

ALA leads national #eBooksForAll campaign

Access to digital content has long been a sore spot for libraries. When Macmillan Publishers announced an eight-week embargo on new eBook titles sold to libraries, the public outcry was extraordinary. In response, ALA launched the #eBooksForAll petition campaign at the Digital Book World conference in September. Coverage of libraries proliferated in news outlets across the country as more and more library systems led their own local campaigns to oppose Macmillan's new policy. Just days before the embargo took effect on November 1, 2019, ALA hand delivered more than 160,000 signatures to CEO John Sargent.

Though the #eBooksForAll campaign focused largely on the impact Macmillan's policy will have on access to popular titles at public libraries, there are broader implications of the company's business decision. So far, Macmillan is the only one of the Big 5 publishers to institute such an embargo. ALA trusts that the outrage expressed by the library community will discourage other publishing companies from following suit. However, while Macmillan may be the only one to introduce an embargo, the problem of high pricing and restrictive licensing is rampant throughout the publishing industry—a fact which academic libraries know all too well.


Congress is catching on. Within days of launching the #eBooksForAll campaign, ALA received a request from the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and

Administrative Law, to contribute to the Committee's investigation into competition in digital markets. ALA's report in response to the congressional inquiry underscores practices by many companies, that "threaten Americans' right to read what and how they choose and imperil other fundamental First Amendment freedoms." Half of report is dedicated to the dismal situation for libraries that purchase academic and research content.

The report specifically addresses several issues of note to *C&RL News* readers, including the growing consolidation in the market for scholarly journals and trend toward so-called "big deals," once seen as a way to get a collection of journals at a discounted price but "has devolved into a restrictive agreement that limits financial and strategic flexibility."

Another issue described in the report is the future of the academic publishing industry in controlling and exploiting data. According to the report, data collected by publishers about students, faculty, research output, and more disturbingly "represents a potential multi-billion-dollar market with... the same kind of dynamics that led to the rise of platform monopolies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, and others."

ALA sees the #eBooksForAll campaign as the tip of the iceberg. We are using the success of the petition to educate Congress on complex issues. ALA has also established a Joint Working Group on eBooks and Digital Content in Libraries made up of representatives from ALA divisions and affiliates as well as numerous external organizations and co-lead by Leah M. Dunn, university librarian at the University of North Carolina-Asheville, and Kelvin Watson, director of Broward County Libraries (Florida).

For the latest information about the #eBooksForAll campaign, visit ebooksforall.org. Join the conversation on social media at #eBooksForAll. 

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