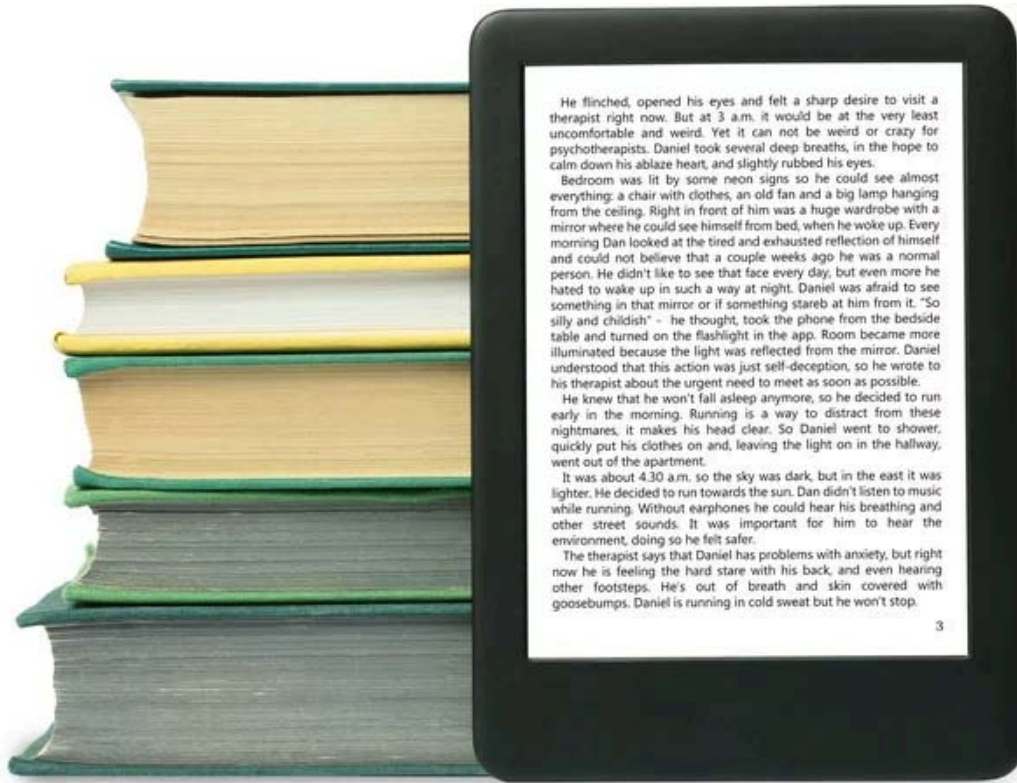


Why are librarians up in arms over ebooks?

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'Some publishers refuse to provide ebooks to public libraries, despite selling them to consumers'. Photo: Getty Images

Opinion: lack of available stock, high prices and onerous terms and conditions mean ebooks currently offer poor value for readers and libraries

By **Cathal McCauley, Maynooth University; Martin Bradley and Stuart Hamilton, Local Government Management Agency**

Ireland's public libraries are **hugely popular** with millions of visitors each year and academic libraries are an essential part of third level education. Libraries' ability to continuously adapt is crucial and ebook services are an excellent example of this.

In public libraries, ebook services are increasingly popular and most academic libraries' have more ebooks than print. During the pandemic, Irish libraries' investment in ebooks soared by over 140% and their use increased by over 200%. This pattern of high investment and usage has been sustained post-pandemic. Ebooks have some advantages over print books including being more suitable for readers with a range of disabilities and some have increased functionality.

So why are librarians unhappy?

There are three main reasons: availability, cost and terms and conditions.

Lack of availability

The first challenge libraries face is simply being able to acquire an ebook. Some publishers refuse to provide ebooks to public libraries, despite selling them to consumers. For academic libraries, publishers often don't provide an ebook or provide an older edition. A 2018 UK study [found](#) that academic libraries could only provide an e-version of a title as little as 10% of the time.

Ebooks typically cost public libraries 2.6 times more than print copies

High costs

If libraries can source an ebook, the next barrier is cost. Ebooks typically cost public libraries 2.6 times more than print copies. For academic libraries, the quantum is generally three to 10 times, but there are many examples of up to 20 times. This is difficult to understand given savings on printing and distribution.

A pernicious impact of this is that e-content is consuming an increasing share of library budgets. This has significant implications. In the short-term, it means less money for other library activities. In the longer term, it means that the comprehensiveness of library collections is threatened. Libraries generally must licence rather than purchase ebooks outright, meaning that future library collections could shrink if budgets are cut. This is not a risk with physical books which are bought and owned.

Most e-books are only available to libraries through subscription bundles which are now even worse value. Since Budget 2024, ebooks have [attracted](#) 0% VAT to buy, but subscriptions continue to attract 23% VAT.

Onerous terms and conditions

The terms and conditions publishers attach to ebooks provided to libraries are varied and onerous. Examples include limiting access to a set number of readers, set amounts of reading, particular student classes and specific apps. Publishers and vendors who sell ebooks frequently only make ebooks available if a whole collection, of often variable quality and interest, is licensed.



Tips, tricks & recommendations from the libraries of Ireland

From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime, reading tips, tricks and recommendations from the libraries of Ireland

Vendors often withhold the right to add or remove titles from the collection undermining the centuries old role of libraries to curate and maintain comprehensive collections. Parents of children attending schools using ebooks will be familiar with the inherent restrictions. The Government spends €110m per annum on schoolbooks and yet most educational publishers use technical measures to limit ebook availability to their own apps.

How are librarians fighting back?

In view of these issues, librarians felt compelled to act. The pandemic was a tipping point due to the perfect storm of financial pressures, a dysfunctional market and skyrocketing demand. The [ebookSOS campaign](#) started when UK librarian Johanna Anderson was unable to obtain ebooks.

Building on the work of UK colleagues, the [Library Association of Ireland \(LAI\)](#) issued a [call for action](#) also signed by the [Irish Universities Association Librarian's Group](#), the [Technological and Higher Education Association Librarians' Group](#) and the [Consortium of National and University Libraries](#). This was an unprecedented cross-sectoral move underlining the concern in libraries.



Dublin City Libraries Top 10 Borrowed Books

From RTÉ Radio 1's Ray D'Arcy Show, the 10 most borrowed books from Dublin libraries in 2021

We gathered data which confirmed that some ebooks are 20 times more expensive than print and many are three to 10 times more expensive. Interestingly, the data suggested that the highest multipliers are applied by the large international publishers rather than Irish publishers.

The campaign attracted substantial attention from the outset with webinars attracting over 500 delegates. Representatives have spoken at many events and with many media outlets including [The Irish Examiner](#), [Newstalk](#), [KFM \(Kildare Today\)](#) and [RTE Radio 1 \(Liveline\)](#). Across the Irish Sea, the campaign has received coverage from the [BBC](#), the [Guardian](#), and many others. We are working closely with [Knowledge Rights 21](#) and other international partners and have had meetings with government departments, politicians and industry groups about the problems with ebooks.

What's next?

For many librarians who worked through the transition from print to online in the past, the current situation around ebooks is familiar. Then, as now, publishers resisted change for years but, when it did come, it came very quickly. It is likely that the same pattern will be repeated.

The ebookSOS campaign aims to ensure that the changes that will come will lead to a tangible improvement for libraries and readers and for ebooks to be provided on reasonable and sustainable terms. A recent [groundbreaking announcement](#) in the United States, allowing libraries to purchase ebooks, shows what is possible.

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