the book the audiobook version will be available to libraries. Increasingly, the audiobook release of a new likely bestseller coincides with the release of the printed book. Some digital audiobook vendors will allow a library to prepurchase copies before the release and list them in its online catalog. Libraries can then use holds placed against these yet-to-be-released bestsellers to gauge demand. In some instances, I acquire additional copies of a yet-to-be-released title for Unabridged based on the strong early demand shown by the number of holds.

## Audible

Because Audible does not provide a publication date in its downloadable list of titles, and because the list of titles is so large, it is very difficult to make even rough estimates of how many titles are frontlist, backlist, and in the public domain.

## NetLibrary

NetLibrary is committed to frontlist and high-demand backlist titles. According to Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary, it will begin carrying content from Books on Tape with 200 recent backlist titles, and then add all new titles from Books on Tape as they become available (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

## OverDrive

Approximately 83 percent of OverDrive's master collection of digital audiobooks is listed with a "pub date" of January 1, 2005, or later. However, the "pub date" listed is the date on which that digital audiobook version was published, not the date on which the work was first published in any format.<sup>14</sup> OverDrive allows libraries to list audiobooks in their online catalogs before the book is released, so libraries can gauge early demand for titles.

## Playaway

Follett's "Language Arts Catalog" contains approximately thirty Playaway titles, mainly out-of-copyright children's classics, but also a couple of titles in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series. Follett's "General Titles" includes approximately sixty-five titles, most of them frontlist and recent backlist titles.<sup>15</sup>

## TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

Dates of original publication of the books available in TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Along formats are not readily available, but a visual scan of the title index indicates a balanced mix of frontlist, backlist, and public domain content.<sup>16</sup>

## Subject and Genre Strengths

This category of analysis includes a variety of parameters. For fiction audiobooks, I often analyze master collections along genre lines, such as mystery, romance, thriller, and science fiction. For nonfiction books, it may be useful to analyze the collections along broad disciplinary lines, such as history, science, politics, self-help, and religion. This category also can include breaking down a collection by reading levels, such as audiobooks geared toward children, young adults, and adults.

One potential problem with analysis by subject and genre is the fact that the subject headings and genre descriptions usually are supplied by the vendors or even by their content suppliers—publishers and business-to-business aggregators. If a vendor is using more than one content supplier, the categories may not be consistently applied across the master collection. One publisher may categorize an author's works as general fiction, while another publisher or content aggregator may categorize works by the same author as mystery. These differences in categorization can affect the findability and use of different titles by the same author.

### Audible

Audible uses 28 categories for its content. Audible's master collection is especially strong in fiction and certain categories of genre fiction, such as mysteries and thrillers. The larger categories in the master collection are fiction in general (24.6 percent), mysteries/thrillers (12.7 percent), arts and entertainment (8.7 percent), classics (7.1 percent), biographies and memoirs (6.6 percent), business (4.9 percent), religion and spirituality (4.5 percent), history (4.4 percent), self-development (3.6 percent), nonfiction in general (3.4 percent), and education (3.1 percent).<sup>17</sup>

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary's core collection is especially strong in general fiction and certain genre fiction, such as mysteries. However, it also has a substantial nonfiction collection, especially foreign language materials. According to Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary, the company's long-range plan is to offer other types of audio content and media (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

### OverDrive

OverDrive uses eighty-two subject headings to categorize its digital audiobooks. Many audiobooks in its master collection are assigned two or more subject headings. The subject headings appear to have been assigned by OverDrive's content suppliers. A sampling of subject headings and the percentage of titles assigned each heading include the following:

- biography and autobiography (3.5 percent)
- business (3.3 percent)

- classic literature (6.1 percent)
- fiction in general (13.1 percent)
- history (2.5 percent)
- juvenile fiction, literature, and nonfiction (9.7 percent)
- literature (4.4 percent)
- mysteries (13.6 percent)
- nonfiction in general (3.2 percent)
- religion and spirituality (5.3 percent)
- romance (3.3 percent)
- science fiction and fantasy (3.0 percent)
- suspense (5.5 percent)
- thrillers (3.6 percent)
- westerns (2.5 percent)<sup>18</sup>

### Playaway

Playaway categorizes the majority of its titles as young adult and adult titles, but some titles are categorized as ideal for third through sixth graders, and some for fifth through eighth graders.

Follett's "General Titles" list includes approximately 65 titles, with nonfiction titles outweighing fiction titles.<sup>19</sup> Follett also offers "The Complete Language Course" titles for French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

Here is the way the TumbleTalkingBooks Web site describes the nature and scope of its collection: "Titles include unabridged high quality audio versions of classics of American and world literature, non-fiction, fiction, and children and teen books. We have licensed audio books from audio book publishers like Blackstone Audio, Highbridge Audio, and Naxos Audio. We also offer plays and drama, including all cast versions of popular Shakespeare plays."<sup>20</sup>

### Publishing Partners and Other Content Suppliers

Before selecting a vendor for your library's digital audiobook service, you will want to examine that vendor's publishing partners and other suppliers of content. Some suppliers offer high-quality, compelling content that will be in high demand by your users, while others may offer a lesser product that would receive less use. Some vendors of digital audiobooks use only one or a handful of content suppliers. Other vendors use a wide variety of content suppliers.

### Audible

Audible uses more than one hundred content providers, including Recorded Books, Time Warner AudioBooks, Simon and Schuster, Random House, Naxos, and Blackstone.<sup>21</sup>

### NetLibrary

During the first eighteen months of NetLibrary's digital audiobook service, which launched early in 2005,

Recorded Books was its sole content supplier. When asked, however, Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary stressed that the partnership between NetLibrary and Recorded Books did not prevent NetLibrary from adding content from other publishers, producers, and aggregators to its master collection (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

### OverDrive

OverDrive has more than fifty suppliers of digital audiobook content, including BBC Audiobooks, BBC Audiobooks America, Blackstone, Books on Tape, Brilliance, HarperCollins, McGraw-Hill, Naxos, Random House, and Time Warner.<sup>22</sup>

### Playaway

No information is readily available on Playaway's content suppliers.

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

TumbleBooks.com obtains its content from several suppliers, including Blackstone, Highbridge, and Naxos.<sup>23</sup>

## Content Characteristics

Another way to analyze the offerings of the various digital audiobook vendors is to examine content characteristics. These characteristics can include abridged versus unabridged, the type of voice talent (i.e., professional narrators, authors, or actors or celebrities), whether the narration is done by a single narrator or cast, and other similar questions.

### Abridged versus Unabridged

The “tastes great, less filling” preferential debate about abridged versus unabridged audiobook content probably will never be resolved. Most audiobook vendors offer a combination of abridged and unabridged content. Unabridged content seems to be more popular, but there must be a market for abridged content as well. One drawback to abridged versions is that usually there is no indication of who made the specific abridgement decisions and what criteria were used.

### Audible

Rather than categorizing an audiobook as merely unabridged or abridged, Audible describes its “faithfulness.” The faithfulness of a digital audiobook could be described as “abridged,” “unabridged,” or “as originally staged.” Approximately 32 percent of Audible's master collection is abridged, 49.4 percent (7,000 titles) is unabridged, 13.6 percent is as originally staged, and 4.9 percent is not categorized as to its faithfulness.<sup>24</sup>

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary audiobooks from Recorded Books are all unabridged titles, but as more content suppliers come on board, more abridged titles will be coming into the master collection.

### OverDrive

Approximately 6,300 of OverDrive's digital audiobooks (about 84 percent) are unabridged.<sup>25</sup>

### Playaway

Playaway offer three types of content: single unabridged titles (approximately 80 percent of its master collection), single abridged titles (approximately 10 percent of its master collection), and bundled content, usually consisting of two related titles (approximately 10 percent of its master collection).<sup>26</sup> Of the Playaway titles offered by Follett Library Resources, fewer than twenty are abridged.<sup>27</sup>

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

TumbleTalkingBooks offers primarily unabridged works, but some titles (and some versions of other titles) are abridged. An exact percentage breakdown is difficult to calculate, but, based on a random sampling of the titles in the master list, at least three-quarters of the titles appear to be unabridged.<sup>28</sup>

## Narrators

A motion picture is a massively collaborative art form. Besides the screenwriter, director, producer, and main actors, there are literally hundreds of people who contribute to the making of each film. A printed book also is a collaborative project involving the author, one or more editors, and several types of production and distribution teams. Nevertheless, we tend to think of books as primarily productions of authors. A digital audiobook lies somewhere between these two ends of the continuum. Specifically, for a human-narrated audiobook, the performance of the narrator or narrative team is almost as important as the writing performance of the author. A good narrator can enhance the overall experience of the audiobook, and a bad narrator can turn off the listener to what may be splendid prose.

Audiobook narrators can be divided into three categories: actors and other personalities; authors; and professional narrators. Although actors such as James Earl Jones or Burt Reynolds have recognizable, sonorous voices, usually their primary professional talent is overall acting, not narration. While authors as narrators can provide a unique perspective on a work, their primary talent is writing, not narrating. Professional narrators, on the other hand, have been trained and tested at the process of narration. Thus, professionally narrated audiobooks tend to be of a higher quality overall than author-narrated or actor-narrated audiobooks. Avid audiobook users are very

keen on the highs and lows of audiobook narration performances. They will want to know who narrated each audiobook in your collection. They will also want to be able to search and limit by narrator. They may also want to be able to search and limit by types of narrators, such as British versus American, Midwest versus Southern dialects, or male versus female narration.

Most audiobooks rely on a single narrator. Often the narrator will try to use slight vocal variations to distinguish direct dialogue spoken by various characters in a work of fiction. Other audiobooks utilize a cast of narrators, which may range in size from two to dozens.

Although audiobook vendors do not have direct control over who narrates the audiobooks they offer, you can at least do some sample checking of who narrates the books they offer. For example, NetLibrary's Recorded Books are all professionally narrated, and most are solo narrations.

### Nonverbal Background Sounds

Some audiobooks are more theatrical than others and include lots of nonverbal background sounds. Some will use mood-setting musical riffs at the beginning and ending of each chapter or section. Others will use background noises, such as gunshots, shrieks, thunder, or automobile crashes. Some users appreciate these theatrical background sounds, while others find them annoying. Although some content provided by vendors certainly contains nonverbal background sounds, it is difficult to ascertain how many audiobooks in a collection numbering in the thousands contain significant amounts of nonverbal sound, just as it is difficult to know what the users of your audiobook service prefer on this count. As one example, most of NetLibrary's Recorded Books include few nonverbal background sounds.

### Sound Quality

Describing the quality of the sound in an audiobook can be very subjective, and sound quality can vary along several parameters, some of which are beyond the control of the content producer, the vendor, and the library or library consortium. For example, if users use their own playback devices, or even their own earbuds, headphones, or external speakers, that essential component of sound quality cannot be controlled by the middlemen.

In general, the quality of the sound is not a major stumbling block in the digital audiobook market. Because these are digital files, repeated use does not reduce the quality of the sound. Scratches, for instance, are not a problem. As one example, the field testers of the Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center's (MITBC) study of the Playaway digital audiobook devices generally described the sound quality as good, very good, exceptional, great, fine, excellent, or in similar terms.<sup>29</sup>

### Prefatory and Supplementary Material

As with DVDs in the motion picture industry, prefatory and supplementary material not included in a printed book or e-book can be added to the audiobook version. For example, at the conclusion of the Brilliance Audio version of the recent thriller, *Rusty Nail*, by J. A. Konrath, there is a humorous audio clip from the author that pokes fun at the lengthy acknowledgements contained in many books these days. During his recitation of the phony acknowledgements, Konrath admits that he does not recognize some names and that he is only speculating on how to pronounce others.

Prefatory and supplementary material, obviously, also can have serious purposes that add to the overall value, usability, and information-sharing aspects of the book. For example, during the MITBC field tests of Playaway digital audiobooks, several testers suggested that the prefatory matter to the book should state the length of the book in pages, hours, and minutes. Another suggested that supplementary material, such as author interviews, book-study questions and discussion topics, and other similar material, be added to the end of the digital audiobook.<sup>30</sup>

### Languages Other Than English

Many vendors of digital audiobooks have begun offering content in languages other than English. Some of these audiobooks are intended to help an English-speaking user learn another language, some are books originally written in English and translated into other languages, and some are true foreign works.

#### Audible

Audible has 239 titles that it categorizes as in Spanish. Most of these titles are world classics in the public domain.<sup>31</sup>

#### NetLibrary

NetLibrary offers 151 titles in the Pimsleur language learning series.<sup>32</sup> Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary reports that the company is pursuing other non-English-language content (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

#### OverDrive

As of mid-November 2006, OverDrive offered 2 Arabic language-learning audiobooks, 3 Chinese language-learning audiobooks, 23 French titles (primarily juvenile fiction and language learning), 9 German language-learning audiobooks, 26 Italian titles (language learning, juvenile fiction, and adult classics), 6 Japanese language-learning audiobooks, 4 Russian language-learning and business titles, and 222 titles in Spanish.<sup>33</sup>

## Playaway

Playaway's master collection currently contains only English-language audiobooks.

## TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

The TumbleTalkingBooks master collection contains approximately 40 Spanish-language titles.<sup>34</sup>

## Other Types of Deliverable Content

In addition to digital audiobooks, many of these vendors also supply other types of audio content that can be delivered and played back via the same platform.

### Audible

Audible offers audio versions of newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio programs, as well as original programming.

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary also offers electronic books of various types, but that is beyond the scope of this report.

### OverDrive

OverDrive also offers classic radio programs, classical music, and digital videos. Of course, OverDrive also supplies e-books in several formats (currently Adobe and Mobipocket formats), but that is beyond the scope of this report. OverDrive's audiobooks, old-time radio programs, classical music, and digital videos can all be played through its OverDrive Media Console, which is freely downloadable software. Version 2.1 of the OverDrive Media Console, which circumvents the need to use Microsoft's Windows Media Player to transfer content to portable playback devices or to burn content to compact discs, was released in October 2006.

### Playaway

In addition to accessories for its playback device, such as portable speakers, spare earbuds, lanyards, and storage boxes (both lockable and unlocked), Playaway offers a few children's music titles.<sup>35</sup>

## TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

TumbleBooks also offers the TumbleBookLibrary for children, an amalgam of story books, games, puzzles, and similar content.<sup>36</sup>

## Purchase and Lease Options

Libraries contemplating a digital audiobook service should consider which way of purchasing access to content will be the most advantageous. One choice is between purchase plans and lease plans. Under a purchase model, libraries purchase and own each copy of each title. On the

other hand, a leasing model offers multiple concurrent users access to a title.

## Single Copies, Owned versus Leased with Multiple Concurrent Users

### Audible

Audible generally follows the "single copies, owned" model for purchase of digital audiobooks from its master collection.

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary uses total library circulation data to estimate the number of anticipated checkouts for an audiobook collection. Libraries lease access to the core collection and also gain access to the approximately thirty titles being added each month. NetLibrary has negotiated one-, two-, and three-year contracts with libraries.

The plan allows for multiple concurrent users, but aggregate use of the collection is limited. For each contract period, a maximum number of aggregate uses is specified. However, NetLibrary adds a clause (described under "Cost Components," a section that appears later in this chapter) to make sure no library runs out of checkouts.

Content from NetLibrary's new audiobook content suppliers, such as Books on Tape, will be sold on a per copy basis.

### OverDrive

OverDrive generally follows the "single copies, owned" model for purchase of digital audiobooks from its master collection. OverDrive also offers a multiple concurrent leasing plan for Blackstone audiobooks, which it calls its Maximum Access Plan. OverDrive also recently launched its School Download Library service, which enables unlimited concurrent usage of a core collection of approximately 740 titles (with a combination of audiobooks and electronic books available).

### Playaway

Playaway generally follows the "single copies, owned" model for purchase of digital audiobooks from its master collection.

## TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

TumbleTalkingBooks offers leased access to its entire master collection with virtually unlimited use, both at any particular moment and over the life of the contract period. If, for example, five hundred users want to access the same Tumble audiobook at the same time, that's permitted.

## Swappable Titles

Another aspect of purchase and lease plans allows libraries to "swap out" underperforming titles for more compelling content. TumbleTalkingBooks used to offer a

swappable lease plan, but it has since abandoned that plan. As of mid-November 2006, only the Maximum Access Plan from OverDrive offered the option to swap up to 10 percent of the leased access to titles during a subscription year.

### Selecting at the Individual Title Level

Selectable collections can be either for rent or for purchase. For a while, TumbleTalkingBooks allowed libraries and other institutional subscribers to rent a certain number of titles per year and select the titles individually from its master collection. This is an example of a selectable rental collection.

TumbleTalkingBooks, however, has moved away from offering selection of individual titles. Company representative Ron Zevy reported the management and logistical issues related to this model were too troublesome, time-consuming, and expensive to warrant continuing the model (phone conversation with the author on November 16, 2006).

Selecting content at the title level is expensive and time-consuming, regardless of whether the selecting is done by the vendor, consortium, library, or individual user. If done well, however, a digital audiobook collection selected at the individual copy level should become better over time, meaning that it will better meet the needs and interests of the population served. Of course, a population's needs and interests evolve over time because the needs and interests of individual users change and because the overall population of active users continues to change and, ideally, grow.

### Cost Components

The direct out-of-pocket cost components vary from vendor to vendor.

#### Audible

With Audible, libraries purchase copies of selected content and probably will need to invest in portable playback devices on which to load the content for circulation. Retail prices for Audible audiobooks range from 95 cents to \$147 (for the Pimplauer Spanish language learning books). The median price is \$17.50.<sup>37</sup>

#### NetLibrary

NetLibrary charges only the annual lease fee. If a library or library consortium runs out of circulation events before the end of the contract period, it may, at its discretion, purchase additional circulation events. According to Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary, as the company adds digital audiobooks from other content suppliers, it will add a purchase-per-copy option (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

#### OverDrive

OverDrive charges both a purchase price for each copy purchased and a monthly platform maintenance fee. OverDrive's leased access to a set number of Blackstone audiobooks requires another fee. The purchase price per copy of OverDrive's titles ranges from \$1.96 to \$240 (for an abridged version of *Remembrance of Things Past*).<sup>38</sup>

In 2006, OverDrive began bulk sales of portable playback devices from Creative Labs. Sales are made only to libraries and library-related organizations, not to individuals. Prices generally are below the best "street" prices for the particular makes and models.

#### Playaway

Playaway charges for each device purchased. List prices range from \$30 to \$60 per copy. Discounts for volume purchases are available.<sup>39</sup>

Playaway also sells various accessories, such as spare earbuds, batteries, lanyards, and storage cases (both the unlocked and lockable varieties).

Prices per copy for Playaway's titles offered by Follett Library Resources ranged from \$35 and \$65, with most titles \$45 or less.<sup>40</sup> Follett offers free shipping and handling.

#### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

A one-year lease to the master collection of TumbleTalkingBooks (including the Tumble Read-Alongs) costs \$999 for individual public libraries and schools. Discounts are available for public library districts with multiple branches and for school districts with multiple schools. Custom-quoted discounts for library consortia also are available.<sup>41</sup>

### Licensing and Agreement Terms

#### Entire Master Collection, Subcollections, Individual Titles

##### NetLibrary

NetLibrary offers a variety of subcollections, which are described in a February 2006 press release in the following way:

The eAudiobooks Core Collection features more than 1,300 of the latest eAudiobook best-sellers and book club favorites. The eAudioEssentials Collection contains 123 literary classics from writers such as James Joyce, Mark Twain, Victor Hugo and more. The eAudiobooks Pimpler Language Series Collection features easy-to-use language lessons in 39 languages for several learning levels and ESL students. Library users can listen



to the most authentic unabridged translation of the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Holy Bible with the eAudiobooks CEV Holy Bible Collection. The eAudiobooks Popular Fiction Collection contains more than 135 of the most popular works of fiction by authors such as Patricia Cornwell, Stephen King and more. The Children's/Young Adult eAudiobook Collection includes fiction titles from publishers such as Newberry and Caldecott, and includes time tested classics as well as bestsellers.<sup>42</sup>

### **TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs**

A subscription to TumbleTalkingBooks provides access to the entire master collection of approximately five hundred titles.

### **One User Per Copy at a Time, Multiple Concurrent Usage, Unlimited Concurrent Usage**

#### **TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs**

TumbleTalkingBooks offers unlimited concurrent usage of the titles in its collection. Users never are turned away, and they never need to place holds and wait for a title to become available.

## **File Formats and Compression Ratios**

### **Audible**

Content from Audible comes in a proprietary file format based on the MP3 format. Five compression ratios are offered, but not all compression ratios are available for each title, and not all "Audible-ready" playback devices are capable of playing all five compression ratios.

### **NetLibrary**

NetLibrary offers only the protected WMA file format. NetLibrary offers two compression ratios, which it calls radio quality (4 KBPS) and CD quality (34 KBPS).

### **OverDrive**

OverDrive offers just one file format (WMA) and just one compression ratio. OverDrive divides its audiobooks into parts. Each part can be downloaded separately if the patron chooses, and each part will fit on one CD, if the user decides to burn the audiobook to CD.

### **Playaway**

Because Playaway content cannot be transferred from the self-contained playback device to another device or

storage medium, information about the file format is not helpful to the user.

### **TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs**

TumbleTalkingBooks delivers its audiobooks as streaming Flash audio content.

## **Playback Options**

There are basically three options for playing back a digital audiobook: on your computer, either as a downloaded file or as streaming audio; on a portable playback device; and on a set of CDs to which the content has been burned by the end user. Not all vendors offer all three playback options.

In a potentially disturbing trend, some publishers are revoking the right to burn audiobook content to CDs, where that previously had been allowed.

### **Audible**

Audible supplies its own software for downloading, transferring, and playing back its digital audiobooks.

If a library purchases digital audiobooks from Audible, the only option is to load them on library-owned playback devices and circulate the devices. As Diana Brawley Sussman, director of the Southern Illinois Talking Book Center and a member of the Lobe Library collaborative, explained to me:

This puts the library in the position of having to purchase and circulate playback devices. It also means patrons will most likely need to come to the library to return and check out an e-book, rather than downloading the book from their home computer. The library's circulation will be limited by the number of playback devices it is able to afford. Policies for distributing those devices will need to be determined. At the present time, there are 190 players compatible with Audible's content. A list of compatible devices is available on the Audible.com web site. Audible does not sell playback devices.<sup>43</sup>

Audible has agreements with its content suppliers that enable users of most of its audiobooks to burn the content to CDs. However, some of its suppliers do not allow burning to CD.

### **NetLibrary**

For NetLibrary digital audiobooks, the only software needed is browser software to access the Web site catalog and media software to play back a downloaded digital audiobook. Freely available mainstream browser software and media software work well. Windows Media

Player, Nullsoft WinAmp, MusicMatch Jukebox, and other media player software can play this content.

According to Gillian Harrison of NetLibrary, the company has no plans to offer burning to CD. It feels the trend in publishing is to retract the rights to CD burning and that the CD is a waning storage medium (phone conversation with the author on September 15, 2006).

### OverDrive

In mid-2006, OverDrive entered into an agreement with Creative.com to sell Creative's portable playback devices in bulk quantities to libraries and other subscribing organizations.

Like Audible, OverDrive has agreements with its content suppliers that allow users of most of its audiobooks to burn the content to CDs, although some of its suppliers do not allow burning to CD.

### Playaway

Because Playaway content comes in a self-contained playback device, that is the only playback option.

## Key Features and Accessibility Issues

Libraries will want to consider certain key features of audiobooks on particular playback devices when evaluating potential sources of content:

- placeholder
- bookmarking
- the option to skip back 15 seconds
- variable speed playback (without the "Alvin and the Chipmunks" effect)
- sampling (The ability to sample parts of an audiobook benefits both end users and library selectors. You can sample not only the writing style, but also the style of the narration. Bear in mind that the pace of the narration should not play a major part in your selection decision because with variable speed playback the end user will be able to speed up or slow down the narrative pace to meet his or her specific needs and preferences.)
- nonlinear navigation

Ideally, content and information services provided by libraries are as accessible as possible to the entire service population. In reality, many library buildings, collections, and services are not very accessible to major parts of the target service population.

The accessibility of digital audiobooks has several facets:

- audible clues in response to commands
- keystroke alternatives
- accessible documentation and tech support
- accessible content Web sites

One of the five major vendors, NetLibrary, has its Web site evaluated by a third party for accessibility, and it has customer support reps who use screen-reading software.

## Circulation Models

For audiobook vendors that offer a circulating item model, one sticky issue is how—and how well—the items expire and are "returned" at the end of the circulation period.

### Audible

Audible's digital audiobooks that are transferred to a portable playback device do not automatically expire at the end of the circulation period. If a patron does not return the portable playback device with the audiobook loaded on it, the library cannot reload and circulate that book on another device.

Audible does not provide a circulation module. As a result, circulation information about these digital audiobooks and the playback devices will need to be maintained by a separate system, if only a spreadsheet, or be integrated into the library or consortium's overall circulation management system.

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary has a twenty-one day circulation period for its subscription content. Libraries cannot control the circulation period for purchased content. An individual can check out up to ten books at a time.

### OverDrive

OverDrive allows each library to establish a circulation period. At the end of the circulation period, the downloaded book becomes unlistenable. Note, however, that as of late 2006, if a digital audiobook had been either burned to CD or transferred to a portable playback device, it remained listenable after expiration.

### Playaway

Because Playaway is a self-contained device, the circulation model to be used is entirely up to the purchasing library or library consortium.

### TumbleTalkingBooks and Tumble Read-Alongs

Because the TumbleTalkingBooks content is delivered as streaming audio, there is no need to circulate files, devices, or anything else.

## Administrative Modules

The value of a good administrative module in general, and of good usage reports in particular, varies depending in part on the type of vended audiobook service the library uses. For example, if your library is using a vendor that leases unlimited concurrent access to the vendor's master collection, there is no need for an administrative module that handles title selection and purchase orders well. The usage statistics of this type of system may be marginally interesting to the subscribing library, and it may help inform the decision whether or not to renew the library's subscription to the service, but good usage statistics will not be mission critical for that library's audiobook service. On the other hand, if your library decides to go with an audiobook vendor that offers (or requires) selection and purchase at the title or item levels, you will want to evaluate the administrative module and statistical reporting capabilities very carefully.

### Audible

Audible does not offer a library administrative module for its digital audiobooks.

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary has a Library Resource Center that functions as an administrative module, source of usage statistics, and so on. Usage reports are provided in real time. Reports can be exported in tab-delimited format for further analysis offline using spreadsheet software.

### OverDrive

Because OverDrive utilizes primarily the model whereby libraries purchase and own individual copies of titles, and because OverDrive has a fully developed administrative module and statistical reporting package (called Digital Library Reserve), it may be useful to examine in detail how OverDrive's administrative module can be used to operate on a daily basis and to improve the operation of a downloadable digital audiobook service. The discussion below describes how this module is used in connection with the Unabridged downloadable digital audiobook service.

When the OverDrive administrative module generates a report online, the user can re-sort the data by clicking on a column heading. For example, click on the Date column, and the rows are sorted by date. Click on the Date column again, and the rows are sorted in reverse chronological order. Most of the reports available through the OverDrive administrative module can be exported either as CSV (comma separated value) files or as XLS (Excel spreadsheet) files for further manipulation offline.

Nearly all of the reports allow the user to specify a date range. If an account is broken into smaller segments, such as individual libraries in a consortium or branch libraries within a library system, the user can also request a report that covers all activity or just activity pertinent to

a specific segment. For example, because the Unabridged service covers nine states, all of the reports can be broken down by state. In addition, some states are broken into smaller areas, so the user can request reports showing detailed usage information about specific service areas within the state.

Specific reports available through the OverDrive administrative module are described below.

**Purchase order history report**—The purchase order history report contains all of the purchase orders that a library or library consortium has submitted to Unabridged. The number of units purchased through each purchase order, the dollars spent, the dates, the person who executed the purchase order, and various control numbers are listed in the report. When a purchase order is being submitted online, before completing the purchase order, the system generates a minireport that summarizes the current month's purchase order activity and amount spent, including the dollar amount for the purchase order about to be finalized. That way, if collection developers have a target monthly expenditure, they can quickly see where they are in regard to that target amount.

**Report of content usage through Maximum Access Plan**—If a library or library consortium uses OverDrive's Maximum Access Plan, which allows multiple concurrent access to a library-selected set of digital audiobooks, the administrative module offers a report on usage of content through that plan.

**Activity chart**—The administrative module can also generate an activity chart, which lists checkouts by day, month, publisher, format (if the library offers more than one format, such as audiobooks, music, and e-books), title, genre, and branch. For example, this report can be set to show data for the current month. By including data for all branches, users can quickly see the current month's overall usage of the service. By including data only for certain branches, they can quickly see how usage spreads across those branches.

**Purchased title report**—The purchased title report is very useful for collection assessment, management, and development. It lists each purchased title in the collection, publisher, author, subject (genre), date each title was added to the collection, number of copies, overall checkouts, turnover for each title (i.e., the number of overall checkouts divided by the number of purchased copies), overall holds that have been placed on that title, current checkouts, and current holds. By generating this report, which takes only a few seconds, the collection-development librarian can quickly discern how many titles and copies are in the collection, as well as totals for all the checkout and hold measures. For example, for the Unabridged service, it is typical to have approximately one third of all copies in the collection currently checked out. The overall average turnover rate for the items in the collection is over 5.1. In other words, on average, each item in the collection has circulated more than 5 times. When

information gleaned from other reports is pulled in, the content cost per circulation (in this case, \$7.52) is quickly calculated.<sup>44</sup>

When downloaded and manipulated as a spreadsheet, the purchased title report is a very powerful collection-development tool. When sorted by author, it can provide insights into how popular a particular author is with users of the service. This information is especially helpful when making subsequent selection decisions about new titles by the same author added to the master collection. The same kind of analysis can be performed by genre or publisher to discern high-performing pockets within the collection.

Once a title has been checked out at least once, the title field in the purchased title report becomes a hotlink. When the collection-development librarian clicks on that link, the administrative module presents a summary report on all circulations of copies of that title, including the lending period at the time of each checkout, the date, and the branch—but no information about the individuals who checked out the book, of course. For example, the book *Wolves and Honey* has circulated eight times since being added to the collection. Five of those checkouts have come from Oregon users.<sup>45</sup>

The turnover rate is defined as the number of circulations divided by the number of items available to circulate. Using the OverDrive administrative module, a librarian can view the turnover rate for the collection for a specified time period. Various turnover-rate parameters, such as genre, publisher, or even title, can be specified. For example, when the turnover rate for a recent period of operation of Unabridged (July 1–October 31, 2006) is calculated along the parameter of publisher, it becomes evident that, of the publishers with more than ten audiobooks in Unabridged, Time Warner is the top performer, followed closely by Brilliance Audio, from which approximately 38 percent of the collection came. When the turnover rate for the same period is calculated for genre, the top performers include crime, business (yes, those are different categories), biography and autobiography, science fiction and fantasy, suspense, and romance. Classic literature, current events, and, oddly, humor are a few of the genre categories with low turnover rates. Of course, such turnover-rate analyses must be taken with a grain of salt, because not all items have been in the collection for the same amount of time, and the quality of content selected from each genre and publisher may vary depending on the knowledge and skill of the selectors.

**New patron registrations report**—The new patron registrations report allows you to see how many new active users began using your audiobook service in a specified period of time.

**Title statistics report**—The title statistics report enables the collection development team to see which titles, format, or genres have received the most checkouts or holds during a specified time period. Because these are

just raw tabulations, without the context of total items, checkouts, and holds, their usefulness is limited. For example, during the four most recent months of activity in Unabridged, general fiction had received the most checkouts, followed closely by suspense. When we look at the number of holds placed by genre during the same four-month period, fiction and suspense are tied for first.

**Current waiting list report**—The current waiting list report provides basic information about each title (author, publisher, ISBN, etc.), the number of current holds on the titles, the number of owned copies, the ratio of holds to owned copies, and the earliest date on which a current hold on any copy of the title was placed. This report also indicates the total number of patrons on one or more waiting lists for audiobooks in your collection, as well as the current waiting period. Because the report can be sorted by any column, such as total number of holds in descending order, or ratio in descending order, it is easy for a collection developer to review current holds and make decisions about adding additional copies of high-demand titles. Because it is becoming increasingly common for audiobooks to be purchased by institutional customers prior to the release of the book in any format, it is possible for users to place prerelease holds on a book. This waiting list information can then be used to ensure that the digital audiobook service has a sufficient number of copies to meet the initial demand. Also, because online purchase orders make new titles and additional copies of existing titles instantly available to online users, it is possible for the collection-development team to make daily or semiweekly micropurchases to respond to patterns evident in the current waiting list report.

**Waiting list history report**—The waiting list history report does something similar for a specified period of time in the past. It is possible to generate waiting lists for various parameters, such as by day, month, publisher, format, title, genre, or branch. For example, if a waiting list history report is generated for July through October 2006 along the title parameter, it reveals that *5th Horseman* has had the most holds placed on it (twenty), followed by *Ist to Die* with eighteen.<sup>46</sup> This information, coupled with actual circulation information, enables the selector to view demand for a title over a longer period of time. Also, if you ever write a work of fiction, it may be a good bet to have the title begin with an ordinal number.

**Reports on current checkouts**—It also is possible to search for current checkouts along several parameters, such as library card number or title. This particular report is useful primarily for troubleshooting. However, if you search by title, you get a report summarizing all circulation events for that particular title. A useful expansion of this report would be one that interfiles all borrowing and hold-placing activities for a title.

**Digital library statistics report**—The digital library statistics report provides summary information about the

number of titles and copies in the collection, the number of checkouts and holds, and the number of unique patrons who have used the service to check out at least one digital audiobook. For example, this report indicates that twenty-nine percent of all patrons who have ever checked out a digital audiobook through the Unabridged service currently have a title checked out.<sup>47</sup> By default, this report covers all activity from the inception of the digital audiobook service to the present, but it is possible to specify date ranges.

**Web site usage reports**—OverDrive's Digital Library Reserve also provides several reports of usage data about the collection Web site. The Web site traffic report contains information commonly found in Web log analyses, such as the total page requests for a specified period of time, total patron sessions, total patron referrals, average patron page visits, and average patron session length. For example, the average length of a patron session in the Unabridged content collection in September 2006 was thirty-one minutes.<sup>48</sup>

The patron interest report is, well, interesting. It reports the total number of detailed item records viewed in the Web site catalog to the digital audiobook collection, as well as the top fifty titles in terms of detailed item records viewed. This could be called colloquially the “nibble” report because it indicates patron interest prior to the decision to check out and download a digital audiobook. When patrons are just searching and browsing, viewing the detailed item record indicates a certain level of interest that may not lead to actually checking out an item.

The Web site page requests report lists the total Web page requests for the specified period of time, as well as the more popular individual pages on the collection Web site.

### Playaway

Playaway does not offer a library administrative module for its digital audiobooks

## Integration with Other Library Collections, Systems, and Services

Integration of digital audiobook content is another factor to consider as libraries investigate and implement digital audiobook services. Integration can happen in various ways in this context. One form of integration is to compile all digital audiobook content in one seamless collection. For example, if an individual library subscribes to NetLibrary audiobooks and gains access to OverDrive audiobooks through some consortia or statewide initiative, that library may want to pull all this digital audiobook content together into a seamlessly whole collection and service that it presents to its users. Currently, this is very difficult. The ListenIllinois initiative is trying to do this with content supplied by OverDrive, NetLibrary, and Audible.

There are at least two major integration issues regarding vended digital audiobook services. The first involves the processes by which the user population searches for and finds available audiobook content. Some people commence their search knowing that they are looking for audiobooks. When that is the situation, pointing them to a silo Web site where the audiobooks can be searched, found, browsed, downloaded (if applicable), and used may be sufficient. If, however, the user begins his or her search without any particular format in mind, the library or library consortium will want to have records about its audiobook collection—whether leased or purchased—integrated with the finding aids for other types of content. If a library user looks for a known title or performs a subject search and pulls up a list of results, being able to display and quickly discern the audiobook content within that welter of results could be a boon both to the individual user and to usage of the library's audiobook collection as a whole.

A second major integration involves integrating digital audiobooks from two or more vendors. As libraries learn that digital audiobooks are of sustained interest to the populations they serve, the libraries may want to use the services of various vendors.

### NetLibrary

NetLibrary provides machine-readable cataloging, or MARC, records free of charge to the subscribing libraries. NetLibrary does not offer a shared model for consortium use, but it will work on a group subscription with a volume discount, so there may be some value in this consortium type and statewide agreements.

### OverDrive

OverDrive offers MARC records at a cost of \$1.50 per record (phone conversation with Claudia Weissman of OverDrive, November 13, 2006.)

## Technical Support

All five of the vendors outlined in this report offer some type of technical support. The better technical support systems will use multiple interaction modes (Web form, e-mail, documentation, video demonstrations, and live humans) and use tracking software for Web form and e-mail tech support requests so that, ideally, no request is lost or allowed to languish unanswered.

### Notes

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2. “eAudiobooks collections and titles,” Online Computer Library Center Web site, [www.oclc.org/audiobooks/title\\_lists/default.htm](http://www.oclc.org/audiobooks/title_lists/default.htm) (accessed November 14, 2006). Lists of

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  14. Ibid.
  15. "Introducing Playaway."
  16. "About TumbleTalkingBooks."
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  18. Search in OverDrive's Digital Library Reserve administrative module.
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  46. Data from waiting list history report generated in OverDrive's Digital Library Reserve administrative module for the Unabridged downloadable digital audiobook service November 1, 2006.

47. Data from digital library statistics report generated in OverDrive's Digital Library Reserve administrative module for the Unabridged downloadable digital audiobook service November 1, 2006.

48. Data from Web site usage report generated in OverDrive's Digital Library Reserve administrative module for the Unabridged downloadable digital audiobook service November 1, 2006.