DSG Part 5: Ebook and Audiobook Questions

So, life continued on. I taught, worked, and was generally content with things. I was learning the ropes and handling classes and the workload fairly well. But of course, things just keep on changing - here come the questions about audiobooks from the library!

Personally, audiobooks are not my favorite. I am a visual learner, with a ton of hands-on practice thrown in for good measure. My ears are not made to be used alone - hence, I have a terrible time talking on the telephone. Just being on the phone for 30 minutes is tiring for me, because I find myself concentrating very hard on what the person is saying. I also need *near silence* around me, so I can properly hear the person on the other end.

It's exhausting.

Therefore, when the libraries first started offering audiobooks in an electronic, downloadable format, I was *personally* uninterested. However, because I *knew* I'd be training our patrons on these items, I forced myself to look at the available offerings, and even checked some out on my library card. I quickly discovered a *major problem*: I could not download the book on the computer at my desk in the library. Basically, I could complete half of the process in checking out the book on my card. But I could not finish the "more important" part: *actually listening to the book*.

I found out I had to download the audiobook at home, because the library was concerned about Internet bandwidth. As I pondered this at work, I thought to myself, "Oh, boy, this is going to become an issue!"

If you're not familiar with the *very early world* of downloadable audiobooks (and other content, like ebooks - remember, most videos *stream*, not download. Since this is a totally separate issue, I will not address any video content here), allow me to explain for a moment here. The timeframe I'm discussing here runs somewhere between 2008 and 2010 or so. Authors and publishers were concerned with intellectual rights and piracy (this is still a concern, but that's for a later post). I won't detail the whole process here, but suffice to say that it was *complicated*. Anyone wishing to download a library audiobook had to use the special "Digital Rights Management" software made by Adobe. Each copy of the software had to be registered to a person, and each registration was further limited to 6 computer devices *total. Adobe Digital Editions* was so large that it could not fit on a mobile device - it had to be loaded onto a regular computer. This computer would serve as the *only download point* a patron could use and *would also use one* of the six devices a person could use for library downloads.

It was difficult to de-register a device once registration was complete. Also consider the fact that audiobooks were not transferred *wirelessly.* A patron had to have their mobile device (an .mp3 player) and its cord so that it could be plugged into the computer itself.

Once that was done, transfer was almost guaranteed…. *Almost….*

Lots of things could and would go wrong, and it was my experience that audiobook downloads and transfers were successful about 80 to 85% of the time, with no rhyme or reason as to why one or the other failed. This means there were a *lot* of questions and issues to work out, none of which could be done in the library. No patron would use a publically accessible library computer as a download point. It was not private, and it was difficult to de-register the computer through Adobe.

On top of these issues was the one of Internet bandwidth. Remember, we're in a time before wide-ranging access to broadband (higher-speed Internet), and libraries are sharing their bandwidth between patrons and staff - that could be anywhere from three people, to 100-plus people, depending on the size of the library and time of day. None of the Internet was wireless, either, so patrons were limited by the actual number of wired, Internet-connected computers available in the building. Cellular phones were just that: *phones*. One might text with them, but the "mobilegeddon" wouldn't come until 2015. Data connections were spotty at best and quite expensive.

If patrons were downloading audiobooks using library Internet, they could slow down or even crash an *entire building's* Internet connection. The books average about 30 megabytes *per hour of reading*; they are significantly larger than any file attachment you may email, even today. A 7-hour audiobook would be about 210 megabytes, and could take anywhere from 15 minutes to *two hours* to download, depending on the speed of the Internet and the amount of people using a connection at any one time.

Then you'd need to transfer it to your mobile device. Ugh.

To me, it was interesting that audiobooks were the first types of books to be electronically loaned from public libraries. The .mp3 format was widely available and easy to use, so it made sense for libraries to offer audio first. Ebooks, the ones we read on the screen, came along after. As I mentioned, audiobooks are not best for my learning style, and so once ebooks could be borrowed, I was very happy. Ebooks were also significantly smaller in size than audiobooks, meaning they could be downloaded without the same bandwidth issues presented by audio. A single ebook might be 1 to 5 MB. They downloaded and transferred quickly, but ebooks still went through the same digital rights management software that the audiobooks did, meaning patrons still had to use their home computer, not a library computer. This also meant yet another device to be registered, because of course you couldn't have audiobooks and ebooks on the same gadget. Audiobooks went on an .mp3 player, and ebooks on an e-reader (not a *tablet*, we're not there yet).

Are you ready to throw in the towel yet?

At any rate, this was a tough time to train patrons. I kept up with the regular Microsoft software, and did very well with Internet questions about searching, email, and social media, but had to figure out how to answer all sorts of questions on our new digital collection. It was actually fun, though. I learned a great deal and was able to become proficient by the repetition of questions. Patrons brought in newfangled devices like a *Nook E-Reader*, and I could play around with it and figure it out. The Nook was the most popular ereader because Barnes and Noble allowed users to borrow library books with it. The Kindle was a (very distant) *third place* with the Kobo in second. No one wanted a Kindle because Amazon would not allow its use for library books. Of course, the company quickly figured out

that was a terrible mistake: *People who borrow library books also buy books*. Amazon wanted all the money for itself and actually managed to bungle badly.

The Kindle *finally* rose to dominance by doing several things:
1. Kindle users could borrow library books in a faster, easier way than the Nook. Amazon took care of the digital rights management through the user's Amazon account, allowing for the seamless experience we enjoy today.
2. The Kindle e-readers could connect wirelessly to the Internet, starting about 2009 or so. This allowed a patron to visit a library digital collection, check out a book, and add it to their Amazon account as a "borrowed library book." The "borrowed library book" would then load on their Kindle when it synchronized with the user's Amazon account. This was *nifty* and *convenient*. It worked extraordinarily well.
3. The *Kindle Fire* was released in 2011 as the first e-reader "tablet" to compete with Apple's iPad, introduced in 2010. Not only could you read books on the Fire, you could browse the Internet and get email, too. You might even check Facebook, if you had an account. At the time, it was superior to the iPad because it was an e-reader, too, not only a tablet. As the user downloaded books, they could be read without an Internet connection, unlike any real use of the iPad at that time.

This was a pretty wild and exciting time to be working in digital literacy and technical training. More and more patrons heard about the classes and came in for assistance. We were growing by leaps and bounds, and I figured out I needed help. *Badly*.