



COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

Messaging the E-books Crisis: A Communications Toolkit for ULC Libraries

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The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and action tank of North America’s leading public library systems. ULC drives cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions. Across the U.S. and Canada, nearly 200 member libraries rely on ULC to identify significant challenges facing today’s communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, and equity.

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INTRODUCTION

In public library systems large and small, urban and rural, access to digital content like e-books and e-audiobooks has become an indispensable part of the way library users learn, work, and interact. But as demand has skyrocketed, the price public libraries pay for this material is still not widely understood by the public.

For libraries, this has become a crisis, and access is under threat because the terms under which libraries license this material are increasingly unsustainable, especially for the most popular titles. Libraries need new licensing models that work for authors, publishers, AND libraries. The Big Five publishers, as well as platform providers, have an opportunity to come to the table to work with libraries to reimagine licensing models that are sustainable.

That's why ULC, along with many other groups, organizations, and libraries, are working to demand change. We hope this toolkit, with key messages, an FAQ, draft social images and op-eds, a wealth of examples from your peers, and other resources helps your library communicate why this e-book pricing issue is so urgent, and what can be done to help libraries better serve their communities.

“Publishers, authors, and public libraries should be partners, but with the exponential growth in digital content demand, libraries are unable to provide and sustain access under current licensing models. The moment is ripe for large publishers to meet with libraries across North America, to hear our concerns, and address them, so we can continue building a mutually beneficial future for literacy and reading.”

—Brooks Rainwater, President and CEO, Urban Libraries Council



KEY ISSUES

- **E-book demand has skyrocketed among library users:** [ULC found](#) that eResource usage among members has gone up 58% since 2019. Costs have also risen: In 2019, ULC libraries spent \$1.54 per capita on e-books, and by 2024, that had grown to \$2.72.
- **E-books are much more expensive for libraries than print books:** Consumers pay \$13 in perpetuity for an e-book on average, while libraries typically pay \$55 or more for a 2-year license, limited to checkout by a single user
- **E-book licenses are also use-limited**, meaning that libraries must spend enormous sums of taxpayer money to re-license the same in-demand titles repeatedly.
- **Libraries are spending more taxpayer funds to get much less:** As demand for e-books increases, upwards of 50% or more of library collections budgets are eaten up by licensing e-books at high prices, meaning libraries can buy less and less.
- **A library's core mission is about access and preservation:** Current licensing terms mean libraries cannot sustain their mission of providing equitable access to materials, or expanding access to library users with mobility issues, the elderly, or those in rural or under-resourced areas.
- **Library users experience the resulting long wait times as a reflection on the library:** Library customers unaware of the root causes of wait times see this as a sign of the library unable to fulfill its mission of free access.
- **There's nothing preventing publishers from setting the terms.** Libraries have rights for how they share physical books, but they do not have the same rights when it comes to e-books. The Big Five publishers also enjoy a very high share of the most in demand titles, as well as limited platform providers through which libraries buy e-books.
- **There are examples of publishers that offer fair terms to libraries:** Even though the majority of current e-book licensing models are unsustainable for libraries, some smaller or indie publishers have subscriptions that are sustainable for libraries.

“Public libraries face a digital lending crisis. Even as library patrons demand greater access to digital materials, eBook publishers have subjected libraries to onerous licensing terms. These include prices substantially higher than those charged to the general public...”

Mary LaFrance, Source: [Copyright, eBooks, and the Future of Digital Lending](#), Yale Journal of Law & Technology



“THE BIG FIVE”

When we talk about publishers in the context of e-books, we mean the Big Five publishers that control the vast majority of the most in-demand books: **Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, Simon & Schuster, Macmillan, and HarperCollins.**

Numbers fluctuate, but in 2022, the U.S. Justice Department estimated that **the Big Five enjoyed a 90% market share**, [according to Reuters](#). Indie publishers often offer far more flexible terms to libraries. It’s important to clarify this distinction in advocacy materials at least once.

THE ASK:

What libraries want is an honest dialogue on fair pricing and sustainable models.

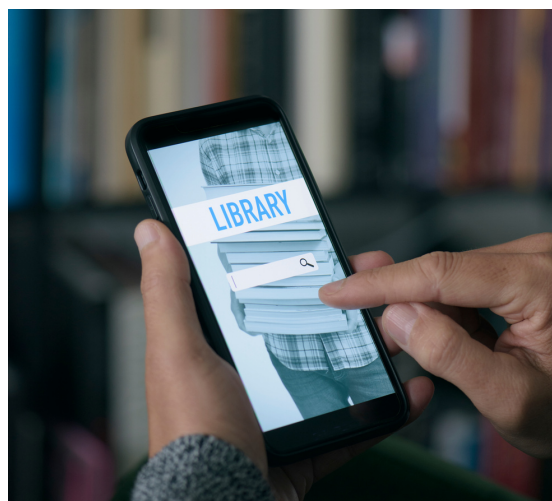
With the increase in public demand and the normalization of e-books and audio-books, it is time for the publishing industry and public libraries to identify models for a sustainable marketplace that works for readers, libraries, authors, and the publishing industry. **Libraries want to better serve their patrons, not gain unrestricted access** – but so far, the Big Five publishers have not worked with libraries for fairer terms. That’s one reason states are using legislation to try and help libraries change the status quo.

ULC’s E-Books Solutions Group reached consensus on two key areas to significantly improve sustaining current access with all publishers: These include **the importance of usage-based e-book models** that guarantee our communities actually get full value from the materials their libraries have paid for, and **the option for libraries to purchase perpetual-use models** so we can ensure the preservation of knowledge remains a cornerstone of the public library. [Learn more here.](#) Other solutions exist.

No model will be perfect, and publishing is a business. **Authors should be paid fairly. But that does not mean libraries must be treated unfairly.**

Adding together the initial cost with time and checkout restrictions can make library e-book access as much as 10 times more expensive than print books... this is forcing some libraries to launch ‘bake sales to pay for their e-book budgets.’”

[Libraries Pay More for E-Books. Some States Want to Change That.](#), *The New York Times*



Key Audience Messages for the Public, Decisionmakers, and Authors



THE PUBLIC

- Unacceptably long waits for new and popular e-books are not the library's fault
- A small group of publishers control the most in-demand e-book titles, and they set the prices libraries have to pay
- E-books typically cost 4x times more for libraries than for a normal consumer, and libraries don't own the material
- Libraries don't decide how they're allowed to lend e-books, publishers do
- Libraries cannot buy their materials anywhere else, so if they are going to have these books, they must pay whatever they are charged – even if it's unsustainable



When speaking to the public, make sure to:

- **Use examples of popular titles to explain the cost differences with real dollar figures and wait times:**
 - “When ‘Onyx Storm’ by Rebecca Yarros was released on Jan. 31, Jefferson County Public Libraries spent \$3,300 on 166 print copies of the new release. The library then spent \$22,000 on roughly 360 e-books, at three times the cost per copy.”
[*Rising popularity, cost of e-books forces some Colorado libraries to limit access*, The Denver Post](#)
- **Explain who needs e-books. Use examples of the types of groups that need this access: the disabled, the elderly, those in rural or isolated areas.**
- **Explain the licensing terms simply and clearly and connect them to the waits library users experience:**
 - “The licensing terms of these library ebooks mean they often expire after 12 or 24 months, or a certain arbitrary number of checkouts, which then forces our libraries to repurchase ebooks and audiobooks over and over again to meet demand, at the same high prices each time. It is simply unsustainable.”

*Benjamin Hanley, President of the Rhode Island Library Association, and Julie Holden, Assistant Library Director, Cranston Public Library, [*Publishers are pricing RI libraries out of the ebook market*](#), The Providence Journal*

How can you get the public to help?

- Encourage them to speak out, and speak to their elected officials and let them know libraries are facing this burden – [share ULC's public two-pager!](#)

- “If the publishers start to see that we’re seeing a real public reaction to this, that’s always helpful for us.”

Kay Cahill, co-chair of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council’s Digital Content Working Group, [Why the library seems to never have copies of the ebooks you want to read](#), Calgary Herald

- Be honest, and ask for patience:

- “We don't want you to stop checking out books, but you do need to be a bit more patient and cognizant of that wait time, because we do have to make those adjustments. We can't buy as many e-book copies. We can't buy as many audiobook copies.”

Heidi Daniel, Executive Director, King County Library System, [Libraries search for a way to make digital books more affordable](#), KNKX

- Also, explain good “hold hygiene”, like [this example from Spokane Public Library](#).

Show Your Patrons the Reality of What Your Library Pays!

Title/Author	E-book Price	Print Price
<i>The Final Target</i> by Nora Roberts	\$60	\$30
<i>Ironwood</i> by Michael Connolly	\$75	\$32
<i>Theo of Golden</i> by Allen Levi	\$60	\$30
<i>The Midnight Train</i> by Matt Haig	\$55	\$30

Source: King County Library System

Note: Each e-book is also subject to either a 2 year license, or a limited number of checkouts. For print books, the library received a wholesaler discount. A \$30 list price for hardcover costs \$16.20.



DECISIONMAKERS

- The terms large publishers set for libraries cost taxpayers more: libraries are forced to pay 4x times or more the cost consumers pay, and must repeatedly re-license e-books to keep up with demand

- “While the library's spending on e-books is trending upward, the number of copies in its collection has declined slightly since reaching a peak in 2020. The library is getting less for more — and readers are left waiting longer.”

[‘Astronomical’ hold queues on year’s top e-books frustrate readers, libraries, CBC](#)



- Libraries have tried to engage publishers on this issue, but publishers have not offered dialogue on what fair and sustainable models for libraries could look like

- “They’ve set the rules, and we abide by them. There has not been a real back-and-forth in terms of what I would consider a real negotiation.”

DC Public Library Executive Director Richard Reyes-Gavilan. [DC Public Library pressures publishers on e-book licensing costs \(video\)](#), NBC News4 DC

- Libraries are **significant customers for publishers**, spending hundreds of millions of dollars on e-content, but they are not treated like it

- Publishers prefer long wait times at the library because of a misconception that it’s better for business:

- “When it’s so easy to get a free e-book, a perfect e-book, every time, why would they ever buy an e-book?” said Mary Rasenberger, executive director of the Authors Guild. “The only friction now that exists for getting library e-books is the wait time.”

[Libraries Pay More for E-Books. Some States Want to Change That.](#)
The New York Times

- Libraries are premised on providing and preserving free access, and we cannot fulfill our mission or build balanced collections under these terms

- “We really can’t curate an ongoing (digital) collection. Everything expires, so you have to continue to purchase them if there’s still a demand. ... It’s not fair at all to libraries, and I think it’s hitting a crisis level.”

Denver Public Library Collection Services Director Stacy Watson, [Rising popularity, cost of e-books forces some CO libraries to limit access](#),
The Denver Post

When speaking to decisionmakers, make sure to:

- **Make clear that libraries are responsible users of taxpayer funds, and these terms are unsustainable**
 - “We want transparency because we are stewards of public dollars and we want to be able to deliver the highest value for the public that we serve.”
Jennie Pu, Director, Hoboken Public Library, [Q&A: Public libraries counting on bill to combat huge cost of e-books](#), NJ Spotlight News
- **Emphasize that this is a crisis for libraries, and that access to e-books and other e-content is essential to reaching all of their constituents**

How can decisionmakers help?

- **Encourage them to speak out on this issue!** The more voices weighing in, the more pressure on publishers to change.

AUTHORS

- **Libraries are essential to the reading ecosystem: they increase literacy rates and create lifelong readers – and book buyers**

- “Having my books in libraries is essential for my career. It’s the most direct way I have to reach children. It’s crucial.”

Sarah Brannen, Author, [Essential for My Career’: Six Authors Explain Why They Need Their Books on Library Shelves](#), PEN America



- **Libraries are an important stop on the promotional circuit for new books. They also benefit local bookstores:**

- “[W]e work with Poor Richard’s (a favorite local bookstore) quite a bit. The library doesn’t sell books, obviously, so we bring in Poor Richard’s to sell books during the author visits at the library. Authors love this because we’re helping them sell their books. And the bookstore loves it, because they’re engaging with the community outside their walls. It’s a win-win-win.”

Heidi Buljung, Senior Librarian, Pikes Peak Library District, [Working with Authors to Promote Your Collection](#), EBSCO/NoveList

- **High prices for libraries hurt emerging authors: if libraries cannot afford to build a balanced collection, they prioritize what's currently popular over exposing customers to new or lesser-known writers**
 - “And for librarians, they say a third of their digital budgets on average, often more, now goes to re-licensing popular works rather than buying new releases or taking a chance on a new author, impacting the breadth and depth of their collections. And, of course, every expensive, temporary license from a Big Five publisher, equals a few indie books that a library can't buy.”

[Librarians Say the Library Ebook Market Needs Another Breakthrough Moment. Can Legislation Help Deliver It?](#), *Words & Money*

- **Small and independent publishers have long seen the value in fair terms for libraries**
 - “Smaller publishers say their authors are largely happy just to get their books into the digital holdings of libraries. ‘If someone checks out an e-book from a library, is that a lost sale?’ said Joe Matthews, chief executive officer of the Independent Publishers Group. ‘No one really has the data set to prove anything.’ Even so, Matthews said that for the authors he works with, library exposure tends to be a good thing, and not represent lost sales.”

[Libraries Pay More for E-Books. Some States Want to Change That.](#)
The New York Times

- **Libraries don't decide how authors are compensated for their work**
 - “Libraries do not pay authors; publishers pay authors. Libraries pay publishers... When publishers extract these astronomical, repeating fees from library budgets, it's the corporate executives lining their pockets, not the creators.”

Kyle Courtney, [Is James Patterson Defending Publishers or Authors?](#), *The Providence Journal*

Topeka & Shawnee Co. Public Library bringing local authors together in one event



When speaking to authors, make sure to:

- **Reiterate that we're part of their career toolkit:** Center the marketing, publicity, and discovery value of the library

How can authors help?

- **Use their platform and speak out!** Publishers, their trade groups, and authors' groups are all over the news saying fair e-book licensing for libraries would hurt authors. Authors also have their own issues with the terms publishers extend to them. Authors can say: I want a fair deal, and I want libraries to have a fair deal too!

HOW DO LIBRARIES HELP THE PUBLISHING BUSINESS



Although libraries are not businesses, they are essential to the business of reading in the U.S. and Canada: public libraries collectively spend hundreds of millions of dollars on e-books every year, and affect publishers' bottom line.

A ULC estimate of our nearly 200 member base found that the largest library systems each spend over \$4 million on average annually on e-books and e-audiobooks, while their medium-sized peers spend \$2 million on average. **This means that for ULC member libraries alone, the total licensing costs for these materials is at least \$300 million** (compared to about [\\$4.5 billion in overall US ebook and e-audiobook sales](#)), representing a significant revenue stream for the publishing industry and its authors.

At the same time, **libraries create lifelong readers, which translates into lifelong customers:** A [study from Canada](#) found over half of library users also bought new books, and another study found 1 in 3 respondents bought a book online or from a bookstore that they first found in a library.

Libraries also understand that publishing is a business: “Books won’t be published if people aren’t making money from them. We don’t want to do away with profit, but we would like to sustain our collections in a meaningful manner (to continue) offering great literature to our communities,” [according to Dianne Coan of Fairfax County Libraries](#).

Toronto Public Library’s Lisa Radha Vohra, whose library alone [spends over \\$20M on buying titles](#), puts it this way: “Libraries want to support a healthy publishing ecosystem which includes reasonable friction to access – and equally sustainable use of tax dollars to provide access to materials customers are looking to read, listen, and watch,” she told ULC.

“We have dozens of publishers who are vying to have their books made available, sometimes at no cost, because they absolutely see ... when libraries promote an author, their print sales spike, their e-book sales grow, and their audiobooks as well.”

OverDrive Chief Executive Steve Potash, [E-books at libraries are a huge hit, leading to long waits, reader hacks and worried publishers](#), *The Washington Post*



TEMPLATES AND TOOLS FOR LIBRARIES

Social Graphic Templates & Sample Language

Help educate your visitors! Use your library's e-book costs and real e-book examples to maximize your impact. [Find social media language here](#), and share these [customizable social graphics](#) about the issue. Feel free to change the colors and fonts to best suit your organization's branding!

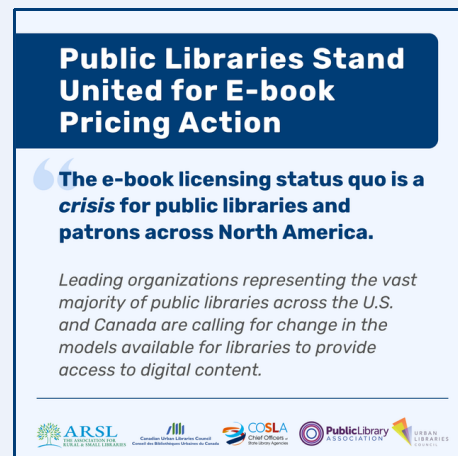
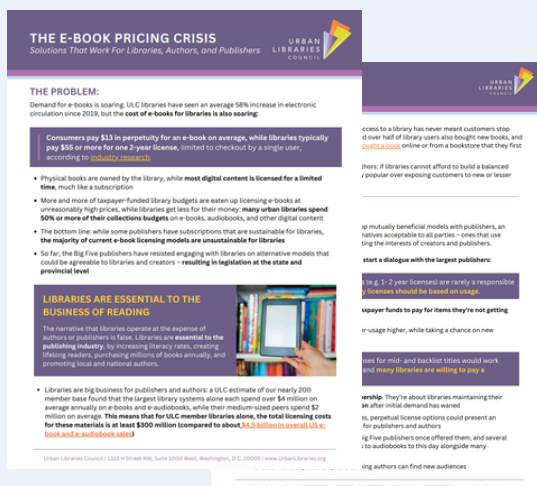


Sample Op-Ed

This [sample op-ed template](#) offers libraries a practical tool for raising awareness about the growing e-book pricing crisis. With suggested messaging, background information, and space for local examples, the template can be tailored for publication in community newspapers, online outlets, or other local media channels.

Key Resources:

- Spread the word! Use our handy [E-books Pricing Crisis two-pager](#)
- Show how libraries stand united for e-book pricing action: [A joint statement by leading library groups](#)
- Follow along with the public conversation and get inspired: [Running e-books media tracker](#)





FAQ

Why are the current pricing models by the Big Five Publishers a crisis for libraries?

Simply put, the current e-book models for libraries are unsustainable, and a poor use of taxpayer funds. And as costs continue to rise, as does demand, we believe that this issue has reached crisis levels, and [we are not alone](#). Some libraries wonder how long they can continue to afford them at all.

Why are libraries just addressing it now?

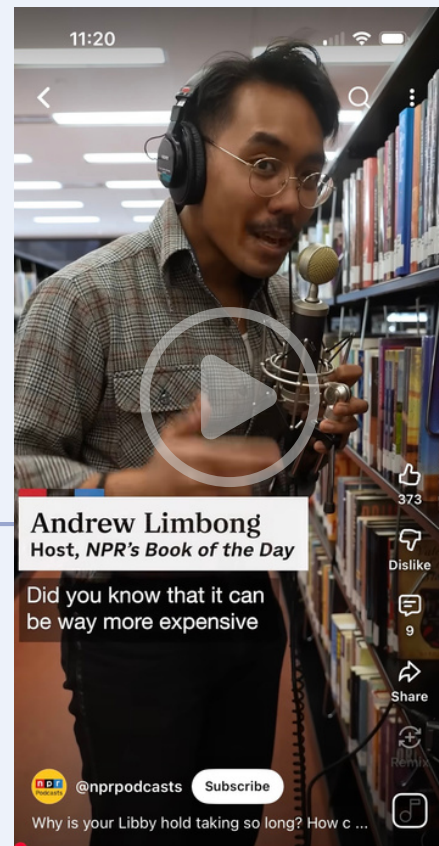
They're not! Libraries and library groups have advocated for changes that are more library-friendly for decades now, but [have not gotten the large publishers to change](#) how they view the issue.

If nothing has changed, why is now a good moment to speak out again?

There's renewed, sustained interest in this issue, due in part to a push by states to pass consumer protection laws that prevent libraries from entering into onerous e-book licensing terms. Legislators are incredibly interested in the issue. And around North America, [media pieces are constantly being published](#) breaking down the issue. This mounting pressure from many different angles means libraries have leverage in ways they've not previously had.

E-books prices for libraries continues to receive media interest nationally in the US and Canada, locally, and internationally

Source: NPR Podcasts, [“Why is your Libby hold taking so long? How can you be ‘in line’ to borrow a digital library book?”](#)





What do publishers say?

The Big Five publishers, which control the vast majority of in-demand e-book titles, as well as their industry groups like the Association of American Publishers or the Authors Guild, make a variety of claims, and push back forcefully on efforts to compel them to change. They claim that some efforts strip authors of their rights, or threaten library e-book access. Even so, many small and independent publishers gladly offer libraries fair terms, because they know the value that public libraries provide for introducing their authors to audiences. These groups also claim that the current models are a better deal for libraries, but to do so draw false parallels: e-books cost per use remains much higher than physical books.

ULC's E-books Solutions Group has proposed [several fixes](#) that we believe would be mutually beneficial to libraries, authors, and publishers, and represent the start of a potential fresh start to our relations – if publishers are willing to negotiate.

Who reads e-books?

E-book users tend to be wealthier than the average population: [According to Penguin Random House](#), e-book readers are 20% more likely to have yearly household incomes over \$100,000 than non-ebook readers. This matters because, due to rising and unsustainable e-book licensing costs, many libraries are now [spending more than 50% of their collections budgets on e-books](#), meaning that wealthier users are more likely than other patrons to benefit. Additionally, print books are still extremely popular, and in the US, [many more people read physical books than e-books](#). However, e-books are also an important source of digital equity and access. For library users with mobility issues, or living in isolated areas far from their nearest branch, e-books are a lifeline.

If demand is high, why can't libraries just buy more materials?

Budgets are limited. If demand for e-books rises, that means there's less money for physical books. The problem gets far worse, however, when you consider that libraries get LESS for their money when they pay to license e-books, because they cost much more than physical books, and they must constantly be relicensed when the time limits expire or a certain number of checkouts are received. This is also an issue of responsible stewardship of taxpayer funds. Should libraries pay whatever publishers demand because they can demand it? Of course not.



How does this relate to existing efforts to help libraries deal with e-book prices?

Various efforts by different groups all want the same thing: models that are long-term sustainable for libraries. We see such efforts are complementary, and anything that gets public libraries a better e-books deal is progress. This work is not directly related to state consumer protection level efforts, but an issue this complex and long standing benefits from multiple approaches and efforts to break the gridlock. We also know that this legislation has the attention of publishers. ULC has been in contact with many of these groups, because we feel a big-tent approach is key.

What is the audience for this?

The media, library users, decisionmakers, and leaders, and the publishers themselves. The media needs to be educated about the role of libraries and helped to understand how this issue affects libraries. In turn, that exposure to the issue helps educate the public and local officials who might be hearing from libraries and patrons that this issue is affecting them. This awareness in turn shows the publishers that they can no longer successfully ignore calls for discussion.

What do you hope to achieve?

We hope for real, good-faith negotiations with publishers – ones that so far have not substantially materialized. We want publishers to sit down with leaders from our organizations and library directors to talk through what solutions, like [those found in this document](#), would help all parties thrive, and implement real changes to existing unfair licensing models. Currently, publishers have had no reason to talk with us in a meaningful, comprehensive way. We hope this show of unity, combined with renewed media and legislative scrutiny, will show them that change is inevitable.

Why did library organizations release a joint statement?

Unfair e-book pricing, long a challenge for libraries, has reached crisis levels. Many different organizations, libraries, and groups have worked on this issue for years. However, the time is ripe to forcefully unite as a field. As organizations advocating for and representing nearly all public libraries in the US and Canada – small and large, urban and rural, and everything in between – this statement sends a message that we stand united for change, at a moment when states are turning up the pressure on publishers with legislative efforts.