

Implementing and Sustaining a Digital Audiobook Service

Getting Started

At the outset of a digital audiobook service, orientation, training, and tech support almost certainly will be a team effort—witting or unwitting—among the vendor, the library consortium (if applicable), the individual library, the user’s friends and family, and the user. Although at first glance it may seem advantageous to have the vendor provide the lion’s share of the orientation, training, and tech support, there actually are several compelling reasons for encouraging other members of the team to do a substantial part of this work. At the library and library consortium levels, having staff members fulfill these functions provides a great opportunity for library staff to develop a sense of the value, inner workings, and lived experience of the service. A great way to make your digital audiobook service user-centered is to encourage your library staff members to use the service and to help other users. This will give them firsthand knowledge of the pleasures—and frustrations—of using the service.

Fine Tuning Your Digital Audiobook Service

Once a library has launched a digital audiobook service, there are several ways to make it grow and improve. One way is to add other types of digital audio content—such as old-time radio shows, recent radio programs, audio versions of newspapers and magazines, and music—and even digital objects that bring together audio and visual information, such as motion pictures, documentaries and

educational films, television programs, and music videos. At the vendor level, OverDrive has been a leader in the institutional market in mixing in other types of content.

Another tactic for increasing the number of users is to offer orientation sessions (in-person as well as online) to help potential new users learn about the service and how to get started. A person needs to overcome some major cognitive hurdles to learn a rather complex, process-oriented technology before he or she can become a regular user of a digital audiobook service, and the reassurance offered by group orientation sessions can comfort the perplexed.

Another strategy is to loan out portable playback devices. This will allow users to experience the joys of digital audiobooks before purchasing a device. If the library preloads the devices before circulating them, new users will be well on their way. Libraries may want to actually give away personal portable playback devices to generate interest in a new program.

One audiobook service provider may not meet all of the needs of your library and its patrons. ListenIllinois, a collaborative effort in Illinois, provides audiobook content from several vendors. It is trying to integrate the content and services from OverDrive and NetLibrary/Recorded Books into a larger seamless audiobook service.¹ According to Helene Blowers of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, that library is pursuing more of a “bake-off” approach. It is offering digital audiobook content from two vendors, then evaluating which proves more useful to the patrons who use either or both services (telephone conversation with the author on October 23, 2006).

Practical Operational Considerations

Should Libraries Get into the Device Business?

The Playaway product contains its own playback device wedded—till destruction do them part—to the content. TumbleTalkingBooks requires a live Internet connection and does not allow the transfer of content to portable offline playback devices. If your library decides to go with NetLibrary, OverDrive, Audible, or a host of other services, however, you will need to consider this question: Should the library purchase portable playback devices to circulate to patrons? There are several arguments in favor of doing so. First, digital divide realities may mean that some library patrons who would benefit from and enjoy digital audiobooks cannot afford to purchase a portable playback device. Second, many users, even if they can afford to purchase a device, may like to try a library “loaner” to see if the experience meets their needs and expectations. The Princeton, New Jersey, Public Library, for example, has a “gadget garage” that allows patrons to try different information gadgets, courtesy of the library.² So, although the idea of having your library completely out of the device business and focused entirely on the information and information services has a clean appeal, there may be reasons to have some gadgets to circulate. If you decide to go in this direction, you probably will need to have an annual budget for hardware because the devices evolve and improve at a rapid pace. When it comes to portable information, communication, and entertainment devices, today’s cool new device quickly becomes a “legacy” device. Most patrons will want to try cutting-edge devices, especially those patrons who may soon purchase one.

Circulating Content and Devices

In some vendor digital audiobook systems, the library or library consortium can establish a circulation period for the content (and, if applicable, the device). With other systems, such as NetLibrary, the library or library consortium must accept the circulation period established by the vendor.

Likewise, in some vendor systems that offer or require the “one copy, one user at a time” model, the library or library consortium can decide how many items at a time can be checked out to a user. With other vendors, the library or library consortium will need to accept the maximum number specified by the vendor.

If those at your library decide to try some Playaway preloaded portable audiobook devices, or if you decide to circulate library-owned devices, you will need to address some nitty-gritty issues. One involves hygiene—earbuds tend to attract earwax and other goo. You will need to clean and disinfect the earbuds before you circulate them again.

Another issue is batteries. If a Playaway device comes back with, say, a one-use battery that contains half its original life, should the library switch out the battery for a fresh one before circulating the device again? And if so, what does the library do with the half-spent battery? Use it for some in-library battery need? Libraries may need to educate staff and users about responsible battery disposal. Although rechargeable batteries are an option, some libraries have found that when devices are circulated with rechargeable batteries, often the batteries do not come back. Either users decide to keep the batteries, or they unwittingly throw the rechargeable batteries away, thinking they are single-use batteries.

When a Playaway device circulates, it will be like a kit with multiple parts. Libraries may wish to include a clean set of earbuds, a spare battery, and perhaps a lanyard. Before and after each circulation, all of the parts will need to be accounted for and inspected to make sure they are neither damaged nor dirty.

Another practical problem with certain digital audiobooks is how to “clean up” the digital content when an item is returned and restore the content to its original pristine condition. For example, a listener can add up to fifty bookmarks to a Playaway digital audiobook. When that Playaway device is returned to the library, a staff member must be able to quickly delete any bookmarks before the audiobook is circulated to another patron.

Collaborative Initiatives

Many libraries are deciding that collaborating with other libraries is a good way to start and sustain a digital audiobook service. Sometimes the collaboration occurs within an existing consortium, library system, or set of cooperative agreements. In other cases, libraries have formed new collaborative agreements and consortia to launch a shared digital audiobook service.

Advantages of Collaborative Downloadable Digital Audiobook Services

Collaborating with other libraries has certain advantages:

- **There is safety in numbers.** It is risky to start a new service in a volatile sector of information technology, and collaboration spreads the risk across multiple libraries. There are also advantages to discussing, exploring, and making decisions in groups. The digital audiobook industry is diverse and changing quickly, so it is difficult for the staff at any but the largest library to develop and maintain a high level of in-house expertise.
- **It is easier and quicker to build a compelling collection of titles.** When two or more libraries pool their

funds to purchase or lease digital audiobooks, they are able to get a collection large enough to encourage patrons to explore it and to keep coming back for additional content.

- **There are economies of scale in certain administrative functions.** As with any library program, certain fixed costs and essential functions remain fairly constant, regardless of whether one library or dozens are involved. By collaborating on a digital audiobook service, libraries can spread these fixed costs across all participating libraries.

Disadvantages of Collaborative Downloadable Digital Audiobook Services

Collaborating with other libraries on a digital audiobook service is not necessarily all cakes and ale, however:

- **There is some loss of local control.** For example, decisions about general areas of focus and additions to the collection often rely more on the needs of the majority of the consortium. In addition, some vendors of digital audiobooks require or strongly encourage collaborating libraries to have a common set of policies and procedures, such as the circulation period and the number of titles that can be checked out by an individual user at any time.
- **The needs of the individual participating libraries may vary.** For example, some libraries in a consortium may want to pay for added services (such as MARC records), while others may not put a high priority on such add-on services.

Examples of Collaborative Efforts

Many consortia and collaborative efforts have emerged in the past few years. Only a few can be mentioned and described in this report:

- **ListenOhio:** Fourteen public libraries in northern Ohio are collaborating to provide digital audiobooks to their users.
- **ListenIllinois:** Building upon the ListenOhio model, forty-three public libraries across five library systems in Illinois operate a collaborative digital audiobook service.
- **Lobe Library:** Libraries that serve blind and low-vision users in six states (Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, New Jersey, Mississippi, and Montana) provide digital audiobooks from Audible and preloaded portable playback devices to eligible residents.
- **MyMediaMall:** Twenty-seven public libraries spread across several library systems are providing shared access to digital audiobooks, as well as to elec-

tronic books and downloadable digital videos, from OverDrive.

- **Unabridged:** Libraries for the blind and physically handicapped in nine states (California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas) provide a shared collection of downloadable digital audiobooks for blind and print-impaired users. The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, a division of the Library of Congress, also is a member of Unabridged for internal testing and evaluation purposes.

ListenOhio
www.listenohio.org

ListenIllinois
www.listenillinois.org

Lobe Library
www.lobelibrary.com

MyMediaMall
www.mymedimall.net

Unabridged
www.unabridged.info

Reports from the Field

Quite a bit of anecdotal feedback is available for the asking about various vended digital audiobook options for libraries, library consortia, and other institutional users, such as the armed forces and penal institutions. Many librarians are pleasantly surprised by the quick and strong demand for digital audiobooks. The Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center has undertaken several field tests of digital audiobook systems pertinent to this report. Although the volunteer field testers were blind and low-vision individuals, their experiences and recommendations also apply to the general population of digital audiobook readers. The major findings and recommendations of two field tests are summarized below.

Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center's NetLibrary Field Test (2005)

In June and July 2005, the Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center conducted a field test of digital audiobooks supplied by the partnership between NetLibrary and Recorded Books. A total of 184 print-impaired patrons of libraries and talking book centers in at least fifteen states participated. The goal of this field test was to enable libraries and the

patrons they serve to test and evaluate the accessibility and general usability of this new digital audiobook system.³

Responses from the volunteer field testers were varied. Quoting from the executive summary of the report:

The volunteers who participated in this two-month trial had a wide variety of experiences and reactions to those experiences. Some volunteers thought this was the best digital audio book system they had ever tried. (Many of the testers currently use and subscribe to a variety of digital audio book services, such as Audible.com and Bookshare.) Many of the volunteer testers noted that the quality of the texts, the narration, and the sound was very high.

Others thought the overall system was barely functional and marginally accessible. The content website, the digital rights management system, and Microsoft's Windows Media Player software presented substantial accessibility challenges for a large portion of the group of volunteer testers.⁴

The report also identified eight major steps or processes in completing a digital audiobook interaction with this particular system. Each process presents its own set of accessibility and general usability challenges:

- Login to the NetLibrary e-book and digital audiobook Web site.
- Use browser software to navigate through the Web site to locate digital audiobooks of interest. This process involves both searching and browsing.
- Check out a digital audiobook of interest.
- Download the digital audiobook to the user's computer.
- [optional] Use media player software on the user's computer to listen to the digital audiobook. Note that in this context, "listening" can include a wide variety of interactions with the digital audiobook text, such as nonlinear navigation, bookmarking, and annotating.
- [optional] Transfer the digital audiobook to a portable audio playback device.
- [optional] Listen to the digital audiobook on a portable audio playback device.
- Interact—wittingly or unwittingly—with the digital rights management system throughout this series of processes.

Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center's Playaway Field Test (2006)

For five months (December 2005 through March 2006), the Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center conducted a field

test of Playaway devices. Fifty blind and low-vision individuals self-selected to participate in the field tests. The median age was 61 years, and the range was 19 to 88. All but one of the respondents who indicated an age was 40 years of age or older. The majority of volunteer testers who indicated an age on their feedback forms were in their 50s and 60s.

The circulation period for each device was two weeks. A total of 140 circulation events occurred during the field-testing period, and 55 feedback forms were completed and returned. In several instances an individual field tester completed and returned several feedback forms.⁵

In general, the devices withstood repeated use well. The LCD display on one device failed, but no device entirely failed. General hygiene and cleanliness of the devices and the earbuds that accompanied them were easily managed by removing the soft foam over the earbuds before initial circulation, then by wiping down the earbuds and the device with a disinfectant wipe between circulations.

The blind and low-vision users who participated in this field test generally were pleased and encouraged by the Playaway device. Over 90 percent of the completed surveys described the overall experience as either very or somewhat satisfactory. The field testers particularly liked the ability to jump forward or backward to chapter and section breaks, the variable speed playback option, and the ability to jump back 15 seconds with the press of a button.

The field testers also suggested several improvements. With the models tested, the user needed to cycle upward through all the volume settings in order to get to a lower volume setting. A handful of testers recommended that the volume control be made bi-directional. They also made recommendations on ways to improve the process of changing the battery (the lid to the battery compartment often was difficult to open), the button design, and the bookmarking feature.

The report concluded: "The experiences and feedback gleaned during this small field test indicate that libraries of all types should seriously consider a self-contained digital audiobook device such as the Playaway as one way to introduce the pleasure and convenience of digital audio books to that broad middle group of their service populations—users who are neither technophobic nor technologically proficient."

Notes

1. "ListenIllinois: One-Stop Shopping for Audio Ebooks in Illinois," *Metro News* 2, no. 3 (April 2006), 5, available online at www.mls.lib.il.us/news/pdf/2006_04_newsletter.pdf (accessed November 24, 2006).
2. "Gadget Garage," Princeton Public Library Web site, www.princeton.lib.nj.us/reference/techcenter/gadgetgarage.html (accessed November 24, 2006).

3. Thomas A. Peters, "Accessibility Trial of the Downloadable Digital Audio Book Service from NetLibrary and Recorded Books LLC: Final Report," Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center and the Alliance Library System, 2005. Available online in both HTML and Microsoft Word formats at www.tapinformation.com/netlibrary.htm (accessed November 25, 2006).
4. Ibid.
5. "Final Report of the Field Test of the Playaway Self-Contained Portable Digital Audio Book Player," East Peoria, Illinois: Mid-Illinois Talking Book Center, 2006. Available online at www.mitbc.org/Playaway/Playawayfinal.htm (accessed November 25, 2006).